

Turkey and The United States: More Alike than Different

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When I first came to Turkey a little over forty years ago, I had the very strong impression that Turkey and America, and for that matter Turks and Americans, were very different, that they had hardly anything in common, either in background, appearance or behavior. But as I have returned to Turkey over the years since that time, and as I have studied and written about its history, I have been driven to conclude just the opposite, that despite many differences in culture and religion, they are much more like each other than they are like other nations and people. What I would like to do is to share with you a few facts and a number of impressions which have impelled me to this conclusion.

The first fact is that, unlike the other great nations, the societies of both nations are for the most part composed of people who themselves, or whose parents or ancestors, have come from elsewhere, in fact from all over the world. They are nations of immigrants, of refugees. There is hardly a Turkish family which cannot say that 'My ancestors came from the Caucasus, or Belgrade, or Salonika, or Baku, or Tashkent', and the like, just as Americans can say that 'My ancestors came from Germany or France or Italy or Russia'. This is because like the United States, Turkey, or in its earlier formation, the Ottoman Empire, has been eager and willing to incorporate into its state people from different political, religious and economic backgrounds, including thousands who were fleeing from persecution in their own lands, regardless of their ethnic and religious background. Turkey like the United States is, indeed, a land of refuge, a land of refugees. Why is this so?

First of all, the Ottoman social system, the extremely fluid Ottoman society, encouraged people who were forced to flee from their homes to seek their fortunes in the Ottoman society rather than in the closed societies which existed elsewhere in Europe. The Ottoman Turks in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, as they conquered first Southeastern Europe, then Anatolia, and finally Byzantine Constantinople in 1453, did not kill or persecute the people they conquered, the Greeks, the Slavs, the Armenians, the Jews, and others, and for that matter the Arabs, but rather allowed them to continue to live their own lives, practice their own religions, and develop their own cultures without interference in what came to be known as the Millet system, in which each group retained its own character while at the same time forming part of a very rich and very exciting multi ethnic and multi religious society.

Secondly, the Ottomans wanted to build their empire through the contributions of all the people they could attract into their service. Alone of the states and elsewhere in Europe and

Asia at the time, the Ottomans were willing to accept the entry and settlement of thousands of refugees fleeing from political, religious, and ethnic persecution in their own countries so they could put these people to work helping build the Ottoman Empire.

I am sure all of you know about the immigration into the Ottoman Empire of the Jews of Spain following their persecution by the Spanish Inquisition starting in 1492. Perhaps you do not know that the Ottomans encouraged these Jews to come to their Empire rather than elsewhere. They sent out declarations to the persecuted Jews of Europe, usually written in the names of rabbis and important scholars who had come earlier, praising the comforts and prosperity that Jews found under Ottoman rule and encouraging more Jews to come. The advertisements remind me very much of similar declarations about the wonders of California found all over the Eastern United States during the early years of the twentieth century.

Perhaps also you do not know that the first alien people to settle in the Ottoman Empire were the Jews of Byzantium, who had been subjected to intense persecution by the Byzantine emperors and the Greek Orthodox church before the arrival of the Ottomans, to the point that a Jewish population said to be as large as one million in Anatolia in the early years of Byzantium had been reduced to no more than 50,000 or so by the time of the Ottoman Conquest. The Emperor Justinian, who is so praised by Byzantine scholars for his legal systems, was the worst persecutor of all, requiring Jews to convert to Orthodox Christianity on the pain of death, for those few who remained to use Greek in their religious services, and killing many of those who refused to accept his demands. There is an excellent book on this subject by a young American scholar, Steven Bowman, called *The Jews of Byzantium*. The remaining Byzantine Jews had been so thoroughly persecuted by the Greeks that they did what they could to help in the Ottoman conquests, particularly of Bursa and Constantinople. They were rewarded for this by being given a privileged position among the non-Muslim *millets* so that in subsequent centuries, the persecuted Jews of France and England and Germany were encouraged to flee to refuge in the Ottoman Empire throughout the fifteenth century, long before the Spanish Jews were compelled to follow them into the lands of the Ottomans. There were Jews who fled into the Ottoman Empire from the Ukraine and Poland to escape persecution and massacre at the hands of the Cossacks and the Poles. There were Jews of France and Italy captured by Christian pirates in the Mediterranean who were ransomed off by the Jewish communities of the Ottoman Empire, who then came to settle among those who had saved them.

Turning to more modern times, the Ottomans and later the people of Turkey continued to receive thousands of Jews persecuted in the unified Germany and in France during the nineteenth century, and particularly Jews persecuted in Russia, starting with the pogroms of 1881, continuing through the Bolshevik Revolution and the Russian civil war that followed and going on to the thousands of Jews who fled from Iran after the 1979 Revolution.

Of course the refugees who were received by the Ottomans and the Turks were not just Jews. Most of them in fact were Christians and Muslims; among the latter there were Turks, Persians and Arabs alike, who came to the Ottoman Empire because it alone was willing to take them and allow them to settle and start new lives. For example, there was the Swedish King Charles XII who came to Istanbul along with hundreds of his followers in the early years of the eighteenth century, and who mixed into Turkish politics to get Ottoman assistance in his successful effort to return to the throne. Also, there were hundreds of

political refugees of all religions who fled from the reactionary monarchies of Germany and Hungary and Poland following the revolutions of 1848 and throughout the later years of the nineteenth century. In addition to these, there were thousands of Muslims and Jews fleeing from persecution and death in the newly independent Christian states of Southeastern Europe, from Greece, from Bulgaria, from Rumania and from Serbia in particular.

The books that describe the Greek Revolution in the early years of the nineteenth century ignore the fact that the Greek rebels completely wiped out the Muslim and Jewish populations of the Morea as well as the places which as a result are now called the 'Greek islands.'

What William B. Gladstone euphemistically called 'The Bulgarian Horrors,' supposedly involving Turkish massacre of Bulgars in the late nineteenth century, in fact involved far more Bulgarian massacres of the Turkish and Muslim population of the area south of the Balkan mountains, known then as East Rumelia, from which thousands of Turkish survivors fled into the ever shrinking boundaries of the Ottoman Empire.

Newly independent Serbia destroyed what had been extremely prosperous Jewish communities in both Sarajevo and Belgrade. Many of the Jews fleeing from the Russian pogroms settled in Rumania, where they were subjected to violent persecution by the Rumanians aimed at forcing them to either convert to Christianity or to go on into Ottoman territory. The result of all of this was that at the least two million Muslims, perhaps 100,000 Jews, fled from Southeastern Europe into the Ottoman Empire in a continuous stream throughout the nineteenth century and right up through World War I.

If you somehow fail to understand the enormity of this movement of population and the vital role that the Ottomans played in saving thousands of people, I would suggest that you read the books of Justin McCarthy, in particular his most recent study, *Death and Exile*, published by the Darwin Press in Princeton, New Jersey, which just has been published in a Turkish translation as *Ölüm ve Sürgün*.

And of course since World War I, Turkey has received thousands more Turkish and Muslim refugees from the Soviet Union and in recent decades from the repressive regime in Iran. To many seeking asylum, Turkey has been an essential stepping stone to freedom in the outside world.

I could go on with this, but I think you get the idea. Just as in the United States, where almost everyone has ancestors who came from somewhere else, so also in Turkey almost every Turk comes from a family that came from almost every other place on the face of the earth, bringing with them elements of culture which have mixed together to form a multi ethnic and multi cultural society very much like the society that has emerged in the United States.

There are many characteristics of both Turkey and the United States that result from this sort of background. For one thing, both cultures and languages are as a result far more open to new ideas, new ways of doing things, new techniques, even new words than other cultures and languages. Perhaps in this respect they are far too open, willing to accept what other people do and say without regard to their own cultural traditions and backgrounds. This broad-based ethnicity has created a culturally stimulating assimilative environment where eclectic influences offer a rich area of investigation and research.

As part and parcel of this multi ethnic society has been the second common characteristic of Turkish and American society, its fluidity. People have come to both countries, not only because they were allowed to do so, but also because they have been given the opportunity to rise as far to the top as their ability could carry them. Whereas in pre-modern England and France you could not for the most part be a part of the aristocracy unless you were born into it, in the Ottoman Empire as in the United States birth has played only a minor role in determining success in life. Since you all know about the United States, I will concentrate here on describing the situation in the Ottoman Empire.

From the fourteenth to the twentieth century, there were two great political and social groups in the Ottoman Empire. There was the Ruling Class, which was called the Ottoman class, or *Osmanlılar*, because all were considered to be the slaves of the Sultan, whose line was named after its first member, Osman, who founded the dynasty in the thirteenth century. The Ruling Class was in charge of providing and maintaining Sultans and of making the rest of Ottoman society work by maintaining a military force to defend and expand the Empire and to keep order and security within it; and by collecting enough taxes to support itself and the army. Members of the Subject Class were called *re'âyâ*, in English *rayas*, the 'protected flock' of the Sultan. The rayas were organized into four religiously-based millets, the Muslims, the Jews, the Armenian Orthodox and the Greek Orthodox, each run by its religious hierarchy. These millets were charged with caring for everything not cared for by the Ruling Class, which meant most of the things that we nowadays associate with government. They attended to not only the affairs pertaining to religion, but also to municipal affairs, organizing the sections of the cities in which members of their millet lived, and with education, social security, justice and the like, all in accordance with their own religious and cultural traditions. To be members of the Ruling Class you had to know and practice certain elements: first and foremost you had to be a loyal 'dependent' of the Sultan. No matter how wealthy and powerful, you had to accept this status.

Secondly you had to be a Muslim, either born as a Muslim or voluntarily converted to Islam, but of course unlike in Europe where you could not rise if you were born a Jew or a Muslim, in the Ottoman Empire you could convert to Islam if you wanted to rise to the top. And thirdly you had to know and practice the complicated system of language and behavior known as the Ottoman Way, including the use of the Ottoman language, which was a complicated mixture of the most complicated elements of Arabic, Persian and Turkish. If you were a child of a member of the Ruling Class and failed to learn and practice these things, you would fall into the subject class, and if you were a Jew or an Armenian or a Greek or a Muslim member of the Subject Class, you could rise into the Ruling Class by learning, accepting and practicing these characteristics. This has left a tradition which has survived with little change into the years of Republican Turkey. I am sure you know many Turks who were born in some far off village, who were educated through the state system of education and who rose through the civil service into prominent places in Turkish society. And while many prominent Turks come from prominent families, who gave them the opportunity to gain the characteristics necessary for them to succeed in life, there are many others from prominent families who have done little with their lives and have fallen accordingly. And on the other hand there are many leading Turks who have risen from the poorest families into the highest rungs of Turkish society. The fluidity of Turkish society compares very favorably with that of

American society, resulting in the fact that in both countries most people have achieved prominence and importance because they have worked at it, not because they have inherited it.

There are other common characteristics between the two cultures which we will consider more briefly. One of them is the fact that the societies of both Turkey and the United States have been substantially impacted by westward movements which created frontier societies, that of the United States from eastern North America across the continent to the Pacific Ocean, and that of the Turks from Central Asia westward into and through the Middle East and Anatolia and onward through Southeastern Europe into Central Europe and beyond, the most recent continuation being the immigration of more than one million Turks into Germany, Switzerland, England and France. There are various results. Both nations still retain many elements of frontier societies. The instinct for self protection, sometimes by rather violent means, characterizes many elements of both countries. Both benefit from the divergent traditions which have encouraged communities to promote self help, supplementing or at times replacing state assistance in civil matters and in times of need. As a result, perhaps more than other nations, Turks and Americans alike share the characteristics of willingness to accept new and different ways of doing things, individual resourcefulness, willingness to work and to experiment, a sense of adventure in whatever new task they undertake, and a tremendous sense of individualism, all of which have survived the tendency of the modern state to make people rely more and more on the state for everything they want and everything they want to do. Another result is hospitality, a willingness to share with visitors or strangers that stretches back to the nomadic traditions in the Turkic and Middle East traditions, and a much later symbolic acceptance of communal sharing that has given rise to the most American of holidays, Thanksgiving.

Both Turkey and the United States were created by revolutionary wars which threw out nations seeking to control them. But there the parallel ends since the United States was throwing out a power, Great Britain, which had controlled it for some time, whereas the Turks, as the Ottoman Empire, never had been controlled by a foreign power. The Turks were fighting to prevent the Allied Powers from World War I from establishing control over them and in fact from giving the lands in which the Turks were a vast majority of the population to the very small Christian minorities that lived there. In both cases, however, the tradition of Independence gained by struggle has left a feeling of confidence and individualism which contrasts markedly with the national feelings of frustration which continue to characterize nations that were colonized for long periods of time. The deliberate establishment of a new nation has left a strong feeling of commitment to the Republic established as a result as well as gratitude and admiration for the founders of the respective republics.

These are but a few ideas, a few examples of the history and traditions which have left Turkey and the United States more alike than different. I invite you to reflect on them, and perhaps to add other ways in which these parallels reflect themselves in the modern world.

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