

Turkey at a Critical Crossroads

By Nur (Gülner) Reinhart



A former Fulbright scholar and college English instructor, Reinhart is a Turkish translator and editor specializing in legal and medical translations. She can be reached at 110045.365@compuserve.com.

In the post cold war era, many political analysts have pointed to the Middle East as the key to global peace and stability. Even though most people perceive this statement in terms of the Arab-Israeli conflict, Turkey is one of the keys to peace and political stability in the region. Yet, as it heads into the 21st century, Turkey is faced with complex problems internally, externally, politically, and economically. Turkey cannot solve all of these problems by itself. Unfortunately, recent events make Turkey seem more isolated than ever from Europe. If Turkey is to overcome its problems, it goes without saying that the country must have visionary, farsighted leadership, but Western Europe must also undergo an "attitude adjustment," and the U.S. must assume a greater leadership role.

No one can deny Turkey's geopolitical significance. First of all, Turkey straddles Europe and Asia, holding the key to Black Sea access. Second, it is the only secular democracy in a region infested with unstable dictatorships and religious regimes. Third, Turkey is a political and economic conduit to the ex-Soviet Turkic republics, such as Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, etc. Granted, these regions are currently poor and not a big target market yet, but that day too shall come. Finally and most important, Turkey has the second largest army in NATO after the U.S., and possesses a sterling record of being a loyal Western ally in a region where the West cannot count on very many allies. In short, NATO, Europe, and the U.S. all need Turkey.

Recent events have brought Turkey's problems to the forefront. Internally, Turkey is fighting a battle with the Marxist, separatist Kurdish guerilla group, PKK. As in all guerilla wars, it's a losing battle, costing the lives of innocent Kurdish civilians, young Turkish soldiers, civil servants, as well as money. In the absence of long-term solutions for a peaceful coexistence, this battle shows no signs of abating. Externally, Turkey has some notorious neighbors which exacerbate the country's problems with its own fundamentalist Islamic movement and Kurdish population. Furthermore, Cyprus remains a divided nation, and now that Greece is pushing for European Union (EU) membership for the island, the prickly relations between the two countries are resurfacing.

Economically, the news is mixed. Inflation has stayed above 80 percent since 1994, but in 1995

and 1996, the economy expanded over seven percent. Big Turkish firms circumvent inflation by dealing in dollars and German marks. This tactic was also adopted by the Turkish people, most of whom convert their paychecks into dollars or marks at corner exchange kiosks as soon as they receive them. The "luggage trade" with Russia and the ex-Soviet republics continues in the streets of Istanbul and in the Black Sea region, generating cash deals worth billions of dollars annually. But the hardship of people on fixed incomes grows as does the gap between the haves and have-nots. There is plenty of work yet to be done on the economy, which is saddled with many unprofitable state-owned enterprises.

Politically, Turkey faces a leadership problem. For the first time since it was established as a secular democracy in 1923, Turkey has an Islamic fundamentalist prime minister, Necmettin Erbakan. Erbakan was propelled to this position through political deals for favors, even though his Welfare Party won only 21.3 percent of the vote in the last election. Since coming to power, Erbakan has dropped his campaign promises to ban interest rates, to introduce a Muslim currency, and to cut off relations with Israel. Nonetheless, he has made visits to Islamic leaders a priority, even warmly embracing Colonel Kaddafi. Most recently, he called for more Islamic measures, including building a massive mosque in the most cosmopolitan area of Istanbul and allowing female civil servants to wear religious head coverings at work.

The icing on the cake, however, was provided by a mayor from Erbakan's party. This mayor supported the Iranian ambassador's highly inappropriate comments urging Turkey to live under Islamic law. After the mayor's bodyguard openly beat a journalist covering an anti-fundamentalist rally, the streets of his small town thundered with the procession of tanks, which the military called "routine maneuvers." Afterward, the National Security Council, consisting of top generals, informed Erbakan of its concerns and expectations that Turkey continue on the Western-style, secular path designed by Ataturk, the founder of modern Turkey.

The subsequent popular and political ripple effect has been far-reaching. For the first time, these events provided the stimulus for the middle classes to orga-

Continued on page 15

Turkey at a Critical Crossroads

Continued from page 14

nize massive and frequent demonstrations. Supportive of the army's arm-twisting, the Turkish people are personally familiar with the oppressive ways of religious regimes whose elite members come to Turkey for vacations, bringing their women dressed head-to-toe in black despite the hot August sun. Turkish women feel especially threatened by Erbakan's rhetorical salvos, because they have much to lose.

Turkish women had the right to vote long before their Swiss counterparts, and a Turkish woman was appointed to a Supreme Court judge position before an American woman was named to a similar post. In addition, half of all Turkish stockbrokers today are female.

One of the recent methods of protest was quite eloquent: Turks across the nation turned lights on and off precisely at 9:00 p.m. daily as a show of popular support for an "enlightened" Turkey, and not one pitched into "darkness."

The reaction in Western Europe, however, was icy. Western European leaders reacted with distaste to the military's role in making Erbakan behave himself. Then, in comments that shocked Turkey, European prime ministers claimed that there were "insurmountable cultural and religious" obstacles to EU membership for Turkey. Former Belgian Premier Wilfried Martens gravely announced, "We are creating a European Union. This is a European project." But only three months ago, President Herzog of Germany had assured Turkish President Demirel that Turkey belonged to Europe, and that Europe was "not a Christian club." Yet, the message seemed clear to many Turks that Turkey was simply too Muslim, too poor, and too different to belong among Europe's elite.

One of the problems at the bottom of this deepening rift between Western Europe and Turkey is perception. Europe—and the world—thinks of Franco, Pinochet, and Strossner when it hears of military intervention. Since the Turkish military has had to intervene three times since 1960, its latest attempts to restrain Erbakan alarmed Europe. However, the irony of the matter is that Turkish generals are not opportunists who exploit a power vacuum in order to stay entrenched in power until the next coup. The Turkish mil-

itary has, every single time, turned power over to politicians in quick succession. In fact, Turkish generals pride themselves on being the guardians of Ataturk's ideology, and are hyper-sensitive to anything that might threaten the secular foundation of the country. And that secular foundation, Turks hope, will bring them the West's approval, and not its cold shoulder.

So, how can these problems be solved? Turkish politicians must set aside their partisan squabbles and habitual deal-making, and chart a clear course for the country. But that's a tall order. The leaders of the two main right-wing parties, Mesut Yilmaz and Tansu Ciller (the former prime minister) don't get along. Ciller, who had pointed to Erbakan's supporters as the threat to secular democracy in Turkey while she was in power, later handed the reigns to him by forming a coalition with his party. Erbakan then returned the favor by helping to drop the parliamentary inquiry into corruption charges against Ciller. The best hope for farsighted leadership rests in a consolidation of power in the center-right with new leaders who have popular support as well as sterling reputations.

To help, Europe must undergo an "attitude adjustment." It is against the best

interests of the West and NATO for the EU to be a Christian club. When Europe relies on Turkey as an ally in crises, but throws new and arbitrary obstacles in the country's way to EU membership, it plays into the hands of Islamic fanatics who point eastward in choosing friends. The EU leadership must clearly specify when and how Turkey can enter the EU, and these criteria must be consistently and equitably applied not only to Turkey but also to other countries. The U.S. must also assume a greater leadership role in mediating regional disputes, since it has a large stake in the area with several bases in Turkey. Turkey allowed the U.S. to use these during the Gulf War at the risk of alienating its trading partners in the Middle East.

The problems facing Turkey may seem overwhelming, but the country has a lot going for it as well, like a thriving tourism trade, world-class textile and steel industries, and a mobilized and aware population. As long as there is strong support for a democratic and secular Turkey both within the country and abroad, Turkey will eventually resolve these issues. After all, this is the same country which rose, like the phoenix, from the ashes of the Ottoman Empire.

ata