

TURKEY and TURKISH CULTURE

Turkey, an applicant for EU membership, would make quite an impact if it were to enter. To begin with, it would be by far the biggest country, being approximately three times the size of the UK and Italy and outsizing France, Spain, and Germany by more than 50 percent. It would be second in population after Germany. It is the leader of a Turkic-speaking trading bloc of six former Russian-dominated Central Asian republics, and most of the country is not in Europe.

It is no wonder that EU members want to take a deep breath before approving entry. Yet where else can Kemal Atatürk's modern, industrializing, secular NATO nation (which, remember, joined the West during the Korean and Gulf wars) go?

Anyone who has been to Turkey could hardly fail to notice how dissimilar it is from other Muslim states. The nation's modern character is largely the result of the influence of its founder, Kemal Atatürk. The first president of Turkey was born in 1881 in Salonika, then an Ottoman city. In 1905 Mustafa Kemal, as he was then known, graduated from the War Academy in Istanbul. In 1915, when the Dardanelles campaign was launched, he had reached the rank of colonel.

The War of Independence from the Ottomans began in 1919 when Kemal, then a general, rallied a liberation army in Anatolia and convened a congress. This was the forerunner of the Grand National Assembly, which was inaugurated in April 1920 with Mustafa Kemal elected president. He set about transforming his country with unabated zeal, creating a new political and legal system, abolishing the Caliphate and making both government and education secular. The Islamic calendar was replaced by the Western calendar, Western hats were worn instead of the fez and women stopped wearing the veil. All reforms took place within 5 years (1923-1928).

In 1934 the Turkish parliament gave Kemal the name Atatürk, which means "father of the Turks." His emphasis on secularism continues today. "Turkey is not a land of sheikhs, dervishes, disciples and lay brothers," he declared, having developed a lasting hatred for religious fundamentalism. He saw Westernization and return to Turkish roots as being entirely compatible, inasmuch as Islam was tolerated as a religion but banned as a lifestyle.

Culture

Values

belief in one's own honesty,
Western-oriented
modified Islamic tenets
fierceness, tenacity
national pride

hospitality, gallantry
warmth, likeability
preservation of heritage and traditions
adherence to Kemal Atatürk's reforms
Respect for the elderly

Concepts

Leadership and Status

In the Ottoman Empire and for most of Turkish history, power has been concentrated in a few hands. Sultans and Caliphs were all-powerful, and autocratic leadership was a

fact of life. Kemal Atatürk changed all that and founded a democratic republic that, in spite of many troubled periods, has worked as well as many other theoretical democracies. It is true that the army has acted undemocratically on some occasions, seeing itself as "the guardian of the nation," but after each coup it has handed control back to civilians. Atatürk gave women the vote in 1934, and there has been one female prime minister. Today, almost 50 % of academics are women.

Space and Time

Turkey is a large country with a low population density. There is generally a "distance of respect" of more than one meter between speakers. Having said that, Mediterranean Turks are somewhat tactile among friends (this is usually confined to one's own sex) though not in big cities anymore.

Things take time in Turkey and people turn up late for appointments. Istanbul—the largest urban sprawl in Europe—is not easy to move around in, and many delays originate from traffic problems.

Cultural Factors in Communication

Communication Pattern

The Turkish communication style derives from its three main roots: Islamic, Mediterranean and Eastern (Ottoman, Seljuk). The first two are sources of their liveliness—they are in the main both multi-active and dialogue-oriented. The third (Eastern) strand is, however, clearly visible—they are more reactive than any Europeans, except perhaps the Finns, and could also be classified as a listening culture, akin to several Central Asian republics as well as some Confucian societies, (reactive cultures let the other side speak first and slowly try to modify their reply or position to fit in with their interlocutor.

In business circles their style is exploratory—they are very interested in all forms of change that lead to progress. They are polite and courteous (more than Westerners), but they wish to be seen as Western and modern. They show natural exasperation at being rejected by the West, but they are patient and persistent in trying to open and maintain acceptable communication channels.

Listening Habits

As reactive, Turks are good listeners, wishing desperately to learn from Western colleagues. They control their Mediterranean ebullience and their Islamic righteousness to the extent that they normally refrain from interrupting their interlocutor. Nor do they try to speak over him or her in the French or Arab manner. They listen with some skepticism, but generally impute best motives and are rarely unreasonable unless they feel that they are being duped.

Behavior at Meetings and Negotiations

Meetings are usually conducted in a friendly, semiformal atmosphere. As hosts, Turks are extremely polite and solicitous. They are by no means inexperienced at negotiating, given their immense exposure to trading in the vast, enduring Ottoman

Empire. Haggling is normal for them and they are disappointed if it does not ensue. Starting prices bear little relation to the intrinsic value of items. Turkish salespeople who are beaten down, or simply rejected, keep their cool, showing no signs of anger or annoyance. Doors are kept open for future deals.

Turks are willing to take risks in business, though they exercise a natural caution when investing in new and sizeable projects. Looking at markets, they know the value of their geographic location ("the bridge between East and West").

Manners and Taboos

Turks are very accommodating people, but they can easily be put off when encountering indelicate responses. They do not wish to discuss things Greek, but have few other national prejudices. The Kurdish question is, of course, delicate and best avoided by foreigners.

Islamic customs prevail in rural areas, but they are much more relaxed than in Arab countries and often invisible in the big cities. Turkish food and coffee are unique; enjoy them. Turks also produce and drink wine, as well as their own strong spirit, *raki*. Men wear ties less frequently than in European countries, though dress for both men and women is, in the main, typically Western.

How to Empathize with Turks

A golden rule would be to see them as they are, not as they are described in misleading accounts. They want respect and recognition. They want to play ball. If you refrain from attacking the current shortcomings of Turkish society, if you believe that Turks are doing their best to cooperate and put their house in order, if you place trust in them and exercise patience, you may end up with extremely reliable and (one day) very influential friends.

Motivating Factors

- ◆ Show sympathy for Turkey's European aspirations.
- ◆ Exhibit solidarity as often as possible.
- ◆ Show early trust and warmth. Socialize with them.
- ◆ Respect their religion, even though the state is secular.
- ◆ Keep calm at all times.
- ◆ Try to show them the way to profit and other benefits.
- ◆ Praise Turkish hospitality and eat, drink and socialize with them.
- ◆ Speak a few words of Turkish.
- ◆ Respect older people.
- ◆ Allow for some ambiguity.
- ◆ Give them room to express their opinions.

Avoid

- ◆ Diminishing their dignity.
- ◆ Expressing strong opinions until you know theirs.

- ◆ Discussing the position of women.
 - ◆ Discussing Greece or Cyprus.
 - ◆ Referring to Turkish cruelty or aggressiveness in the Ottoman period.
 - ◆ Be careful about the traffic.
 - ◆ Don't buy any food from street sellers.
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* Many parts of this material is adapted from Richard D. Lewis, "When Cultures Collide", Nicholas Brealey, London, 2006.

* Another good source is Martin Gannon, Global Cultures, Sage Publications, London 2001.