

Turks and the Western World

Tracy Early

What meager impressions an American may have of the Turks come mainly from their enemies, a source in need of some balancing. It could at least be compared with what the Turks think of themselves. The United States has perhaps fifty thousand citizens of Turkish ancestry, but they are little heard nor much regarded, successful as they often are as individuals. Greek-Americans, numbering two million or more, have the strength to form a "lobby" that the president must heed.

If Arabs in America suffer frustration in trying to match the American Jewish community, Turks must totally despair of rivaling Greek influence in the halls of Congress or the courts of public opinion. And alongside the Greeks stand just as fiercely the Armenians, charging "genocide" so assertively that hardly any American even suspects that Turks might venture an alternative assessment.

Surveying this scene more in sorrow than in anger is Altëmur Kilic, information officer for the Turkish mission to the United Nations. Socially and culturally Kilic feels much at home in the United States. He is a Moslem but was taught by Americans at the church-supported Robert College in Istanbul. He studied English there under John Coburn, now Episcopal bishop of Massachusetts, and speaks it fluently. He has served his government in Washington, and the U.N. at the New York Secretariat. A journalist by trade, he was at one point a stringer for the Associated Press. During the Korean War he went as a lieutenant with the Turkish brigade that fought valiantly alongside American troops. With respect to the United States, he comes friendly.

But Kilic feels Turkey and the United States are now pulling apart, and he is convinced that the blame does not lie with Turkey. The immediate villain, he contends, is the "very effective Greek lobby" that persuaded Congress to embargo Turkish arms sales after Cyprus.

President Carter's proposal to lift the embargo Kilic of course welcomed as "common sense," while deploring the Greek response of more pressure on Congress to prevent the lifting. A *New York Times* editorial saying the embargo should remain to provide leverage against Turkey, Kilic said, reverses the reality. "If the United States tries to use this kind of leverage, you will lose everything," he says. "We have lost our patience."

It has been the U.S. "tilt" in favor of Greece, Kilic argues, that has prevented a Cyprus settlement. In his view the Greeks have felt no need to negotiate because they thought they could count on American backing. The result of Greek influence, he contends, was to put the United States in a situation it should never have gotten into in the first place—one of having to choose between two friends and one in which it stands to lose the friendship of both.

But further back and deeper in the Western psyche, Kilic sees the effect of long-nurtured images. "The Greeks and

Armenians have tried to stigmatize Turks as barbarians," he says. "If the Turks had been Christians and done the same things, they would not have these unjust images of the terrible Turk and so on."

Kilic looks back on the conquests and cultural achievements of his ancestors with pride. "We had a dynamic nation," he observes with satisfaction. And though Turks hold no imperialistic ambition today, no irredentism, he says, they need make no apology for their expansive success in the past. Other nations built empires when they could, and are not despised for it. Americans took their land from the Indians, did they not?

From the perspective of Western history, however, Turks meant dread and threat. Beating on the gates of Vienna in 1529, they threatened Christendom, though helping the Reformation by distracting the pope's attention from heresy in the north. When Christians defeated the Turks in the sea battle of Lepanto on October 7, 1571, Pius V was so exhilarated that he established a new feast of the church—Our Lady of Victory, later called Feast of the Most Holy Rosary.

Turks emerged anew as the enemy in later centuries, when the West gave its sympathy to Greeks and other Balkan nations struggling for independence from the Porte, dubbed by Westerners "the sick man of Europe." Kilic finds it natural that Greeks would seek independence. But he cannot agree that Ottoman rule was anything for a Turk to be ashamed of, judging it according to the standards of its day. If there were primitive conditions and hardship at some times and seasons, they fell on Moslem as well as Christian, he says. Turkish sultans were notably tolerant for their time, he argues, reminding skeptics that Turks harbored the Jews driven out of Spain and other countries of the Christian West. He points out that sultans did not try to force religious conversion on their subjects, as did the most Catholic majesties of Spain, but established a millet (from Arabic *millah*, religion) system that left each religious community largely self-governing.

Nor does Kilic think the Turkish people need apologize to anybody for their record in modern times. "We were one of the first nations to recognize Israel," he says, "and we don't want to see it destroyed, though we think it should give up the occupied territories and let the Palestinians form a state."

In the case of the Armenians, he will concede there is an unhappy history. But he contends that the troubles were started by Armenians. They were aroused by nineteenth-century nationalism to oppose the Ottoman ideal of a commonwealth of nations, he says, and their nationalism was used by foreign enemies—notably Britain and Russia. "There were many terrorist activities by Armenians, and the Turkish people responded," Kilic says. "There were some killings on both sides. It was unfortunate, but the first move came from the Armenians." Then in this century, during the First World War, Kilic says, Armenian guerrilla bands attacked the Turks while they were at war with Russia. As a result of that, he says, there were "excesses," but "many Turks also perished." He

places the number of Armenians killed below 500,000, rather than the 1.5 million he has heard from Armenian sources.*

Kilic was born in Ankara in 1924, the year after Kemal Ataturk was first elected president of the new Republic of Turkey. Kilic's father had fought under Ataturk and then served in the parliament, so Kilic's total life has passed politically under the Republic. And though he continues to feel pride in the earlier history of the Turkish people, he finds some impropriety in pressing the Republic to account now for events that occurred before it existed. Or Kilic to account for things done before he was born.

Anyway, what is the point, he asks, of continuing to make angry charges about these events of a past generation? "What do they want? They keep telephoning here and threatening to kill us and do other things. Do they want territory? They won't get it. Do they want us to apologize? We will never do that. We believe the past should be forgotten, or there will be no end to us blaming each other."

Kilic expresses similar impatience with recurrent Greek charges about the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Istanbul. Where Greeks see a history of Turkish repression, Kilic sees proof of Turkish tolerance and adherence to the Treaty of Lausanne (1923). "The fact that the Patriarchate is still there means we have not wiped it out," he says. "If the Turkish people had wanted to get rid of it, they would have. And we would have done it directly. The Turks are not a devious people."

Kilic acknowledges that Greeks in Turkey have perhaps felt uncomfortable and that this may have caused them to emigrate and the Greek community to diminish. He would like for Americans to consider as the other side of the coin, however, that Turks in Greece are "systematically persecuted" (which Greeks, of course, deny). "But we never propagandize these things." He also asks Americans to consider that "the Greek Church has always been a political church and has always been against Turkey." The late Patriarch Athenagoras he praises as a wise and discreet leader, but officials on lower levels, he says, have devoted themselves to intrigue. He also suspects that Greeks dream of recapturing Istanbul and establishing a Hellenic empire, noting that they still call it Constantinople.

And if the Patriarchate from time to time has difficulties with government officials over this or that, so do other institutions have their "tangles" with the government, in Turkey and in other countries. It is not to be taken automatically as proof of some persecution under way. Of late Greeks have complained particularly of taxes on their schools in Turkey, but Kilic says these applied to all private schools. And in any event, the Foreign Ministry has now persuaded the Finance Ministry not to enforce them against Greek schools—an implicit admission that international pressure may sometimes have effect. The closing of the Orthodox theological school of Halki, Kilic says, resulted from other laws that did not have the Greeks particularly in view. His explanation on Halki becomes a little vague and he does not pretend that Turkey made any great effort to look out for Orthodox sensitivities, but he denies any aiming of fire directly at Greeks qua Greeks.

In denying official persecution, Kilic is careful to lay stress on "official," leaving unmentioned perhaps occasional offenses by lower officials on their own, harassment by sectors of the Turkish public, etc. But he observes that things get out of control elsewhere at times—for example, Chicago in 1968. When it happens in Turkey, he says, it reinforces old images of the "barbarian Turk." When it happens elsewhere, it seems to

him, it cannot be used to stigmatize a whole nation, but gradually fades from view.

Kilic now especially laments what Cyprus has done to American-Turkish relations. Turkey has no ambition to seize Cyprus or to keep its troops there, he says. As with expelling the Patriarchate, he says, if Turkey wanted to annex Cyprus, it would have done so already. Turkey is concerned, he says, about securing the independence of Cyprus, for the sake of Turkish security, and with preventing renewed "persecution" of Turkish citizens of Cyprus. "Turkish women and children were murdered in 1964 and 1967," he says. "When Turks do it, the world calls us barbarians. When Greeks do it, the world forgets. But these things are living in our memory."

A Cyprus solution imposed by American pressure will not be accepted, Kilic declares with absolute firmness. Turkey is responding to such pressures by taking a new look at its total defense arrangement. In recent years, he says, Turkey has made a mistake in putting all its eggs in one basket. He denies that moves toward the Soviet Union and the Arab world are precisely in counterpoint to the embargo imposed by Congress on American arms sales. But he does not deny that those relationships are developing.

The mood, though, seems like that of a wife who learns her husband is cheating on her and goes out to commit adultery with someone she does not particularly like, just to get even. "It is sad," Kilic says, "that America is forced to lose an ally because of Greek pressure. Whether the real interests of America are the same as those of the Greek lobby, I leave up to you."

It is sad because Turks really yearn for admission into the club of Western countries. Ataturk led the way, his whole movement was one of Westernizing. He disestablished Islam and abolished the caliphate, adopted the Gregorian calendar, replaced the Arabic alphabet with the Latin, set up a Western-style republic with bicameral legislature, introduced Western surnames (such as his own Ataturk—father of the Turks), and made his people lay aside the fez and the veil.

"Even before Ataturk," Kilic says, "other Turkish leaders made overtures to the West, but they were always rebuffed. We want to be known as Western-oriented world citizens. We have a foot in the Middle East, but our largest city is on the European continent and we look toward Europe." He notes that Turkey belongs to NATO and holds associate membership in the Common Market.

Islam remains important to Turkey, Kilic says, and its role has increased to some degree as Turks, along with others, have recently looked more to their heritage and to spiritual values. And it has special importance still for rural Turks, he says. But Ataturk's move to a secular state was irreversible, Kilic says, discounting the possibility of the religiously oriented National Salvation Party becoming dominant. So there stand the Turks, longing for acceptance by the West but finding their way blocked by bad images of the past.

*For a different report one might turn to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*: "In 1915 the Turks, regarding the Armenians, despite pledges of loyalty, as a dangerous foreign element with friends among the enemies who had launched a campaign against the Dardanelles and with brothers in the Russian armies on their eastern front, decided to deport the whole Armenian population of about 1,750,000 to Syria and Mesopotamia. The operation was carried out with the utmost barbarity. It is estimated that about 600,000 Armenians died or were massacred en route. About one-third escaped deportation."