

## INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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**The voice of the people**

Plato is said to have taken a dim view of books. He was suspicious of them on the grounds that you could not question them and they could not answer you back. From my point of view, there is a double irony here, since my early education -- and lifelong habits of reading -- were largely moulded by Greek teachers whose homework assignments of preference consisted of extensive passages drawn from that prolific author, Plato! Nevertheless, there is a deep truth to his observation, which I have been meditating on for a month. Certainly ancient Athens was a very talky place, and so is modern Turkey. A minority of Turks read in any meaningful way, and of course fewer write. In a recent survey only a quarter said they bought daily newspapers -- admittedly, they are expensive. I personally cannot foresee the day when Turks will be content to sit alone at home and surf the Internet. The key information flows in this society are mouth-to-mouth, like a swollen river fed from time to time by streams of television. The Turkish Information Superhighway is the local mosque courtyard or corner grocery store. To sum it up in a mot: If the Turks were great readers, they wouldn't have squat toilets.

Reduced reliance on the written word has implications for my fellowship here. I have been slow to grasp this. The first step, which I took some months ago, was largely to ignore universities and research institutes which place undue emphasis on writing. Now I am shelving the books and journals too. Especially if they were written in an academy, I have begun to force myself *not* read them, and certainly not to rely on them. My rationale is this. Perhaps *I* appreciate the scholarly arguments that the authors develop -- the historical facts they muster -- the standards of rigour they set themselves in order to establish truth. But I am sorely deluded if I assume that most people I meet form their impressions of the world by those rules. I decided last month my job was not only to eke out the truth about Turkey and environs, but discover (with minimal interference) what people *believe* is the truth, as they orally communicate it to one another and to me. This conviction was predicated on the assumption that Turkey is a democratic country where people's opinions, however misguided, matter.

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What a delightfully tolerant principle I had decided to act upon! On this view, whether or not it is *true* that Washington is home to an international Jewish conspiracy is not the point. What is important is that a significant number of Turks believe it. I was open-mouthed when the first full torrent of anti-semitic invective sullied my virgin ears from stall-keepers in the Foreigners' Market in Samsun. Later I met a man in Adana, back from a business trip to Kazakhstan, provokingly proud of his new possession: a Russian-language version of the Covenant of the Elders of Zion. He boasted that it sat beside his Koran, illuminating the room as twin fountains of truth. (I would have thought they should be kept as separate as meat and milk in Orthodox Jewry, lest they contaminate one another, but no matter.) Such people are not alone by any means. The ones I met all vote for the Refah Party. These are extreme examples of "misguided opinion," but they indicate the self-restraint that is required if one sets about paternalistically (for there is a little of the elitist in all of us) to listen to the Voice of the People.

All in all, according to my diary I have logged over 150 hours of talk during the last month in cafeterias and blacksmiths' yards and busses and fish-markets from Trabzon to Antalya and from Antakya to Istanbul. The following pages are a summary of some of the more strange, twisted or simply challenging thoughts offered to me, popularly circulating in the marketplace of ideas. My criterion for including them is that I heard each one well explicated and sometimes passionately defended by different kinds of people around the country at least ten times. That does not make for a scientific opinion poll, but are intellectuals and "reasonable" commentators quite aware the Turkish public at large holds views like these? And what are the implications for a Turkish foreign policy sensitive to democratic mandate?

### Conversation games

I treat conversations like games of chess. When one has repeated the same conversation enough times, one falls into sequences one recognizes, as if replaying the moves of a well-known game but with variations. For instance, Turkish conversation games always begin the same way: 1. What is your name? 2. Where are you from? 3. What state? 4. What work do you do? That is the equivalent to a standard Ruy Lopez opening. There is a Queen's Side Opening variant that goes: 3. Are you from California or Texas? 4. You see, I have a relative working in California or Texas and I thought you might be from there? Then there are four or five more immutably patterned moves (5. How long have you been in Turkey? 6. Where do you live? 7. How much money do you make, in Turkish lira please? 8. What do you think of Turkey?, variant: 8a. Do you prefer Turkey or America? 9. What's the weather like in America?) before the opening sequence is finished.

The examples that follow are mid-conversation passages that I have run through many times with Turks from all walks of life. I summarize my interlocuter's attack and development, my standard response, and his or her most common counter-response or parry, noting any significant variations.

1. *The North American Indians were originally ethnic Turks who crossed the Bering Straits into Alaska.*

Development: It is known that nomadic Turks spread westwards from their steppe homes around Mongolia and the Altay mountains to populate Central Asia and eventually penetrated Anatolia. But some Turks stayed in the north and east, like the Tuvan and Hakas Turks, while the Yakutian Turks passed as far up as the North Siberian Sea. Why shouldn't they have crossed over to populate the American continent?

Standard Response: And the Aztec/ Incan/ Mayan/ Olmec/ Toltec civilizations were founded by ancient Egyptians crossing the Atlantic in papyrus canoes?

Counter-response: That's also possible.

Comment: To their credit, Turkish schoolbooks do not support this claim. The question is why this myth is attractive to so many Turks I have met. Forgetting the redskins for a moment, I could make the stretch to believing that Pacific Coast tribes like the Tlingit and Kwakiutl and Haida were distant relatives of Siberian eskimos and Yakuts. The sleight of hand involved is to say that the Yakuts, Tuvans and Hakasi are Turks in the first place, and unfortunately here the new, post-Soviet schoolbooks *are* to blame (eg. Milli Cografya I, 1992). My psychological read on what's going on might be dubbed "Over-enthusiastic Co-ethnic Overspill." Having newly discovered five post-Soviet republics filled with Turks (as the Anatolian Turks regard them) they are now reaching out to find new Turks living in Siberian Russia, and in a sort of headlong rush the popular imagination has overshot into the Pacific, taken with the idea that there might even be Turks of a diluted sort as far away as North America. There are two female Yakut students (their names are completely Russian, Maria and Nadezhda) studying at the Black Sea Technical University in Trabzon I asked their opinion They replied with a passion that they had had enough of being told that they were Turks and spoke a form of Turkish; and having been labelled Turks, they were sick of being *reproached* for not being Muslims (they are Shamans).

2. *The US invaded Somalia in order to take possession of (and exploit) Somalia's rich gold deposits.*

Development: The true face of American foreign policy is material self-interest, that is to say, greed. This conclusion is inescapable when any unbiased observer notes the way the US instantly launched into action to protect oil-rich Kuwait, and juxtaposes that fact with American drawn-out indifference towards the suffering of oil-poor Bosnians. That example in itself gives the lie to any US declarations of goodwill towards ordinary Somalis. Professions of disinterested hopes for peace in Somalia must be chalked down to American hypocrisy and lies. What motivations are left to explain America's intervention? Somalia is known to be rich in gold. Ergo, exploitation of that gold must have been the Americans' true goal.

Variations: Diamond mines.

Standard Response: Perhaps the US has national interests that stretch beyond the material? For example, maybe Bush believed his rhetoric and launched an experiment to see whether US-force-projected, UN-administered protectorates and peace-enforcement actually could underscore a new world order, which would have been in America's long-term interests. If the Somalian experiment had succeeded, attitudes towards the UN and even towards how to settle Bosnia might have been very different.

Counter-response: The UN and the US are practically indistinguishable. The US keeps the UN on a leash. It does what the US says. Its resolutions are only cover for American imperialism. Whether peace had come to Somalia under an American or a UN umbrella is irrelevant; in either case the end result would have been the exploitation of Somalia by American business.

Comment: I would like to strangle the originator of this all-pervasive idea, that Somalia is a gold and/or diamond El Dorado. This interpretation of American interests in Somalia is absolutely dominant in Turkey. I can say that I have not met a single Turk outside of the walls of universities -- and not even *all* universities -- who is not utterly convinced that America was out to grab Somalia's mineral deposits.

3. *The US invaded Haiti in order to take possession of (and exploit) Haiti's rich oil fields.*

Comment: As above, save that the idea is slightly less preponderant than #2. Those who do not subscribe to #3 usually subscribe to #4.

4. *The US and Russia cut a secret deal. In return for Russian silence over the American invasion of Haiti, the US would allow Russia to attack Chechnya with impunity.*

Development: Once American empty rhetoric about establishing democracy in Haiti is swept away, it becomes apparent that the Russian and US invasions were similar in purpose: to impress their power on their respective regions. The US was reasserting its Monroe Doctrine in Haiti; Russia is pushing its own version of a Monrovsкая doktrina for its hemisphere. Russia was completely accommodating over Haiti, and in return Washington (and the West) have capitulated to Moscow by giving it a free hand in Grozny. The timing of the invasions; the cynical nature of the US-Russian partnership; the assiduous care not to intervene in one another's affairs any more -- all smell of a behind-the-scenes agreement

Standard Response: It is not true that the West has not loudly protested Chechnya. Not to speak of the fuss from human rights groups, Europeans are withholding key Russian loans. There will be a sour taste to the Clinton-Yeltsin summit in May, and Russia will continue to pay a price in terms of loss of support in international forums. The invasion of Haiti had at least as much to do with Clinton's need to boost his weak image as to project US power in its hemisphere. The US and Russia are not going to make concessions to one

another if they are really claiming spheres of influence as their right. Rights need not be bargained for and a negotiated trade-off of rights would undercut their own arguments.

Counter-response: Western shows of resisting Russia are hot air. The West can make as much noise as it wants in a feigned show of concern for Chechnya, or to try to exonerate itself from responsibility with the sort of futile politicking it has tried in Bosnia. But the acid test is whether any of it makes a practical difference to the Chechen children who are bombed every evening on the Turkish news. "Rights" are what a country can get away with. Might makes right. Russian and Western interests are joined in ignoring the suffering of small nations and peoples.

Variations:

*Standard Response:* If all the protest are hot air, what do you think the US should do vis-a-vis Chechnya?

*Counter-response:* Turkey is sending definitely sending aid and volunteers to help our brothers in Chechnya. Turkey would be making an all-out effort on behalf of the Chechens, if the US wasn't forcing us not to -- just as we would have done in Bosnia, had the West not tied our hands in order to protect Yugoslavia's Christians.

Comment: I have failed to sway anyone's view by pointing out that the invasions in Haiti and Chechnya have been vastly different in terms of casualties and results. In either case a hegemon bully is strong-arming a weaker nation. I cannot communicate the idea of a benevolent American occupation of Haiti without converting the believers in #4 into believers in #3. I rarely make headway in suggesting that *America* per se doesn't do things as a bloc entity, but that Clinton might have signed off on Haiti for personal reasons, say to revive his presidency, or that Bush invaded Panama for political reasons to look macho, and I have encountered disbelief in describing how the Bush administration was actually divided over the wisdom of invading Iraq. As for the widespread "Might makes right" argument, see below, #5 comment.

*5. The US is presently implementing a covert plan to dismember Turkey and establish independent Kurdistan.*

Development: The US is eager to consolidate its presence in and around the Turkish land-bridge, which, with the opening of Central Asia and peace coming to the Middle East is the world's most geostrategic zone. Israel is America's sentinel in the south. Setting up a puppet Kurdistan in the north as its client makes sense for the US, since then it would straddle the region and ensure its dominance

Furthermore, the US has definitely noticed that Kurdistan would be a petrol-rich country. There is oil at Mosul and Kirkuk in northern Iraq, just outside Kurdistan's putative borders, so surely there must be more under the ground inside its borders too. There are also extensive oil fields on the Turkish side that would extend into Kurdistan. These reserves are not generally known to the outside world, because the US has maliciously forced Turkey to cap the wells to keep world petrol prices down, but the Turkish people

know about them. As a quid pro quo for supporting Kurdish independence, the US would be first in line to exploit Kurdistan's oil.

Standard Response: Turkey recently started pumping petrol near Adana (Karaisali Bulgurdag). I don't know anything about US pressure on Turkey to cap its own wells. Why would America gamble on a risky venture like independent Kurdistan, when it already has a good ally in the region who would thereby be alienated forever -- viz. Turkey?

Counter-response: Kurdistan has been the West's dream since it sought to partition the Ottoman Empire after World War I. Today Turkey has stopped being a good ally for the US: it is no longer slavish enough to US interests, and Washington wants a puppet it can control. Friendship has been eroding since 1991. Despite receiving Turkey's support during the Gulf War, US positions in its aftermath have been consistently anti-Turkish. Operation Poised Hammer and the No-Fly Zone provide a safe haven for Kurdish terrorists; human rights are a club Washington uses to protect its Kurdish allies by bashing Turkey; and US-supported sanctions on Iraq hurt Turkey to the tune of millions of dollars a day, a form of blood-letting intended to weaken Turkey.

Variations:

*Standard Response:* America would fatally undermine a friendly country and a NATO member just like that?

*Counter-response:* America has cynically calculated that Kurdistan's oil and the chance to control the gates to Central Asia/ the world's most geostrategic zone make the betrayal worth it.

Comment: First, it is amazing to me how everyone starting from the fishmonger's wife up is unselfconsciously conversant in terms like "strategically important," "geopolitical crossroads," etc in discussing Turkey. These phrases have been so bandied about in recent years that the population has been educated to think and talk like security-council strategists. I note that even a new secondary-school geography textbook has added a chapter entitled "Turkey's Geopolitical Importance" (*Milli Cografya* 7, 1993). Second, everyone has become the sort of geostrategic thinker Machiavelli would be proud to call his own. Everyone is a hard-headed realist, and there are no liberal internationalists at all. Everyone's notion of strategy is completely cutthroat. There is no yesterday; no trust; no international commitments or standards of behaviour; no worthwhile habits of cooperation kept from day to day; in other words, the US could stab Turkey in the back tomorrow, as if it saw a good move on a two-dimensional board game. And presumably, on the same view, Turkey could (and should?) act in the same way towards its own allies.

*6. The provocation leading to riot in Istanbul on March 12/13 was designed to sabotage Turkey's chances of joining the European Union and was backed by Greece or by Islamicists anxious to stop the country drifting Westwards.*

Comment: To date no one knows who is responsible for machine-gunning four teahouses and a patisserie frequented by Alevi customers in Istanbul's Gaziosmanpasa district on the evening of March 12. Two people were killed and 20 wounded. An angry crowd quickly turned against the nearby police station, which had neither deterred nor reacted promptly to the killings, and the protest widened into a battleground between Alevis and Sunnis and between the police and the crowd. In the ensuing fighting and looting during the night and the next day, at least 34 people died and over 100 were injured. In the present circumstances a hit against Alevis, considered by many Sunnis to be heretics, was a shrewd way to spark a gunpowder barrel. Consequently, the incident was universally dubbed the "provokasyon."

Development: The provocation's timing, on the heels of Turkey's signing a Customs Union agreement with the European Union, was not coincidental. By fomenting instability, opponents to Turkey's integration with the EU have given the Europeans a reason to reassess their positions on Turkey negatively. In particular, the European Parliament has an excuse now why not to ratify the Customs Union agreement. Such opponents could be Islamicists who want to see closer cooperation with Middle Eastern countries in the framework of the Islamic Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), or Greeks, who always want to trip Turkey up every step of the way.

Variations (in order of frequency):

(a) *Kurds.* This was one in a series of destabilizing and demoralizing strikes by Kurdish separatists. They have been quiet for 3-4 months and it was time for an appearance. Moreover the terrorist organizations Dev-Sol and TIKKO are particularly suspected to have a base of support in Gaziosmanpasa.

(b) *Armenians.* There is a host of Armenian groups with territorial claims and nursing grudges that range from alleged massacre during the Turkish War of Liberation to Turkey's backing of Azerbaijan in the war over Nagorno-Karabakh. The provocation in Istanbul coincides with a new Armenian attack on Azerbaijan, breaking the fragile ten-month cease-fire.

(c) *Russians.* The Russians have been waiting for an opportunity to punish Turkey for its support of Chechnya, lashing out in frustration, seeing how Turkey has infused the plucky Chechens with courage and the spirit to resist Orthodox Christian injustice. It fears that a strong Turkey will encourage other Muslim and Turkic people to secede from the Russian Federation, and has seized the chance to hamstring a competitor for regional power. The more unstable Turkey is made to look, the greater the likelihood of Central Asian pipeline being routed through Russia rather than Turkey.

(d) *Others.* In particular, state-sponsored Iraqi or Syrian terrorism is always anxious to weaken Turkey and to settle scores, whether over Turkey's complicity in the Iraqi No-Fly Zone or anti-Syrian water politics relating to the Southeastern Anatolian (GAP) project.

Standard Response (irrespective of my interlocuter's chosen culprit):

Why haven't the perpetrators publicly claimed responsibility for the action?

Counter-response: Turkey has so many enemies -- and is consequently shot-through with agents serving those powers [see APPENDIX] -- that, in the present climate, it is shrewder for the perpetrators to remain silent and let people's imaginations run wild. There are three major, inter-connected fault-lines in Turkish society: Sunni/Alevi, Islamic/lay, and pro-Europe/pro-Middle Eastern. Insert a wedge into any one to prise it open and you send repercussions through the others.

*7. Turkey is the target of an international Jewish conspiracy headquartered in Washington.*

Development: The US is controlled by Jews; Israel is its instrument, etc.

Standard Response: On recent evidence the CIA can't even organize itself competently and they are supposed to be the professionals. A perfect, coordinated, secret Jewish organization working like clockwork and ringing the globe is a ridiculous fantasy.

Depressingly Inevitable Counter-response:

This is obfuscation. You are trying to hide something. It is clear that you must be a Jew.

## APPENDIX

The following is a list of "Kurdish/Leftist," Armenian, Greek, and "Islamicist" terrorist organizations that I picked up from the Turkish media and the barber shops in only *five* days. The names and acronyms were mentioned in connection with speculations about the March 12/13 "provocation" in Istanbul. I have never even heard of half of them. I offer it as a sort of ID-quiz for anyone interested in terrorism in Turkey.

Armenian Liberation Army		Armenian People's Movement	
Armenian Revolution Federation		Armenian Secret Army	
ASALA	DEV-SOL	DEV-YOL	DHKP-C
EOKA	EOKA/B	ERNK	IBDA-C
KAWA	KGK	KUK	KUK/C
Pan-Hellenic EOK Fighters		PKK	Rizgari
SVP	Tasnaks	TDY	TEIKP
Tekosin	THKO	THKP/C	TIKKO
TKP	TKP/K	TSIP	