

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Istanbul Diary

American Research Institute in Turkey
Çitlembik Sokak 18/2
Serencebey
Beşiktaş Istanbul
TURKEY

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Mr. Peter Bird Martin
Institute of Current World Affairs
Wheelock House
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755
USA

Dear Peter,

Had I known nothing of recent events in Turkey, I would still have sensed from the outset that all was not well. As you know, I departed from JFK on Swissair late in the evening on the 10th of October. The following morning, when I shifted from the New York to the Istanbul leg of my flight, I was faced with a precautionary procedure that I had never encountered before. I lined up with my fellow passengers in the Zurich airport lounge, and soon thereafter we were whisked out to the plane. There, we found all of our baggage spread out on the tarmac. No piece of luggage which was not identified by a passenger on the spot would be loaded on the plane. A terrorist intent on blowing up Swissair Flight 324 on the 11th of October would have to have been willing to die in the process. I was later told that this procedure was followed for every flight into Turkey from abroad.

The sense that all was not well was reinforced by the trip in from Yeşilköy airport. Customs had been relatively simple, and I was quickly able to get my gear loaded into a couple of taxis for the journey into town. Our destination was Beyoğlu. There, on İstiklâl Caddesi, on the site of the old Istanbul headquarters of the Dutch East India Company, sits the Palais de Hollande, a splendid 19th century structure constructed to serve as the Dutch embassy to the Sublime Porte. Istanbul is no longer the capital of a great empire; history has passed it by. Accordingly, the Palais de Hollande now houses only the Dutch consulate and the Dutch Archaeological Institute--where, some months before, I had booked a room. Along the way from the airport, at most of the major intersections, there stood military policemen armed with rifles or submachine guns, some lounging, others standing like statues, moving, but only to breathe.

My arrival at the Palais de Hollande caused considerable consternation. I had written ahead, specifying that I would probably not get there before the early evening, but the director of the archaeological institute and the consul

Paul A. Rahe is a fellow of the Institute of Current World Affairs, studying the contemporary culture, social development, and politics of the Eastern Mediterranean with an eye to the earlier history of the region.

general are not on the best of terms--and the latter was, in any case, out of town, on leave, in Holland. In short, I was not expected at the gate, and that occasioned the trouble. In Ankara, not long before, someone linked with one of the shadowy terrorist groups which inhabit this region had threatened to bomb the American embassy. Military guards with submachine guns had subsequently been placed at the gates of every consulate in Istanbul. The Dutch were not a likely target, but no one was willing to take any unnecessary chances. Fortunately, I had foreseen that the hour of my arrival might occasion difficulties and had a letter in hand from the proper authorities, confirming that a room would be ready for me. And so it was.

I did not wander far afield that evening. By the time that I had lugged my gear up the two flights of stairs, exhaustion had set in. Eventually, I felt the need for food, and I stumbled across Istiklâl, wolfed down all that was placed in front of me, and returned to my haven to collapse. Between packing and travelling, I had not slept in quite some time. But, even though I was tired, I was sufficiently attuned to what was happening around me to sense that something was strange and possibly amiss regarding the crowds walking up and down Istiklâl Caddesi.

The next day, I took a taxi up the Bosphorus to the American Research Institute in Turkey where I collected my mail and secured the addresses of some acquaintances who had come to Istanbul some weeks before I did. Early that evening, I located the correct street on the city map I had purchased and set out to find the first of the two couples, only to get hopelessly lost in the rabbit's warren of streets that make up the neighborhood of Cihangir. Our rendezvous was to be delayed until morning, but, as darkness fell, it soon hit me what it was that had given me such an eerie feeling the night before. The tiny, cobblestone streets of Cihangir were packed, and there was not a woman to be seen.

I had once lived in New York on the border between Harlem and Spanish Harlem, and I had soon learned that, in crowded cities at night, groups of young men unaccompanied by women can spell danger for the unwary. The weeks that followed my first days in Istanbul considerably reduced and softened the forebodings to which my initial wanderings had given rise, but they did not eliminate those fears altogether--which is as it should be.

The Jews, the White Russians, the Chaldaeans, the Greeks, the Armenians, the Iranians, and the Turks among whom they reside in Cihangir and the other districts of Istanbul are not city dwellers as we know them; they are urban villagers. To be sure, the citizens of Istanbul are not nosy in the manner of the Athenians and the rest of the Hellenes. But, nonetheless, they rarely miss a trick. They are not, like most Americans, strangers wherever they live. They almost never move to new homes outside the neighborhoods into which they were born. As a consequence, they are familiar with those who live about them and their knowledge of their neighbors is a great deterrent against crime. All but a handful of the men on the streets at night are quickly recognized by nearly every person they encounter. Only a few are outsiders bent on mischief; and those who are, are easily recognized as potential sources of trouble--and they are watched with a suspicious eye.

The phenomenon is too well known to need detailed discussion here. Where social and geographical mobility are limited, the social controls so distinctive of life in the village can survive in the city, and they prevent the emergence of that anonymity which makes violence and crime so easy to get away with. But, of course, this regime of familiarity cannot eliminate crime and violence altogether. Just a few weeks ago, a friend was out for a walk in Cihangir. A scuffle broke out in front of him, and someone stumbled into him and tried to lift his wallet. It might have been New York, Naples, or Rome. The third night that I was here, the violent potential of these throngs of men was similarly brought home to me.

The event happened shortly after 10:30 p. m. It was Saturday evening. I was rushing home from a dinner party, intent on reaching the Palais de Hollande before the witching hour when the half-crazed old Greek gateman abandons his watch and takes to his bed. As I approached the one street which I knew lead to Istiklâl Caddesi, a small crowd of fifty to sixty men burst on the scene. They were angry. That much was clear from the tone of their shouts. And they were heading for a coffee house (kiraathanesi) built on an embankment overlooking the bottom of the street. At least two of the men were carrying chairs. I started to reverse course, but, after reminding myself that this was the only route I knew that lead to my nest, I turned back again and plunged through the crowd. As I glanced back at what was happening, I saw one young man hurl the chair in his hands up, over the embankment, and through one of the plate glass windows of the kiraathanesi above. I did not stop to watch his companion throw the second chair; but, as I made my way with rapid steps up the steep incline towards my temporary home, I heard it strike and shatter the other window of the coffee house.

Had this event taken place some weeks later, I would have stopped to learn the cause of the quarrel. Did politics enter into the dispute? Did the owner of the kiraathanesi or his son-in-law get caught cheating at cards? Or was the coffee they served simply foul? I still wonder, but I will never know. At the time, my ignorance of the city pleaded caution--so I avoided the fray. The local neighborhood riot which I witnessed late that first Saturday evening was then and is now a disturbing reminder that four years ago dozens of Turks were being shot down in the streets every single night. As I write these words, the military police are combing the city, searching for gunmen; building by building, apartment by apartment. Even now, there are terrorists and bands of robbers abroad in the land; hardly a day passes without there being news that somewhere in Turkey a bank has been robbed. At least once a week, the national television news carries a story that another gang has been arrested and displays photographs of the men and their guns. More often than not, the weapons and their owners were found in Istanbul.

Sincerely,



Paul A. Rahe