

## Spinning Turkey into Gold: An American Perspective

By Walter Haas

Istanbul, TURKEY –

*Stanford in Berlin has been in Istanbul for only one hour, and has already run away from an alley fistfight, been banned at the airport from using a video camera, observed next to the hotel a local movie being filmed, driven on modern highways past in a beautiful Mediterranean metropolis, and eaten lamb intestines from a street vendor. This sets the pace and tone for the next 72 hours.*

While the memories of our enchanting trip to Istanbul blend together in a jet-lagged and Efes-fueled montage, I will not forget what we learned first-hand re: Turkey's quest to be a European Union member state. This awareness was only acquired due to the unparalleled level of access we were given. While only in Turkey's largest city for half a week, we had opportunities 99% of young foreigners visiting the country would lack.

So, what insights were gained from meeting representatives of Turkish business, military, legislature and academia? Perhaps it would be more accurate to say *insight*, for despite the high level of diversity and intelligence of the Turkish citizens we spoke to, the relative uniformity of answers was surprising. This certainly contrasts to the differing opinion of Europeans and Turks living outside of the former Ottoman nation. Granted, I base the German Turks' opinion on only two students I met, one of which who called herself an "anti-globalization Marxist" – an outlier in most contexts.

Nonetheless, when talking to academics and AKP political rivals – two groups one would expect at least a healthy dose of dissent, there was nothing but uniformity on the issue of the EU ascension: Turkey should and wants to join the EU. It has a modern, growing economy, and Europe needs to recognize that Turkey's young, skilled population will contribute to the EU's desire to be a superpower.

At first sight, the jaded westerner in me finds this unvarying optimism both refreshing and appealing. Even though this country is rough around the edges, the fact that it uniformly desires membership should warrant relatively quick ascension – or so I

reckoned while in the city. Perhaps I was just taken by friendly people, temperate climate, and tap water.

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*Local interactions were friendly and lively, somewhat contrasting to the typical East German winter experience.*

We are later able to spend time with students from local universities. They are intelligent, fresh-faced youths with a bright future ahead of them. In other words, perfect people to help us ascertain the challenges and opportunities of this country (along with good nightlife spots):

*What about this movie, Valley of the Wolves... is this Anti-Americanism / a sign of growing Radical Islamism?*

Turkish Student one: You have to understand, the movie was based on a very popular TV show that had nothing to do with the current content. Also, it was reflecting recent scandal.s

*(This puts me at ease until I realize a movie's popularity does not answer my question...thus failing to quell my paranoia)*

*What about the secret police? Does Turkey really have one?*

Turkish Student two: Conscription is mandatory in this country, so we take great pride in our high level of security, and...well, the thing is...hey, check out the Galata Tower!

To make a point, I obviously embellish and take conversations out of context. The variety of people we met led to a fairly high level of transparency. Obviously, any country wanting to join the EU puts its best face forward when meeting foreigners studying the political and cultural environment. We detect no dishonesty, only good PR.

As an American (probably too) conscious of the importance of image, I sincerely respect this commitment to marketing. For the same reason, I know it when I see it.

Only when interviewing random people for a video project does someone say what many Europeans and Geographers believe [paraphrasing]:

*Do you consider yourself European?*

Turkish Girl: As someone from Istanbul, yes

*Do you consider Turkey European?*

Turkish Girl: Most of this country? No.

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*Istanbul seemed to be San Francisco, Paris, Cairo and Mexico City – simultaneously.*

The glistening Ritz-Carlton hotel, gorgeous natural harbor with its yachts, and colorful street market is remarkable. So too is the hardship we witnessed. We visit a rural area by the Black Sea, and along the way I taken aback by both the incredible beauty and more third world imagery. Hundreds of houses seem half-built — obviously abandoned years ago. Others seem inhabited but are in a state of disrepair. Trash and debris line the otherwise picturesque (wow, it really is Black) Sea. Less than 24-hours previous we visited the pristine Sebanchi University, clearly on par with any top-notch American counterpart – *that is the future*. I then look outside our Mercedes bus at the broken, clay and dirt – *this is the present*.

Such a subjective view alone should not cloud ones opinion on Turkey's economic strength. America, the richest country on earth, too has great economic disparity (much larger than a more socialized Western Europe). Anyone who has been to an East Coast town abandoned by manufacturing downsizing knows destitution.

Nonetheless, Turkey's \$7,900 GDP per capita was just as apparent on the outskirts of its largest metropolis as its 9% GDP growth, and 7.7% fall of inflation was inside the city.

So, based on this whirlwind tour of Turkey, we return to the \$64,000 question: "Should Turkey be allowed to join the EU?" No doubt it is moving in the right direction. The country is modernizing faster than most places on Earth, and is doing so in many cases for the express purpose of integrating into the policies set out by the EU. So, the intention is very strong, yet even aside from, "you have a long way to go..."- arguments against ascension, perhaps this "dedication" to resembling an EU member-state without reflection is the ultimate sign of immaturity. For, even though there are always majority opinions, if someone asks ten Germans a question on the EU, he expects to hear more than one answer. This is no doubt a cynical appraisal, perhaps complexly without merit. But much like personally I have learned the hard way that being too eager with girls is a turn-off, maybe too Turkey needs be less aggressive and more self-critical. Perhaps playing "hard(er) to get" will ultimately win European favor.