

Turkey (read from bottom up)

The white cap of hatred

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Our Europe editor glimpses a nasty nationalism

Friday

BACK in Kars, we have dinner with the mayor, Naif Alibeyoglu. He is an AK Party man, and a progressive fan of modern sculpture, examples of which unexpectedly adorn bits of his city. The food and wine, as always, even in far-flung parts of Turkey, are superb. Mr Alibeyoglu is an optimist on the subject of improving ties with Armenia. He would like to reopen the border, he wants to encourage Armenian tourists and he invites Armenians to come, even if by roundabout routes, to his local art and music festivals.

But he has plenty of enemies: Azerbaijan, for one, which fought a ruinous war against Armenia in the early 1990s. Perhaps one-third of Kars's population is Azeri (the languages are both Turkic). The local Azerbaijani consul-general is a positive fomenter of dissent with the Armenians. But there are also plenty of Turkish nationalists to deal with.

I go to see one of them, the local boss of the far-right MHP Party, who says he expects to do well in the election in July. Surrounded by a villainous-looking group of thugs, he puts forward several hair-raising policies, including the early invasion of northern Iraq and the execution of the imprisoned PKK leader, Abdullah Ocalan. He is against normalisation of relations with Armenia until and unless Armenians stop calling this part of Turkey "western Armenia" and drop their "absurd" demands for an acknowledgment of Armenian genocide by the Ottoman Turks in 1915.

Nationalism in Turkey is, in a sense, the downside of Atatürkism. The great man was a patriot above all else. But in the process of forging a modern Turkey, he and his successors have lost the easygoing Ottoman tolerance of a multicultural empire. This is not just a problem for Kurds and Armenians. The Alevi, an Islamic sect, also feel persecuted. It is dismayingly hard to open a Christian church anywhere, despite Anatolia's long Christian heritage. And the beleaguered Greek community of Istanbul, the seat of the Orthodox Patriarch and of the (closed) Halki Greek Orthodox seminary, are under pressure as never before.



AFP

Trabzon the tarnished jewel

Walking through Kars, I stumble across a sad example of the new nationalism. Three boys are playing football outside a former Armenian church. One, hardly 12 years old, sports the white cap that was supposedly worn by the young assassin of Hrant Dink, an ethnic Armenian newspaper editor shot dead in Istanbul. The assassin seems to have come from Trabzon, north of Kars, now a hotbed of Turkish nationalism. Ironically it was, as Trebizond, once a jewel of Greek Orthodox and Jewish culture. We remonstrate with the boy about wearing such provocative headgear outside an Armenian church—but his response is merely to kick the church wall.

As we head back to Erzurum in search of some of the city's obsidian necklaces and worry-beads, I brood again on Turkey's fractious politics. The heavy-handed military intervention in defence of secularism and the rejection of the AK Party's candidate for the Turkish presidency have inflamed passions ahead of the election in late July. It looks as if the AK Party will win, and Recep Tayyip Erdogan will continue as prime minister. But Turkey's angry nationalism and the bitterness unleashed before the election will play into the hands of those in the European Union, including the new French president, Nicolas Sarkozy, who are against its EU membership. Turkish and European Union leaders have much fence-mending ahead of them.

Thursday



TO LEAVE Istanbul and Ankara and head east is to visit another country. In the towns and villages around Diyarbakir, in the Kurdish south-east, one can still find a grinding rural poverty that would be unimaginable in the sophisticated west of Turkey. In the north-east, in Erzurum and Kars, where I now go, the poverty may be slightly less grinding, but the sense of being on a frontier is if anything even stronger—as is a renewed and unattractive spirit of Turkish nationalism.

Erzurum is the sinister backcloth to John Buchan's "Greenmantle", set in the first world war. This was then a key playground in the great game with the Russians, who had long occupied a chunk of what is now north-eastern Turkey. At least they left intact the city's wonderful madrassas (religious seminaries), though in accordance with Ataturk's precepts these are today all secular museums. Farther east, in Kars, most of the grey

stone buildings, including the city's best hotel, were actually built by the Russians. Kars is also the setting of Orhan Pamuk's novel "Snow".

Appropriately enough, even in May the mountains around the city are still topped by snow. This is a high-altitude place, in the foothills of the Caucasus and quite near the biblical Mount Ararat. On a chilly afternoon we head east out of Kars and towards Armenia. Our goal is not that country, however, for the land border is still firmly closed. It is Ani, one of the world's great historical and architectural gems.

As capital of Armenia in the tenth century and a great trading station on the old silk road to China, Ani once vied with Byzantium as a place of wealth and of Christian observance. It is located on a plateau high above the River Arpa that divides Armenia from Turkey—but it is firmly on the Turkish side. Given the testy relations between the two countries, and a revival of nationalist feeling in Turkey, it is not surprising that the Turks should have somewhat neglected the place, which is entirely deserted as we wander around (save for a couple of glum-looking soldiers who come from the old fort that looks across into Armenia).



AFP

Noah's old neighbourhood

At least, some restoration has been done here in recent years. There are four or five early medieval churches, one of which later became the first mosque in Anatolia, most of them complete with some superb frescoes. They would create a sensation if they were transplanted lock, stock and barrel to western Europe. But here they are tramped over by the resident sheep and goats, and very little else. There is no hotel, restaurant, bar or guide anywhere in sight. The atmosphere is all the more haunting as a result. My advice is to go to Ani, or, if you cannot, at least visit its excellent website, before the world's tourists discover and ruin it.

As an antidote after such high-blown culture, we decide on returning to Kars to visit a well-known local truckstop and bar. The chief attraction of the place is not the food and drink, however: it is the Azeri prostitutes who lounge around one of the tables, being gawped at by the almost entirely male clientele. Occasionally one of them wanders around the bar singing and inviting customers to stuff banknotes into her skimpy top. But the beer is expensive, and the ladies are scarcely more beguiling than their intended clients. At least I can put the excursion down to experience—and, with luck, charge the tab to expenses.

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Wednesday



ON TO Ankara, Turkey's unattractive capital. A small village when Ataturk picked it as the new capital, it is now a dusty metropolis of more than three million residents. It has a shiny new out-of-town airport, but still no direct flights to London, Paris or the United States.

Ankara is suffering an outbreak of political fever as the election in July approaches. The area around the Turkish parliament is thick with television crews; inside deputies were recently engaged in fisticuffs. A pro-secular politician wanders over to promise that the ruling AK Party is "finished" and that voters will rally to the opposition.

I wonder. Opinion polls give AK and its charismatic prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, around 40% of the vote, up from 34% in 2002 (when the party won a huge parliamentary majority because only one opposition party crossed the 10% threshold).

One reason voters may back Mr Erdogan is that he has given them five exceptionally successful years. Before 2002, when the country was run by varying coalitions of secular parties, it lurched from one crisis to another, with inflation roaring, banks going bust and frequent recourse to the IMF.

The ground for Turkey's recovery was laid by Kemal Dervis, finance minister in 2001; but the AK Party stuck to his course, tamed inflation, restored growth and won the prize of accession talks with the European Union. However much they dislike Mr Erdogan's Islamist leanings, even fierce secularists concede that his economic and political record is impressive.



AFP

Their secularism is best sensed by visiting Ataturk's mausoleum high above the city (pictured, left). Here you find not just the great man's coffin and a museum about his life, but such other memorabilia as his cars, his cigarettes and even three of his chickpeas. A film records how Ataturk saved the nation, and then personally educated and

modernised it. The atmosphere is almost religious in fervour: to coin an oxymoron, it is a place of secular religion.

It is plain that modern Turkey owes a lot to Ataturk. Without him it might have been summarily chopped up into pieces by the allies in 1918-19. Yet there is something creepy about the reverence that he is now accorded. It is an offence to insult his memory in even the most trivial way. And it is thanks to him that the army is treated as an oracle by secularists—and by much of public opinion.

Yet Turkey's military is no great respecter of human rights—nor of democracy, for that matter. Besides waging a long and brutal war against Kurdish rebels, its habitual response to critics has been to try to silence them.

For many years the generals backed Turkey's aspirations to join the EU, because they saw this as the ultimate fulfilment of Ataturk's dreams. Now, however, some seem to be having second thoughts. The EU has a pesky way of insisting on freedom of speech and religion, on human rights—and on subordinating the army to civilian authorities.

As it happens, the talk in Ankara is that Turkey's EU ambitions may come to nought because of rising opposition from the French, Austrians and Germans. But there is here another paradox about Ataturkism. The army considers itself the guardian of Ataturk's legacy. But if Turkey is to achieve true modernisation by getting into the EU, the military must lose its special status. And that is also why, despite the secularists' arguments, I conclude that another AK victory will, ultimately, be the right result.

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Tuesday



NOBODY should visit Istanbul without going to the Topkapi palace and Aya Sofia, both now museums. The Topkapi houses a fabulous collection of rugs, weapons, jewels, pottery and mosaics accumulated by sultans over the centuries. But almost as big an appeal is its setting: grassy courtyards, fountains and cool flowerbeds all set high above the Bosphorus. You can while away hours watching the boats, tankers and ferries scurrying across the busy waters of Istanbul's harbour.

What really pulls in the tourists is something else: the Topkapi's famous harem, which was opened to the public only in 1960. Yet though it sounds salacious, in reality it simply houses the private quarters of the sultans, including several of the finest rooms in the entire palace. Because it imposes an extra charge and does not admit guided tours, the harem is also mercifully quieter than the rest of the museum—and than Aya Sofia outside.

Sadly, Aya Sofia (pictured below) is disfigured by internal scaffolding, but the immense scale of the basilica, built by Justinian between 532 and 537 AD, is staggering. It was turned into a mosque on the day that Constantinople fell to the Turks in 1453. It is fitting,

given today's arguments over his secular legacy, that it was Ataturk who turned it into a museum in 1935. Besides the mosaics on the first floor, I am intrigued to stumble across a memorial to Enrico Dandolo, the blind 90-year-old Doge of Venice who led the appalling 1204 Fourth Crusade—in the course of which, instead of going to Jerusalem, the crusaders sacked Constantinople, paving the way for the fall of the city to the Turks.

That is enough history, I reflect, as I wander off to meet Norman Stone, an eminent British historian who decamped from Oxford to Turkey a decade ago, basing himself first at Bilkent University in Ankara, and now at Koc University in Istanbul. He complains about the traffic and says that he might return to Ankara if a high-speed train link is built with Istanbul. We talk about the political situation in Turkey. But I swiftly find that it is impossible to escape the burden of history. For one of Mr Stone's bugbears is the Armenian “genocide” of 1915.



AFP

He shares the mainstream view of many Turks: it happened at a messy time during the first world war; some Armenians were fighting (with the Russians) against Ottoman forces; a decision was taken by the Ottoman government to deport them; a large number of Armenians died. But he insists that this did not amount to genocide. Other historians disagree. They have found archived plans laid by the Young Turks in Constantinople that had the explicit aim of killing Turkey's ethnic Armenians.

I cannot judge the truth, but I note one peculiarity with regret. Inside Turkey, it is an offence to talk about the mass-slaughter of the Armenians. A number of writers have been prosecuted. An ethnic Armenian newspaper editor, Hrant Dink, was gunned down recently on his own doorstep in Istanbul. Elsewhere, it can be an offence to deny that this was a genocide. The French National Assembly recently passed a bill to this effect, and there is one before the American Congress. With laws like these flying around, whatever happened to free speech and the disinterested unearthing of historical truth?

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Monday



BY ANY measure Istanbul is a world-class historical city. As first Byzantium and later Constantinople, it was capital of a Roman Empire that lasted longer in the east than in the west. It became the Sublime Porte, capital of the Ottoman Empire and seat of the Islamic caliphate. Coming into the city from Ataturk airport, you pass right through the thick walls of Constantine (which kept Ottoman besiegers at bay until 1453) before emerging into a forest of minarets perched spectacularly above a blue sea.

Yet this is no dead town from the past. Istanbul now has over 10m people, making it Europe's biggest and fastest-growing city (in 1950 it had only about a million). The noise, the traffic, the streets crowding down to the Bosphorus and the Golden Horn are overwhelmingly busy. There is little sign of the political crisis that threatens to engulf Turkey, and provokes my visit.

This crisis is over the secular inheritance of Ataturk, father of modern Turkey, who abolished the Ottoman sultanate and the caliphate in the 1920s, and moved the capital to Ankara. Turks revere Ataturk, whose secular legacy is jealously guarded by the army. A month ago the army put out a statement criticising the government's choice of Abdullah Gul, the foreign minister, as candidate for the Turkish presidency, and implicitly threatening a military coup.



AFP

The army has always disliked the AK Party government, led by Recep Tayyip Erdogan, for its Islamist roots. Mr Gul's particular offence is to have a wife who wears the Muslim headscarf, which is banned in public buildings. The details of the subsequent in-fighting and court cases are too boring to discuss, but the upshot is that no president has been chosen and Turkey is preparing for a general election in late July.

It seems likely that the AK Party will win again, though perhaps not with the same big majority that it won in 2002. The party may again try to install a mild Islamist as president. So the threat of a military intervention still hangs over Turkey, which has a long history of coups.

You might expect that the worldly elite of Istanbul would deplore such heavy-handed military threats and firmly back democracy. But that is not the opinion of most of the journalists, former diplomats and bankers who gather at a splendid dinner party hosted by colleague here in her apartment in the city's Galata district. On the contrary, they are overtly sympathetic to the army, concerned to preserve secularism in Turkey, and suspicious that the AK Party has a hidden Islamist agenda to turn their country into a new Iran.

In an era of creeping fundamentalism throughout the Muslim world, such concerns are understandable. Yet to a Westerner from Europe the notion that a military coup might be preferable to a woman's sporting a headscarf in the presidential palace in Ankara seems bizarre. The truth is that, in Turkey, secularism has turned into another form of fundamentalism that trumps other values, including democracy and the country's prospects of joining the European Union.

Here prosperity and urbanisation play a part. Behind these arguments lies a class issue. What the elite really objects to is the influx of scarf-wearing Anatolian Muslim peasants that has swelled the population of Istanbul and other cities. Yet, as in many other countries, this is something they will just have to learn to live with.