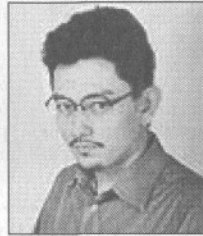


Bush's Turkish delight

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COMMENT



FARISH A NOOR

Historical, rather than contemporary, Turkey is still seen as a model by Muslims the world over. Yet it is precisely this past that is being erased and denied

Turkey is, in many ways, a unique state. Straddling the mighty Bosphorus, the fabled city of Istanbul is divided between the Occident and Greater Asia. On either side of the bridge that spans the great river one sees the signs: 'Welcome to Europe' and 'Welcome to Asia', respectively.

But it is also a state in crisis in many respects, and the crisis cuts deep into the collective psyche of a nation that is Muslim in its identity, culture and history and yet in denial of its past and therefore its destiny. Turkey's secular-democratic institutions and traditions are borrowed from the constitutional systems of the West, yet the modernisation of Turkey — as in the case of Egypt, Iran and Japan, three other non-Western states that tried to modernise themselves following the Western model in the 19th century — was not accompanied by the democratic revolutions that took place in the Occident.

Turkey took from the West technology, sciences, languages and manners of dress and behaviour. But the modalities of modernisation were determined from above, by a handful of plutocrats who had no organic linkages with their own peo-

ple. Needless to say, the Turks were left with little choice and had to undergo the process of rapid modernisation whether they liked it or not. (Those who tried to cling on to the ways of the past were summarily declared enemies of the republic, not unlike Egypt and the Pahlavi Iran.)

In Turkey, as in Iran, Egypt and Japan, 'modernisation' and 'development' practically meant 'Westernisation'. The Ottoman past was decried and vilified as something archaic, backward, retrogressive and diagnosed as the main reason why the country had lagged behind the rest of the world. Notwithstanding the fact that the Ottomans were an imperial power, and that in the conduct of their political affairs and foreign relations they behaved in a manner no different from the British, Dutch and French empires, it remains a fact that the Ottoman empire was cosmopolitan in nature and that the Ottoman rulers did try to maintain their grip on power through negotiated accommodation.

The Ottomans were also responsible for some of the most outstanding architectural wonders of the Muslim world and served as patrons to the arts and sciences. Proof of this is easily found when we look at the tourists who flock to Istanbul, looking in amazement at the great mosques, libraries and schools that were built by Suleiman the Magnificent and his successors. (In contrast, few tourists rave about the wonders of the modern yet dreary capital of Ankara.)

Following his recent visit to Istanbul for the NATO meeting there, President Bush praised Turkey's record of development and recommended the country as a 'model' for the rest of the Muslim world. Yet Bush, like his Turkish counterparts, remained silent about Turkey's Ottoman past. (He may also have been warned against making any feeble Ataturk jokes.) President Bush noted that Turkey, by virtue of its strategic location between the East and West, was in a position to play the role of a bridge-builder between the Occidental and Muslim worlds. He also claimed that Turkey was a model state by virtue of its respect for democracy and Constitutionalism.

Here lies the crux of the matter: Turkey's modern republican constitution, which explicitly calls for the total separation of religion from state, is also one that favours the creation of a powerful centralised state with maximalist powers and the ability to police almost all aspects of public and

private life. It is a country with a human rights record that few would want to emulate. It was Turkey that banned the use of the Kurdish language and expressions of Kurdish cultural identity. It was Turkey that forbade Muslim women entering the public sphere if they displayed their religious identity 'ostensibly'. And it is the Turkish state that has defended its secular status via the routine persecution of Islamist organisations, parties and intellectuals. It is also the same Turkey, with its face turned perpetually to the West, that has supported the Americans in both their conflicts in the Gulf as well as their other foreign adventures. Is this the 'model Muslim state' that the rest of the Muslim world is meant to follow?

Turkey does indeed have a crucial place in Muslim history, but for the very reason the modern Turkish state wants to scrap from the memory: its past points to the inter-penetration and cross-cultivation of ideas between Asia and the Occident, Islam and Christendom. It remains, along with Moghul India and the Spanish Caliphate, an example of a time when Muslims could aspire to power and a global status without compromising their cultural and religious identity and not having to apologise for being Muslims.

But it should be remembered that this glorious past is also heavily coloured by the tint of an Islamic normative religiosity that was rooted in Islam and its universal ideals.

The Ottomans may have made plentiful mistakes of their own (they were, for instance, strongly prejudiced against Arabs and Arab culture. The anti-Arabism of the Kemalist republic finds its roots in the past, even if it is in denial about it), and the Ottoman state was always an imperial state guided by the demands and prerequisites of power above all else. But as a model of Muslim power that was confident yet accommodative, the Ottoman epoch ranks head and shoulder above the soulless modern state that Ataturk has built.

It is for this reason that historical (rather than contemporary) Turkey is still seen as a model by Muslims the world over. Yet it is precisely this past that is being erased and denied as Turkey inches its way to the heart of the West, cultural baggage in tow.

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DURING A RECENT TRIP TO TURKEY FOR the NATO summit, President George Bush has endorsed the government of Turkey. This gives to 'Turkish delight' a new meaning! On the look out for friendly Muslim regimes that can be brought into the fold of the 'coalition of the willing', the American political elite has just adopted their long-term ally, Turkey. The president has even said it was time for the European Union to accept Turkey's bid to join the EU. The reasoning behind this, we are told, is that Turkey is now seen as a 'model Muslim state' where everything is hunky-dory and civil rights and personal freedoms are overflowing.

The Turkish cup is runneth over with freedoms to be shared by the rest of the Muslim world!

Yet during my recent visit to Turkey, I was told that there were certain things I simply could not mention or speak about in public: Never discuss the relevance of Islam to politics; never suggest that the Ottoman epoch was anywhere close (or worse still, better) than the present state of affairs; never praise the policies of the Ottomans; never question the separation of religion and state; and never question the achievements of the great Kemal Ataturk. That left me with precious little to talk about, save my observations on Turkish coffee and tobacco.

I was told the authorities do not appreciate critical comments on Kemal Ataturk; that I could get my hosts into trouble by blabbering in my usual manner. Such respect is considered overdue for the man whose stature and place in history have been overblown by the numerous propagandists and official photographers. (The fact is Ataturk was a somewhat ordinary looking man, and he cut a rather pedestrian figure compared to other Turks of his time — yet in all his official portraits he is seen as a towering figure of virile Turkish manhood.)

A law, called 'To Love Ataturk Act' was apparently passed during Ataturk's own lifetime. It specifically forbids any form of criticism against the man and his ideas. "That means even Ataturk could not criticise himself. Thankfully psychoanalysis was not in vogue then, for had he indulged in a spot of self-criticism on the psychoanalyst's couch, Ataturk would have been arrested for criticising himself!" I tried to joke. My feeble attempt to break the ice did not meet with a warm response: My Turkish hosts' jaws dropped to the floor. It felt as if the roof was about to collapse on our heads.