

➤ The Increasing Global Importance of Turkey by John Saunders

Turkey's recent growth as a manufacturing centre for European markets, along with the country's "perceived warming of relations" with leaders of the Islamic world, has caused members of the global community to sit up and take notice. In "The Increasing Global Importance of Turkey," communications specialist John Saunders sheds light on Turkey's "highly complex society" and offers insight into the country's regional influence and geopolitical future.

Turkey has been in the news a lot recently. In capitals around the world, there is much discussion about Ankara's perceived warming of relations with the East – particularly with leaders of the Islamic world. Some fear it is thus moving away from the West. Are these fears based on fact? Or is Turkey's cordial relationship with Teheran, for example, actually beneficial to global stability?

I have just returned from Istanbul where I had been invited to represent Fleishman-Hillard as a speaker, alongside a senior executive from Monster, at a national Human Resources conference.

My short stay coincided with a series of important events:

- The anniversary of the death of the founder of modern Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk 71 years ago (Nov. 10th) was commemorated with an impeccably observed two-minute silence at precisely 9.05 a.m. – the moment of his demise. All traffic in this city of 14 million souls came to a halt, and the population stood at attention both in the streets and in cafés and shops as sirens called out above the otherwise sound of silence.
- The commencement of a potentially historical parliamentary debate intended to improve relations with Turkey's minority Kurdish population.
- Public consideration of recently proposed protocols to normalise diplomatic and trade relations with Turkey's long-estranged neighbour Armenia, a breakthrough of profound importance on both sides of their border and across the region.
- And, most visibly during my time there, the staging of the 25th session of the Standing Committee for Economics and Commercial Co-operation (COMCEC) of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference. This event was attended by Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Perhaps significantly, in an interview, the Syrian leader called on Turkey to continue to have good relations with Israel in order to help Syrian-Israeli relations.

There is little doubting Turkey's importance in influencing the future direction of the region. It is a highly complex society, but, perhaps, it is its very complexity that allows Turkey to maintain friendships with so many interests in its diverse region. While its

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population of more than 72 million is nearly all Muslim, it is a highly secular and democratic society (a character molded by Ataturk when he founded the republic in 1923) with important relationships throughout the Middle East and Iran, the E.U., and the United States – not to mention with countries throughout Eurasia.

Turkey's complexities are further illustrated by the fact that it maintains the largest standing army in NATO other than the U.S. Yet its ongoing attempts to gain access to the E.U. have repeatedly been frustrated by the largely Christian countries that made up the original EEC (European Economic Community). In recent years, Germany and France, in particular, have been the most vocal opponents to Turkish accession into the E.U.

Though its economic performance was dampened by the global economic downturn of the last 12 months or so, Turkey's growth in recent years has been the envy of many around the world, including developed and emerging market nations alike: from 2003 to 2008 GDP increased by 143 percent, reaching USD 742 billion, and the annual average real GDP growth during that period was 6 percent. To a large extent, that performance was the result of tough-minded reforms (particularly in the financial services sector), Turkey's expanding role as a manufacturing centre for European markets and its growing importance as a transit point for supplies of petroleum and natural gas from relatively new sources to the East to high-volume users to the West. It is now the 15th largest national economy in the world and the sixth largest compared to the 27 E.U. nations.

Many international observers say that the E.U.'s consistent refusal to embrace Turkey is a slap in the face to this proud national and is, thus, forcing it to seek new alliances. During my stay I discussed the overall situation with Ceyde Aydede, founder of our affiliate Global Tanitim, as well as with her managing director, Seyde Uzun. Both Ceyde and Seyde are of the opinion that Turkey is simply out to protect its own interests in a region where there has been so much volatility right on its own borders (which they share with, for example, Iran, Iraq and Georgia). They cite Turkey's growing economic success, its strong middle class and its valued secularism as key reasons why it will continue to embrace Western values. Furthermore, the passion young Turks have for all things digital (Turkey is, for instance, the fastest-growing adopters of Facebook in the world) will ensure that citizens continue to deepen their embrace of Western values and seek upwardly mobile lifestyles.

In the years to come, we can fairly predict that Turkey's geo-political importance will be even greater than it is now.



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