

ICL Trip to Ankara and Istanbul
January 7-14, 2010
Who went: Ed, Ellen, Melanie, Nick and Gabriele

These are Gabriele's Notes from Meetings She Participated In

Dear Team:

The following are notes from various meetings Nick and I attended. But first some observations and recurring themes during our travels – in no particular order. The five of us split up in order to meet as many people as possible, so none of us could make all the meetings.

- I want to start by saying that the fabled Turkish hospitality is nothing if not a crude understatement. We were wined and dined and attended to like nowhere I've ever been. We had to laugh because the U.S. Embassy, while quite helpful and welcoming, was the only place where Mel, Ed and Ellen were graciously pointed to a kiosk where one could buy some water to at least quench their thirst. But I'll let Mel tell you about that....
- Abortion is not a political issue. Women have them and it's not generally discussed.
- Turkey invented the printing press 300 years before Gutenberg, according to an artist/curators we met. A quickie Google search shows that there is in fact some evidence of this. (It's neither here nor there but I found it interesting.)
- While the constitution guarantees freedom of expression, Article 301 of the penal code prohibits insulting Ataturk, Turkey, Turkish government, etc. and one risks jailing. Nobel Literature Prize winner Orhan Pamuk was arrested in 2005 for making statements about Turkey's role in the Armenian genocide (charges were dropped on a technicality).
- A distinction is often made between the French/Turkish concepts of "laicism" (laïcité) versus American "secularism." See this Wikipedia entry (scroll down to Turkey): <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/La%C3%AFcit%C3%A9> or this quickie overview: <http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20071009072044AABFxFC>
- Women were giving the right to vote in 1930, relatively soon as the new Turkey was founded by Ataturk in 1923. But many women emphasize that they were "given" the right, presumably meaning that it was neither assumed they had it nor was it fought for. Not really sure what was meant here.
- While visiting the Ataturk Museum in Ankara and through other conversations, it stood out for us that there is a larger emphasis on "nation" versus "individual" in Turkey. In one speech I noticed that Ataturk spoke about the need to defend against any threat to the nation, "from without and within" but I was later reminded that the US also speaks about needing to defend the nation against "all enemies foreign and domestic."

- It was pointed out that Turkish people, because of the history of the area, are quite diverse and multi-ethnic but are talked about as being Turks, as compared to the US where there is pride in pointing to lineage: e.g., “I’m approximately a ¼ French, ¼ Swedish and ½ Polish, with some American Indian thrown in somewhere.” Turks don’t speak about themselves in this way. This seems to derive at least partially from the struggle for Turkish independence and identity and the very sudden shift toward Westernization.
- Ataturk credits George Washington as his biggest influence (and apropos of nothing, he drove a Cadillac as his private car, which is on exhibit at the museum).
- Turks, both on the left and on the right (Left and Right break down differently than in the US) have enormous trust in the military – 90+% trust the military more than any other institution. There have been several military coups in the past few decades to preserve a secular Turkey, and currently there is a sizeable faction that advocates a military coup over a feared Islamic take-over of the government. This distresses many liberals.
- I found there to be much distrust in the motives of various political leaders, both in and out of office (also not an unknown state of affairs for Americans). While the current government is secularist, the fear is that in reality, they want an Islamic state. Conspiracy theories seem to abound. Politics in Turkey are much more nuanced and complex than here, partially, I imagine, because of its geo-political position and East/West schizophrenia.
- There is a Turkish leader with a lot of power throughout the world call Fethullah Gülen. He is a very polarizing figure. He’s been described to us variously as a cult leader, a dangerous man with nefarious intentions masking as a uniter and peacemaker, and a noble builder of schools that promote diversity, understanding and tolerance. His stated mission is to educate people, especially in rural areas, as the quickest path to peace. The ‘movement’ (their phrase) is worldwide and the Turkish Cultural Center in NYC is an adherent. The greater NYC area has the largest concentration of Turks in the country. Many of the meetings that were set up for us were the result of my meeting with the TCC in Brooklyn. Fatih University, Zaman Newspaper, Samanyolu TV, The Writers and Journalists Foundation are all founded on the Fethullah Gülen philosophy. Melanie and I have both gone to their “Friendship Dinners” in Pittsburgh and Brooklyn and have an extremely positive impression. I’m sure I’m naïve here, but to my mind, any subversive intentions would have to run extremely deep and be fiendishly clever given the decentralization of the movement. Gülen is in exile in Pennsylvania. I asked almost everyone I met in Turkey and the US about Gülen and no one can really give me any evidence to support the negative version of him. The last Friendship Dinners in Manhattan took place at the Waldorf and drew presidents from 8 different countries, Hillary Clinton, Ambassadors, etc. etc. So this movement is quite powerful. It is relevant to this project because some of our funding, at least in kind, may come from or through the Turkish Cultural Center. You can Google him. There’s plenty there.
- *Perhaps the biggest revelation of the trip:* Despite protests from many of the playwrights we interviewed, the headscarf is indeed the central symbol and manifestation of the political differences in Turkey. It is at the heart of the secular vs. Islamic state struggle. When Ataturk in 1923 turned the country toward the West and away from the East, including

changing the language, the script and clothing, women's dress became the central symbol of the success of this radical change. It is a political issue, a religious issue and a human rights issue that, along with Article 301, is also at the heart of Turkey's bid to get into the EU. The headscarf ban is so polarizing that people find it difficult to even talk about. We concluded that the American equivalent would be the abortion debate.

For an overview of the on-again, off-again headscarf ban:
http://www.worldbulletin.net/author_article_detail.php?id=1619

“According to [some], the headscarf issue is not a matter of rights and freedoms, but rather an issue of a political symbol. Others argue that there is no legal ground for such a ban; in view of the fact that headscarf is a religious necessity, the freedom to wear it is connected to the freedom of religion, and should therefore rest securely as a fundamental right and freedom.” But we ran into many women who are ok with the headscarf ban. For one thing, they say, wearing a headscarf is not prescribed in the Koran.

- We asked people Tammy's question about how they see the US and where do they get their impressions. Of course Hollywood is the most common answer. There seems to be some consensus that it's believed that women and in fact the whole population is free to do pretty much as they please. The US is generally not viewed as being a religious country. We were told that the concept of the “American Dream” is known and somewhat internalized in Turkey. We talked to one woman (Mev's friend) whose sister moved to the US with her husband. Once in the US, she went to work and assimilated and when her husband saw that this is what other women did as well, he was ok with it. She says her sister doesn't want to move back to Turkey for fear of her husband reverting back to more Turkish ideas of a woman's role because of societal pressures. Also – and to me this is important – in the US all their hard work bought them a house and, well, the American Dream, which they didn't feel they could achieve in Turkey – too many obstacles.

Meetings:

Our first formal meeting was with Dr. Güzin Yamaner, Head of the Dance Department at Ankara University. It was in the evening of our first night in Ankara and somewhat brief. Her two students – Mevlüde Sahillioglu, who works for the Washington DC-based National Democratic Institute, and Oyukum Lumali, a dancer and the arranger of much of our stay in Ankara – then spent the evening and the next day with us, including taking us to the Ataturk Museum. Ankara U has one of the few Women's Studies departments in Turkey, the only one with the word “Gender” in its title. Because this ‘meeting’ was more informal, I don't have any specific notes on it. Mev and Oyukum are incredibly smart, politically engaged, energetic young people – I learned a lot from them, including some of the above.

Meeting w/ Fatma Benli of Ak-Der, Women's Rights Organization against Discrimination (an NGO) – has consultant status at the UN (Mev from Ankara set this up for us)

- Fatma is a lawyer who was voted one of the 500 most influential Muslims (and one of 3 Turkish Muslim women) edited by a Georgetown University professor (<http://www.ak-der.org/en/reports/akder-reports.html>)
- One of the central focuses for this organization is the headscarf ban. It is preventing devout women from many things, especially getting a good education since it applies to universities (as well as to civil and political institutions).
- She says women don't talk to each other after the headscarf ban in '98.
- It is common for women lawyers who insist on wearing headscarves (including Fatma) to handle their own cases but then to send a man (often their husbands) to actually try the case in front of a judge because headscarves are banned. This is symptomatic of the traditional patriarchy and the role of the woman as stay-at-home mother, organizer, handler of logistics.
- They are frustrated with Ankara University's Women Studies center because they view them as all talk and no action. They also view AU as struggling *with* women.
- Ad-Der's mission is to change the laws as well as to inform women as to what exactly their rights are. E.g., in 2004 they were able to change the criminal code. Before then, intercourse with a girl under 15 was legal if she gave consent (statutory rape law).
- Are working to change laws but also to get judges to enforce the new laws. They do this by writing reports and giving them to the Grand National Assembly (Turkey's legislative body) as well as through the media.
- The assumption in Turkey is that if you're educated and progressive, you don't wear a headscarf. Conversely, if you do wear one, you're assumed to be uneducated, unsophisticated and therefore not hired or put in a back room somewhere, out of the view of the public. This attitude is preventing women from economic freedom. It's largely a class issue according to Fatma.
- She says one honor killing is one too many but that honor killings in Turkey are not common except for a particular region in southeastern Turkey, where they are quite common. This is also the region from which whole villages moved to Austria and Germany without assimilating and still live in very outdated ways, including by Turkish standards (ex. honor killings). This is why German/Austrian Turks are marginalized in both Germany/Austria as well as in Turkey. They are viewed as backward and resistant to change and give a false impression of what Turkey in general is actually like.
- There is big pressure toward honor killing in that region (watch or read "Bliss"). Punishment in the penal code is strong but judges tend to acquit because "there is no proof" – except for the dead body of course, but the families/tribes stick together and judges don't intervene.
- Ak-Der's view is that a change in appearance is not change. They fight for the right to choose, for religious freedom. They believe there is a phobia ("Islamophobia" is a word often used) that Turkey will somehow turn into Iran if the founding principles of Westernization/secularization are not actively preserved. Ak-Der views this as irrational because Iran's Muslims are Shi'a whereas Turkey is mostly Sunni and the relationship to Islam very different.
- In 1990, Law 3670 passed with a special provision stating that, "dress is not subject to any prohibition in institutions of higher education, provided that it is not forbidden by law." Ak-Der showed us where Istanbul University simply crossed the Article out and went from

Article 16 straight to Article 18. This would explain why in Melanie's first trip to Istanbul, when she met with Istanbul University, they didn't even want to talk about the headscarf.

- They view Gülen as harmless and differ with him only to the extent that he believes women can sacrifice the headscarf, especially to prevent men from losing their jobs.

Meeting w/ Dr. Ali Murat Yel, Associate Professor, Department of Sociology and Dr. Mehmet Ipsirli, Department of History at Fatih University

- Dr. Yel is highly respected and a mentor of Erkan Kaptan, the Executive Director of the Turkish Cultural Center who set up and accompanied us to all these meetings. Dr. Yel is extremely charismatic and a true sociologist – objective, observant, critical, bemused by human behavior.
- Headscarves for lecturers and professors is not possible; for students, yes but difficult.
- Sometimes students (and women in general – the NGO talked about this as well) will wear a wig versus a headscarf. Yel considers this a game, a political action.
- Since women were central to the formation of the country, central to its modernization, wearing a headscarf is considered radical and anti-reform. If it weren't central to the country's very founding principles, it wouldn't be an issue he thinks.
- Since the republican elite didn't ask the people what they wanted, there is no social contract. He feels that this lies at the heart of many of the problems. A democracy was formed back in 1923, yes, but there was no consensus sought on what it should be.
- So the ban is not "natural" but imposed.
- Westernization started in the 19th century, before Atatürk, but Atatürk marked the turning point.
- He is carrying out a research project: Women somehow manage to graduate; can't work in state offices so they go to the private sector; but they don't apply to secular corporations so they end up at conservative companies which offer them low salaries and low positions and hide them away so their headscarves aren't seen (may scare off clients and give an unwanted impression); so they're not respected and get "indecent proposals."
- Educated women tend not to want to become mothers – part of the fear involved.
- Yel says pro-headscarf men ironically deny rights to covering women. Even at Fatih U, which is progressive and encourages freedom. They are struggling to change, except when it comes to employing the very women they graduate.
- There are very few female academics in Turkey, whereas almost all primary school teachers and most secondary school teachers are women.
- Non-Turks pay only half tuition at Fatih in order to encourage diversity (which again speaks to Gülen's mission).
- Conservative men are supposed to marry the covering women, since educated men don't want to marry them because they cannot be seen with them.
- From the 20's to the 50's religious schools were closed. Then imams reopened them. First there were 7; now there are 635. And they are supported. Most cabinet members studied at imam schools.
- There are hundreds of NGOs, most of them seeking "natural" rights versus human rights.
- Gülen, who lives in Pennsylvania, considers the US a more reliable friend than Europe. Too many mutual prejudices in Europe.

- There is an Islamic revival not a decline. There are 3,250 mosques in Istanbul, 500 of which stem from the Ottoman Empire. The rest were built in the last 50 years. This of course plays into the perceived threat to a secular state.
- Turkey loves Bill Clinton.
- The more modern, the more secular. Yel says this is true in Europe as well. The only exception to this rule is the US. So Turkey sees itself like the US – religious but also modern.
- The president was elected by the populace partially because he prayed 5 times a day.
- Turkey is tired of French “laicism” and is changing to US type “secularism.” (I still don’t understand this distinction but it comes up often.)
- Gülen believes in “unity versus uniformity.” Is trying to create a structure, primarily through education, where people live in harmony. The movement boasts schools in every country in the world that are open to Turks as well as non-Turks. [The one in Brooklyn is highly respected as to quality of education, according to the people I spoke to at the friendship dinner: only 15 students per teacher.]
- Georgetown sponsored a conference on Gülen; as did Los Angeles and Berlin. Berlin was very critical which the movement liked because they considered it helpful to their evolution.
- What Erkan likes about Fatih: They criticize and are reflective on themselves.

Zaman is the largest-circulation paper in Turkey at 850,000 (the next biggest has 500,000). They publish an English-language version called Today’s Zaman as well as a magazine that is modeled after Time mag.

First we were given a tour of the facility by the Managing Editor, Emrah Ulker. Zaman is run much like Google: a state-of-the-art building and working environment aimed at making employees happy. It provides free food, free transportation to and from work, a gym, showers, etc. Mr. Ulker then served us lunch and put us together with a Canadian-Turkish reporter, a young, extremely fashionable woman who also covers. She grew up in Canada and has now lived in Turkey for 3 years.

- 60% of women cover somehow (headscarves, veils, wigs...).
- There is a consensus in Turkey against Islamophobia in the world, she says. The united message is that Muslim’s cannot be terrorists and terrorists cannot be Muslim.
- University students tend to choose their classes by which professor will not reprimand or ridicule them for wearing the headscarf so their education is hampered.
- We were eating so I didn’t have my notebook out as much as I wanted, but maybe I’ll remember more later.

Meeting w/ Irem Seyma Koc, Project Coordinator of The Journalists and Writers Foundation, founded in ’94.

She was joined by her female colleague. Both were young, covered and soft spoken. They showed us a video presentation about their organization first; then we talked; and in the end, they presented us with porcelain coffee cups that were hand painted by girls up to 14 years old. After that their hands get too big. The cups symbolize the sharing of “bitter coffee” which cements a friendship for 40 years.

- JWF has several “platforms” and Irem is building the “women’s platform.”
- Again, they are Gülen influenced and consider their mission to be building bridges between people of different backgrounds.
- One of their programs is called “Da,” meaning “yes” in Russian, on the premise that intercultural dialogue begins with “yes.” Turkey has many cultures and JWF is trying to unify them.
- They are having a conference in November 2010 on the topic of family values in different cultures.
- Their presentation is about “love, tolerance, dialogue.” “Every being who focuses on love will reach eternity.”
- In ’96 they had a conference of intellectuals: first step to unity. The goal is to bring each Abrahamic religion together. [In fact, at the Brooklyn Friendship dinner, they invited a Syrian Rabbi and Greek Orthodox Priest to speak, which given the political history of these countries is quite symbolic. Those religious leaders were extremely positive and optimistic about the future of relations and the harmony that Turkey/Gülen is working towards.]
- The Left and the Right will use the same argument on women. (Not sure, or can’t remember, what this means exactly but included it because I’m interested in why it’s in my notes.)
- Were going to be in NYC on January 20 (didn’t call—probably too busy) for readings and seminars on women in modernity.
- Their “art platform” is specifically focused on pop culture stars in order to attract youth.

Meeting w/ Bayram Karci, Programs Advisor of Samanyolu (means ‘Milky Way’) Broadcasting Group. He also gave us a tour of the facilities, including their newsroom, where they had us take pictures of ourselves behind the anchor desk. The cooking show studio, etc.

- Samanyolu has 6 different TV channels and 3 radio stations. Mehtap is the cultural channel.
- It was founded in ’93 and has strictly family oriented programming. Violence, drugs, sex, gambling are all edited out of their programming.
- They emphasize dialogue over violence; are interfaith, intercultural and look to present the different poles in society. Have programs for liberals, conservatives, Muslim democrats, Christian democrats... are open to everything.
- They have a program that deals with the Kurdish issue and tries to emphasize the concept of “one nation” – combating terrorist activities, under-education, blood feuds by showing that there are other ways than resorting to these tactics.
- They develop their own stories and then hire writers to write the scripts.

So, interestingly, even though we approached all these places as working on a project that examines women’s issues, not the veil specifically, they all talked about the headscarf and its implications. There is really no other door to entering the topic of women’s identity.

All of these organizations offered to support us. The paper and TV station will interview and promote us. The NGO and Foundation want to continue the dialogue and help us in any way

they can. Fatih University is ready to talk about support and exchange. Much will depend on the content and politics of our theater piece, I expect, especially with the Gülen-based orgs. These places have their ideologies, but then so do American granters. With Outside Inn it was also hard to fundraise without a script. So we'll see what happens, but for now we have a great deal of affirmation and offers to help with the project. It's very exciting and I'm quite hopeful.

3/28/11

As an epilogue, I want to offer a column that was written about us on February 22, 2011 in Today's Zaman. I befriended Nicole Pope about a year ago, and she has since worked very hard on behalf of our project, for which, as it turns out, it has been a challenge to get Turkish organizations on board:

<http://www.todayszaman.com/columnist-236269-cultural-diplomacy.html>