

WESTERN PERCEPTIONS OF TURKEY – AND THE REVERSE

David Judson*

Abstract

It is well established that Turkey in particular, and the larger region to her east, south and north generally, are reflected in superficial ways in what we call the “western media.” This short paper, originally presented as a talk at Istanbul Aydin University on 30th of March 2012 seeks to argue through anecdote that perceptions imbedded in most western discourse – the changing “stories” -- derive from preexisting and largely changeless meta-narratives. As the latter narratives are the residue of decades if not centuries of folk wisdom, cultural prejudice and even propaganda, the theoretically objective stories and analyses that are constructed out of this flawed raw material inevitably taint the results that inform perception. While this is only a thin slice of the issues that form the panorama of contemporary debate on media, it is in the main a neglected one. Most critical examination of news media and its societal role turns on journalist bias, news organization interests and the influence of groups ranging from governments to public relations companies. This more conventional approach drives discussion to a debate on the factors defining the stories that journalists are working on. This paper seeks to introduce a new approach, an examination of the narratives that the journalists – the storytellers – are working from. The critical terms here are “on” vs. “from” and the relationship between the two.

Key words: Turkey, Istanbul, Aydin, Geopolitical, Perception, Journalist

* David Judson, Vice President of Stratfor, the Global Intelligence Company¹ An international conference organized by Istanbul Aydin University on “Turkey’s Rise: Implications for its Neighbours and The World” in Istanbul on 30th of March 2012.

Introduction

At the heart of geopolitical perceptions is the news media. Old media, new media, social media and anti-social media... At the end of the day, this is the “prism,” or glass that refracts and bends the light of political and social discourse. So a few words on how this mechanism, the “prism” works – for better or for worse – is probably where I can make a contribution to the very complex topic before this panel.

Journalists are storytellers?

Journalists are not analysts. They are not academicians. They are storytellers. While technically I am no longer a journalist, having joined Stratfor on Jan. 1, old habits die hard. So let me tell a story.

Having lived and studied in Turkey in the 1970s, I was largely gone for two decades and returned here in 2000. Early in 2001, I had a visit from an old friend from university, I’ll call him Sami. We shared a house some 35 years ago. He was studying anthropology in California. A native of Dubai, he quickly surrendered his dream of anthropology upon his return and has become a very successful businessman – with interests both in the UAE and elsewhere in the world. On his visit to Istanbul in 2001, he came with a large entourage. He stayed at the Ciragan Kempinsky Hotel on the Bosphorus. And he invited me down for a drink.

Reminiscing about old times, one drink was not sufficient. Sami sought to order a second. The waitress walked by. She

again passed our way, and again Sami tried to wave her down. He failed. On the third pass of the waitress, I beckoned and caught her attention: two more whiskeys please.

The second round of drinks arrived and Sami lost his temper.

“This is why I’ll never come back to Turkey,” he said. “My government owns this hotel. I’m here with a large group; I’m spending \$20,000 a night at this hotel. I’m the guest in this hotel and I can’t get the waitress’ attention. Because I’m an Arab. You’re not even a guest. You’re just a penniless American journalist who I invited. But because you’ve got blue eyes you get the service. This is the way the Turks are.”

But Sami did come back of course several times. Most recently he came a year ago, this time with his wife and four daughters. This time they stayed at the Four Seasons Hotel near Sultan Ahmet. Sami really wanted to see what he called the “Islamic sights of Istanbul.” I toured Sultan Ahmet and Hagia Sophia with him. On his own, Sami and his wife visited the Suleymaniye Mosque, Eyup, the Egyptian bazaar and other places. The daughters... well they had one famous site they had heard about in Dubai that was their priority -- a mall. They spent most of their time there in Istinye Park.

We had several occasions for dinner during the visit. At one of them, at the home of the “penniless journalist,” I reminded Sami of his visit more than 10 years ago and his outburst at the

Ciragan Hotel. “You said you’d never be back,” I reminded him.

“I didn’t change, Turkey did,” he replied. “The government changed, and the service got better.”

I relate this anecdote, this play in two acts, for two reasons:

One, it’s a very serviceable metaphor for rising Turkey. Whenever I share it with western colleagues, they are quickly nodding their heads. It encapsulates Turkey’s renewed reciprocal interest with her eastern neighbors. It implicitly notes the rise to power of the AKP and its leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan along the time frame of the two visits. It suggests Arab investment. It hints of certain ironies: Sami who also happens to be a Haci, drinking whisky with a blue-eyed infidel, for example. And it’s also got a twist at the end of the tale on global commercial culture, the daughters of Dubai rushing to the mall at Istinye Park. Sometimes I’ll add in the daughters’ fascination with the “Ask- i-Memnun or other Turkish soap operas - -- also quite true. In short, it’s a one-stop anecdote, a perfect metaphor for just about all of contemporary Turkey.

The second reason I relate this particular tale is that in a deeper sense, in a non-media sense, it is pure nonsense. It’s all true of course. And I think it supports many general assumptions about the way the world of perceptions of Turkey is changing. But supporting assumptions is not the same as support of reality.

So as an exercise, let’s reverse engineer my anecdote and the implicit assumptions:

1) The government changed and attitudes changed. Yes, stereotypes and prejudice against the “east” are changing dramatically in Turkey. But there are lots of perceptual shifts going on. It has also become cool over the past decade to be Greek in Turkey, or Brazilian. Al Jazeera, the television channel for the newly emerging global bourgeoisie, is just one of many factors to be considered. And since roughly 9-11, the “civilizational appeal” of Europe and America has dramatically changed.

2) That the “opening” to the East occurred on the AKP watch. My friend Sami and many others certainly believe that. But Turkey’s outward turn and the dramatic activity of construction firms and others in Libya really began in 1974, under the government of Bulent Ecevit. The late President Turgut Ozal, let’s not forget, really pioneered the post-Soviet commercial, diplomatic and military aid forays into Azerbaijan and Central Asia. Suleyman Demirel carried this forward. Much is made of the current government’s former “zero problems” rapprochement with Syria; but let’s not forget that the thaw --- with the chill now back for other reasons --- began with President Ahmet Sezer’s visit to Damascus more than a decade ago.

3) Arab investment. Yes, there have been a number of high profile deals. And from Azerbaijan and Russia and China and India as well. But 85 percent

of the foreign investment coming to Turkey continues to come from the European Union.

4) Much has been made of Turkey's "soft power" through television series. And this is very real throughout the Middle East, the Balkans, the Caucasus and Central Asia. But let's also not forget that this is an organic outgrowth of Turkey's film industry, a film industry that has directors like Nuri Ceylan Bilgi sweeping awards in Cannes and Berlin or Mahsun Kirmizigul making films with America's Danny Glover or Tomris Giritlioglu breaking taboos with such films as *Guz Sancı*, the *Pain of Autumn*, that explored the anti- Greek pogroms in Istanbul in 1955.

5) And yes, when my wealthy friend Sami comes to Istanbul, his daughters want to go to Istinye Park. Why, coming from Dubai – the global center of shopping malls – they would want to go to Istinye Park is beyond me. And yes, you will hear much Arabic spoken there. But you will probably hear more Russian, and there will be plenty of English, French and German shoppers.

My point here is really a simple one. My little story of Sami is not false. It's just shallow, narrow and incomplete. For it does not capture the true complexity of the sweep of change in Turkey.

Which is not to deny the importance of Turkey's emergent power, a subject approached here from many directions? Stratfor has been making the argument

that Turkey will be one of the most important regional powers in the 21st Century for nearly a decade. Stratfor's founder, George Friedman, has written two books keyed in part to this theme. Once this was controversial; now, conventional wisdom is catching up.

But the western media institutions, which like the first violin in the orchestra, set the chord by which all the rest of the world's media instruments calibrate and tune, are increasingly ill-equipped to grasp this complexity.

The "Turkish model?"

I am sure most people in this room are as sick as I am of this overused term. But the Americans, and to some degree the European media, is certainly not. For it's a crude and easy summary. It ignores, though, the fact that Turkey was a model for Aghan reformer Mohammed Tarzi even before Turkey's revolution. It ignores the inspiration Pakistan's founder Muhammed Jinnah drew from Turkey in the 1940s or Singapore's effective founder and long-serving Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew drew from Turkey in the 1960s.

Turkey surely does serve as a reference point in many of the Arab societies engulfed in change today. But if it is an example, it is more like a Rorschach test, the ink blots used by psychiatrists in which each of us sees different things. In Tunisia, the leading Islamist party Al Nahda cites the AKP as example of the compatibility of Islamic politics with modernity. In Egypt, reformers cite Turkey's model in

creating a new relationship between civil and military authority. In the Gulf, it's as much the business model as anything that serves for inspiration.

We have not integrated our thinking about Turkey's emergence with the other centers of a "post-western world order." Brazil, South Africa, Indonesia, Malaysia and of course India and China...

Discussion of Turkey today turns on a fairly narrow geography, Turkey, the Arab countries, Israel, Iran and sometimes the Caucasus. But consider:

- While the world debates Iran's nuclear capacity, Pakistan has opened a new reactor for purposes of nuclear enrichment, it has doubled its production of new nuclear weapons and is dispersing them around the country for fear they will be targets of the Americans. What have we read about this in the news media?

- Yes, today Turkey is reaching out in important ways into the Middle East and Arab countries. But this occurs just as the center of energy politics gravity is moving east, to new producers like Turkmenistan, or in Eastern Africa or even Afghanistan as the race for pipeline construction and port facilities shifts toward the rim of the Indian Ocean.

- We talk a great deal about the Strait of Hormuz at the end of the Persian Gulf and such projects as a Abu Dhabi-Oman pipeline that could bypass this vulnerable waterway. We should talk more about the Straits of Malacca

between Malaysia and Singapore. It is an even more vulnerable chokepoint transited by even

more energy. There is little discussion of the prospects of a new Panama-style canal across Thailand to bypass the strategic point.

- We see signs of democracy in Myanmar and we think of this of an important human rights story --- which it is. But the opening of Myanmar, with its own substantial resources, portends a reshuffling of many geopolitical balances as it is poised to be the new transit route between China, India and the new points of energy production I alluded to above.

But all of this is largely outside the existing stock of media narratives. These are subjects for which there is as yet no "story." This dichotomy between story and reality is, to my mind, THE story. Or at least the preface.

Of course I'll discuss this all with my friend Sami the next time he's in town. He can order the whiskey. In today's Turkey, I'm sure it won't be a problem.