

## Exploring Turkishness: Women and Minorities

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### Introduction

Turkey was founded to be a secular democracy; as we approach our centennial we will look at how far we've come and how far we have to go. We still face significant issues with respect to human rights, particularly with respect to women and minorities. Turkey still struggles with defining what a "minority" is, and falls short in offering equal rights and opportunities to individuals who are not part of the mainstream but are no less deserving of respect—particularly the Kurdish, Armenian, and LGBT communities. Even for "mainstream" Turks, vital rights like freedom of expression, media and religion are withheld from individuals in the name of slippery concepts like "insulting Turkishness." And although women are not absent from the top ranks of Turkish businesses, schools, and government, Turkey suffers from a widening gender gap.

The long arc of our Republic's history has tended not toward being a "European" country merely in name, but toward being a democratic country in form and spirit.

One of the missions of the European Union is to create unity *within* diversity. It is not, of course, merely a slogan. It is, at its heart, the expression of a very democratic aspiration to achieve understanding and cooperation that is strengthened, not hindered, by a rich variety of experiences and perspectives. Achieving this understanding and cooperation is no easy task:

It requires a set of common, consistently applied liberal democratic principles that transcend the boundaries that threaten to divide us—geographic, cultural, economic, educational, linguistic, sectarian.

It requires not merely tolerating differences between people and peoples, but respecting and appreciating those differences.

Finally, it requires committed domestic *and* international initiatives. At home, Turkey needs to work much harder to unify its people not around an ethno-religious notion of "Turkishness," but around the values, rights, responsibilities and privileges of being a *citizen of Turkey*. Abroad, Turkey must work harder to drive common understandings and to support common principles and values, particularly with the West, rather than simply boasting of stronger ties with the Middle East.

To explore Turkishness in 2010, we'll look at women and minorities in Turkey, comparing it along the way with other countries. While it commands one of the largest and fastest growing economies and has engaged in many reforms, Turkey still suffers from discrimination against minorities and one of the widest gender gaps in the world. These problems are rooted in a rich but old culture that propagates a negative "heritage of patriarchy."

Ultimately, to unleash Turkey's true potential, we must aggressively pursue individual and human rights, respect for diversity, and equal opportunity.



This can only be achieved by putting Turkey's heart and soul into principled democratic reform. There has been much successful reform in the last decade; but there has also been a noticeable slowdown as of late, and doubts have been raised on both sides of the Straits about Turkey's commitment and orientation.

## Women

First, the position of women in Turkish society is not seeing consistent improvement, and is in fact regressing in alarming ways. Turkey has seen some improvement in female education, but enrollment rates are still a full on eighth below that of men.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, female labor force participation rates have actually dropped several percentage points over the last decade, and women's labor force participation rate is 27 percent compared to men's 71 percent.<sup>2</sup> Female property ownership is a mere 8 percent.

The effects of the gender gap in governance are grave. In national parliaments across Europe, roughly one quarter of MPs are women, and in the EU parliament the figure is just under one third. In Turkey—which in 1934 actually was a leader in Europe by allowing women to serve in parliament—the figure is under one tenth.<sup>3</sup> For cabinet positions, Turkey is even further behind Europe, with 7% compared to Europe's 37%. Overall, the proportion of female legislators, senior officials, and managers in Turkey is 8% compared to Europe's 22%. Even in the governing party that earned so many female votes, there are no women among the 25 under-secretaries, and only 3 women among the 85 deputy under-secretaries. Turkey ranks a dismal 129th in the Gender Gap Index.<sup>4</sup>

Women are indisputably being left behind in Turkey. Not only do women deserve better, they also represent vast, untapped development potential. From a purely economic perspective, even in developed societies like the US, Europe, and Japan, closing the gender gap can translate to boosting GDP by over 10%.<sup>5</sup>

But it is not simply an economic issue. By fully educating and empowering the half of the population that has the largest influence on raising the next generation, society can achieve a powerful multiplication factor for economic, social and political development. Turkey must urgently give women their due role in the future of their country.

## Minorities as Individuals

But before we can engage in a meaningful dialogue regarding minorities in Turkey, we must first discuss the delicate but fundamental issue of what a "minority" is. A group only becomes a

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<sup>1</sup> "Turkey: The Human Development Index – going beyond income," *UNDP Human Development Reports*, [hdrstats.undp.org](http://hdrstats.undp.org), 1 Feb 2010.

<sup>2</sup> TurkStat (2010).

<sup>3</sup> Percentage of women MPs: 24% (national parliaments average) EU parliament: 31%. Percentage of women MPs: 9%

<sup>4</sup> World Economic Forum, *The Global Gender Gap Report 2009* (2009), pp. 9, 20.

<sup>5</sup> Closing the gender gap would have huge economic implications for the developed economies, boosting US GDP by as much as 9%, Eurozone GDP by as much as 13% and Japanese GDP by as much as 16%.



minority of a population when it is assigned a distinct identity, and assigning the identity of “minority” can be a dangerously incendiary issue.

In 2004, a prime ministerial advisory board on human rights published a report on minority and cultural rights in Turkey, urging for better protection of non-mainstream Muslim and non-Muslim groups in Turkey. For suggesting that, essentially, Turkey consists of groups other than “ethnic” Turks, the report writers were charged under the infamous Article 301 of the Turkish penal code for insulting “Turkishness.”<sup>6</sup> However, even some groups named as minorities in the report rejected their identification as such.<sup>7</sup> In a country where “minority” is a pejorative term, making true progress on the issue of individual human and democratic rights, that ultimately motivate the protection of minorities, is ever more important.

Even if the challenge is not combating outright ethnic nationalism, holding a discussion on this issue is difficult, particularly for Turkey: Turkey was founded as a country for Turks, but no one has the exact definition of what a modern day Turk is (and attempting that definition could be a risky endeavor). Furthermore, from the nation’s founding, minorities have been identified on purely religious terms. “Non-Muslim Minorities” received protection under the Turkey’s founding Treaty of Lausanne in 1923, and to this day national identification cards propagate identification by religion—reflecting Turkey’s historical path without providing flexibility for its future.

One of the primary goals of “principled reform” is to provide this flexibility: to strengthen Turkey’s democracy by focusing on the fundamental values of modern democracy and giving each individual the same rights and freedoms in front of law.

### **Minorities**

Second, and as we have touched on above, discrimination against minorities poses one of the largest challenges for Turkey’s development.

Turkey’s founding father, Mustafa Kemal, took on the name Atatürk—meaning “Father of all Turks”—to create solidarity around a new Turkish identity. However, his efforts have too often wrongly inspired ethnic nationalism that promotes a singular Turkish “ethnicity” above all others. Too often, the use of the word “Turk” conflates the concepts of citizenship and ethnicity or religion in a volatile way.

It is no secret that Turkey represents a rich mix of ethnicities and cultures. The Treaty of Lausanne devotes an entire section to the Protection of Minorities that is designed to prevail over any “law, regulation, [or] official action.”<sup>8</sup> It includes sweeping provisions for the protection of life and liberty, for the freedom of religion, language, education, movement, and assembly, and for equal civil and political rights for minorities.

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<sup>6</sup> *Suppressing Academic Debate: The Turkish Penal Code*, Kurdish Human Rights Project/Bar Human Rights Committee, June 2006.

<sup>7</sup> Mucahit Bilici, “Black Turks, white Turks: on the three requirements of Turkish citizenship,” *Insight Turkey*, July 2009.

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.lib.byu.edu/index.php/Treaty\\_of\\_Lausanne](http://www.lib.byu.edu/index.php/Treaty_of_Lausanne)



But the treaty defined minorities purely as being non-Muslim, and reality has not reflected even the limited aims that this founding agreement sought to create. In Turkey, individuals of different backgrounds may be tolerated but are not always respected. In fact, in Turkey, Alevis and Kurds are not even considered “minorities” by the Lausanne definition.

There is considerable historical baggage surrounding the use of the word minority in Turkey, but the fundamental issue must be solved: those individuals who are members of smaller segments of society must still have equal avenues for political participation. We must progress past the Lausanne Treaty and look toward the EU’s Copenhagen Criteria for protecting and empowering minorities.

Creating respect for minorities is not simply a matter of legislating the definition of a word and proscribing discrimination. Turkey should certainly show its commitment by enacting better legislation, revising its constitution and even joining the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. (Currently, it is one of four of the 47 member states of the Council of Europe that has not done so.) However, Turkey must vigilantly assure that protecting minorities becomes not just a way of law, but a way of life.

Turkey must improve not just conditions for minorities, but also increasingly empower them to do so themselves. As a 2007 report by the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly emphasized,

*“the effective participation of national minorities in public life, including decision-making on issues directly affecting them ... is one of the fundamental issues of democracy and a matter of good governance [and] will make it more likely that the rights of the minorities will be respected and interests accommodated.”<sup>9</sup>*

The benefits from extending respect and empowerment to minorities feeds back into the strength of Turkish society as a whole. “It is fair to say,” writes one Turkish analyst, “that if there were more non-Muslims in Turkey and if their rights were better respected, Muslims who are religious would be freer.” Turkey, in a sense, has been a victim to the blind characterization that its majority consists of the 99 percent of its population who are “Muslim.” This gross simplification of Turkish society contrives practically all citizens of Turkey to be of the same background; the more we officially recognize that this is not so, the more we can move forward as a nation.

## **Conclusion**

Turkey must undertake urgent reforms in gender gap and minority affairs not simply because they impinge on Turkey’s EU accession: it must undertake them because its citizens benefit when we strengthen pillars of democracy like individual and human rights, political participation and representation, respect for diversity, and equal opportunity.

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<sup>9</sup> Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly Doc. 11221, “State of Human Rights and Democracy in Europe,” 16 April 2007.



As we put our principles into practice, we must heed the reminders of leaders throughout history that social progress is not found in society's gilded crest, but by the rest of society that is too often neglected. Greater political engagement and empowerment of all individuals—at all levels of society—will build not only a brighter future for all Turks, but a better foundation for liberty, equality and opportunity in the Euro-Atlantic community.

To echo a similar sentiment voiced in the middle of the last century: it is not the *fact* of liberty, equality and opportunity but the *way* in which those values are exercised that ultimately determines whether they themselves survive. By basing reform on principles and focusing on the individual, Turkey will find the right way.

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