

Dispatch: Istanbul, Spring 2017

I found myself in Istanbul late March on a 17-hour layover; my ultimate destination being a small island off the coast of Venezuela. I figured that while I was in the “Gate of Felicity” I had some obligation not only to explore the city, but to give you a brief snapshot of it as it is in 2017.

I’m not Anthony Bourdain and I don’t work for the Travel Channel. I do not need to tell you “Istanbul is an old city”, you know it is an old city. Nor do I need to tell you that Istanbul used to be Constantinople, as I’m sure you have gathered that as well from any number of documentaries devoted to the place. I need not tell you of my feelings of awe as I gazed at the Hagia Sophia in the following hours, nor do I need to extrapolate on my feelings of warmth— physical and emotional— as I sat in the oldest bathhouse in Turkey (Çimberlitaş Hamam, 1584 C.E.). I also do not need to subject you to my dumbstruck wonder as I stood looking at the giant dome of the Blue Mosque. You can hear about all of these very same places watching Rick Steves or typing “Istanbul” into YouTube’s search bar.

What I do need to tell you is that Istanbul is in trouble— and it finds itself in peril alongside the rest of the country. Nearly three months ago I wrote for Areo Magazine about Erdogan’s “quiet cleansing” of military personnel suspected of disloyalty, and how this purge resulted in the suicide of a Turkish officer on the base where I resided. Since then, I’m afraid to say, the situation in Turkey has not improved.

To be clear, Istanbul still does an excellent job of projecting the facade of modernity. Western visitors— like me— frequent night clubs, hotel bars, and raves to our leisure. We freely enjoy the historical sites. We walk on the cobblestone

streets undisturbed, where, it seems, every other business is a coffeeshop that plays smooth Jazz and has wacky furniture. But behind the curtain and through the smoke, one will find signs of the regime's Islamist authoritarian influence creeping in, "soft" though it may currently be.

Take for example what is happening to Istanbul's red light district in Karaköy. Like the city of Amsterdam, Istanbul used to be known in part for its legalized prostitution. As far back as the Ottoman empire sex workers in the region enjoyed relative freedom, and it's been no secret that the beautiful "window women" of the Beyoğlu section are major drivers of male visitors to the city. But under the Erdogan regime's political blend of nationalism and religious conservatism, state-run brothels are finding that their licenses to operate are not being renewed, and sex workers fear that once they are out on the street they will face violence and harassment.

A second example occurred when my taxi driver was giving me a driving tour through the city. I began to look at the apartments, shops, ancient walls, hospitals, and skyscrapers, and found that what they all had in common were large hanging banners displaying the face of President Erdogan—often in a triumphant pose looking off into the distance. Ubiquitous iconography celebrating "the leader" is a feature common to all burgeoning or well-established dictatorships. In Saddam's Iraq, for example, a mural or statue of the tyrant was practically on every street. The same was the case in Cuba under Fidel Castro. In North Korea it is still this way. The self-appointed gods demand their tributes and public worship, and it appears that a year after the attempted coups Erdogan is walking this particular well-worn path.



Many citizens of Istanbul and Turkey love their leader so perfectly that they spontaneously hang giant banners of him from their window. It is considered a great honor

I ask my driver what Turkish news is available to an English reader, and he points me in the direction of the state-owned newspaper Yeni Safak. I suppose this is one of the few sources of news he can point me to, seeing as how the regime has forcefully closed down all other dissenting publications. As I begin to scroll through the English version of Yeni Safak's website, it doesn't take long for me to find worrisome anti-Western sentiments. One piece floats the accusation that Germany supports terror attacks on Turkey. Another preaches to its readers that Erdogan "thinks only of Turkey's present and future, not of himself ", and that the reality for Turkey without Erdogan as president would be the Qur'an and hijab banned.

Beyond the crackdown on sex worker freedom and freedom of the press, there is also a rise in antisemitism in Turkey. The regime regularly treats its Jewish population with suspicion, accusing them of having more loyalty to Israel than to the country in which they reside. Lest you think that this anti-Jewish fervor lies only with the regime and its citizen loyalists, think again. It has become a part of the culture as well. Famous Turkish pop singer Yildiz Tilbe made headlines three years ago when she tweeted "God bless Hitler" and "If God allows, it will again be Muslims who will bring the end of those Jews." To which the mayor of Turkey's capital Ankara replied "I applaud you." According to a 2015 poll conducted by the Anti-Defamation League, 71% of Turks harbor antisemitic feelings.



Mein Kampf has an enthusiastic following in the former Ottoman Empire. It's been a bestseller for many years

It turned out I didn't need any of this foreknowledge of rising antisemitism in Turkey to get a clue, during my brief stay, that it was happening. When I returned to the airport at the end of my layover (a bit more sober than when I left it), I found that every single media shop was selling Mein Kampf on their front shelves beside recent releases. Since seeing a book by Adolf Hitler sandwiched between new Clive Cussler and Lisa Gardner novels isn't a normal sight (especially when these stores only possessed about 15-20 books in total), I asked one of the managers about why it was there. It turns out the infamous work has been a consistent bestseller in Turkey since its publication in the Turkish language in 2005. That's twelve years as a bestseller.

Again I should stress that this so far is a rather "soft" form of authoritarianism when compared to past dictatorships like Stalin, Saddam, Mao, etc. A tourist may notice Mein Kampf in the airports and see Erdogan's face everywhere they turn, but overall they could go through their entire stay in Istanbul without feeling any "dark clouds overhead". At least for now. My time in the city resembled nothing like, say, Hitchens in

Iraq or in Bosnia.

But this is because Turkey is only in the beginning stages of its totalitarian hell ride. The situation will get worse. Much worse. If I were still a gambling man, I would put all my money on it. In mid-March, Erdogan made a statement that "Europeans will not walk on the streets safely" if the attitude of European governments toward the regime does not change; a threat that further isolates his nation from the international community. Human rights activists and journalists should not take their eyes off of this part of the world for a second.