

Identity Crisis: The Socioeconomic Hardships of Turkish Origin Citizens in Germany and their Struggle for Self-Identity

Political Science 245: Politics of the Third World

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26 October 2013 marked a sad day in Germany and elsewhere. This was the day that Kadir Nurman passed away in Berlin at the age of 80 years old.¹ Nurman may not be well known by most, but he is the important figure and symbol credited with the creation of the Döner (Doner) kebab, a Turkish-German sandwich that can be found in nearly every corner of Germany, especially in Berlin. It is nearly impossible to walk down a street in a busy German city without seeing a Turkish-run Döner shop – in fact, 16,000 exist in Germany with over 1,000 in Berlin alone.² Though Nurman was incredibly proud of his unpatented sandwich and the success that many other Turkish immigrants enjoyed built around the fast food, the Döner is something of a symbol of immobility amongst Turkish immigrants to Germany. Turks and Döner shops are equated as belonging with one another, and this seems to be one of the highest achievements for Turkish immigrants. That is, so to say, that success is limited to owning low-scale restaurants. Despite famous Turkish-German musicians, authors, etc. it seems that the Turks are unable to advance much past the kebab if they wish to remain in Germany. Whether to remain in Germany is a loaded question that must be analyzed in historical context, beginning with the Gastarbeiter (Guest Worker) program. The Gastarbeiter were foreign workers recruited from poorer nations (usually Mediterranean ones) to work in rebuilding war-torn Germany after the Second World War. The workers were, however, expected to leave once their work was done and Germany was rebuilt. Many Gastarbeiter—the majority of whom were of Turkish background—stayed in Germany, though. As of 31 December 2012 there are 1,575,717 people of Turkish citizenship registered as living in Germany, 1,086,386 of whom were born abroad.³ This number does not include the people of Turkish origins who chose German citizenship. Though such major numbers of Turks and German citizens of Turkish

background reside in Germany, they face difficulties in terms of self-identification; they often do not identify as Turkish and find “return” to Turkey unwelcoming and/or undesirable and in Germany they are often viewed as unwanted. The result is a people split between two motherlands, hardly accepted by either. One long-term effect of the Gastarbeiter program is the lack of a solid cultural and national identity for the Turkish migrant workers and the subsequent generations of Turkish-German citizens, who are victims of poor economic and social conditions and face the decision of which nation to call home.

Turks were not the first Gastarbeiter to arrive in Germany, in fact the first guest work treaty Germany signed was with Italy in December of 1955.⁴ Needing more workers to fuel its Wirtschaftswunder (economic miracle), Germany’s Gastarbeiter program expanded.⁵ In year 1961, Germany signed a treaty with Turkey to import temporary laborers.⁶ The program was officially discontinued in 1973, when Germany realized it lacked the social infrastructure to absorb further inflow of migrants.⁷ Until this point, Turks were not permitted to bring their families to Germany.⁸ Germany faced immense numbers of Turkish residents after family reunification concluded in the mid 1980s and many opted to stay in Germany, contrary to the original expectations of the Gastarbeiter program.⁹ In year 2000, Germany reformed its Staatsangehörigkeitsgesetz (STAG), calling for both *jus sanguinis* (citizenship by descent) and *jus soli* (citizenship by place of birth), allowing for Turkish children born in Germany to claim German citizenship, and thus being able to vote; regardless, children still to this day have to choose between Turkish or German citizenship by the time they are 23 years old.¹⁰ Turks currently make up the largest foreign population in Germany and Germany plays home to the largest population of Turks in the EU.¹¹ The Turkish population in Germany has increased from the beginning of the Gastarbeiter program through family reunification and the pursuant generations have differed greatly from the first wave of migrant workers.

The first migrants from Turkey to Germany were influenced both by a demand-pull from Germany and a supply-push from Turkey. As stated previously, Germany was in desperate need for laborers. Turkey, on the other hand was a less than ideal economical climate. From 1957 through 1961, Turkish GNP dropped from 7.65% growth to 3.50% growth and in 1960, a military coup was the answer to restore collapsed democracy.¹² New jobs and the prospect of new lives and opportunities persuaded droves of Turks to migrate to Germany. Some were simply enticed by the idea of meeting German women and ultimately experienced integration through relationships.¹³ This first generation of Gastarbeiter, consisting purely of laborers, had little education, spoke limited amounts of German, and accounts for approximately 25% of the Turkish population in Germany.¹⁴ The children and grandchildren of the Gastarbeiter (the second and third generations) are quite different from the first. According to a EU-Turkish Relations Dossier, “There is a contrast in the characterization of the first and second/third generations. The second/third generation has been better educated, has a better professional status and tends to speak better German than Turkish, thus, the level of social contribution is greater”.¹⁵ The second and third generations have enjoyed greater economic freedom than their predecessors. One first generation Gastarbeiter spoke to a German reporter of Turkish origin saying, “Do you see? That is what we worked so hard for -- so that our children would have a chance to choose their jobs for themselves -- just like you”.¹⁶ Despite making such strides in Germany in just two or three generations, Turks are still regarded as foreigners and second-class citizens by many Germans. Xenophobic views against Turks permeate not only through city streets, but also throughout the political realm. In 2010, Germany was shaken by a book titled “Deutschland schafft sich ab”—which translates to “Germany Does Itself In”—a tome condemning immigrants of Turkish, Arab and even Jewish backgrounds as being the source of problems in Germany including crime, written by (now former) member of the executive board of Germany’s Bundesbank, Thilo Sarrazin.¹⁷ The book was criticized initially, but quickly gained

alarming public approval, drumming up both debate and political support. Shortly after support for the book took off, Bavarian governor, Horst Seehofer, called for an end to immigration from Turkey and Arab states, claiming:

“It's clear that immigrants from other cultures such as Turkey and Arabic countries have more difficulties. From that I draw the conclusion that we don't need additional immigration from other cultures...I don't agree with demands for increased immigration from foreign cultures...We have to deal with the people who already live here. Eighty to 90 percent of them are well integrated. But we must get tougher on those who refuse to integrate”¹⁸

Germany's Foreign Minister, Guido Westerwelle responded to calls for Turks not to integrate into German society by Turkish Prime Minister, Recep Tyyip Erdogan, by retorting, “Children growing up in Germany must learn German first...The German language is the key to integration for those growing up in Germany”.¹⁹ Even Chancellor Angela Merkel asserted, “This [multicultural] approach has failed, utterly failed”.²⁰ Clearly the Turks are still seen as guest in Germany—ones who have overstayed their welcome.

The xenophobia clouding the German view of Turks largely coincides with Islamophobia. What sets the Turks apart from other migrants of southern and eastern European backgrounds is Islam. As of 2009, 3.8 million to 4.3 million Muslims are estimated to live in Germany, 63.2% of whom are of Turkish origin; 45% of Muslim immigrants hold German citizenship.²¹ Despite such large numbers, Germans still seem to distrust Muslims. In 2006, Germans in East Berlin flocked to the streets to protest the building of a Mosque in an obsolete sauerkraut factory in the East Berlin neighborhood of Heinersdorf; the mosque would have been the first in former East Berlin.²² One protestor remarked, “They should build a mosque where their community is based...or wherever a lot of Muslims live -- Kreuzberg, Wedding” The protestor's quote exemplifies the ignorance inherent to Islamophobia as this particular mosque was of the Ahmadi sect, an orthodox group out

of Pakistan, not Turkey and the neighborhoods mentioned were Turkish dominated and may not have accepted a Pakistani mosque.²⁴ Many saw Islam as a threat to Democracy as another protestor cried, "They're not armed, but they have to swear an oath to be missionaries... We know about oaths of allegiance! We had those under Hitler!"²⁵ The irony, of course, is that xenophobia and religious exclusion are far more reminiscent of the Nazis than swearing to life as a missionary. In attempts to quell religious intolerance in both nations, German President Christian Wulff made the claim that Muslims in Germany are able to freely practice their religion, because, as Wulff claims, "Islam belongs to Germany".²⁶ Whether or not President Wulff's claims are accurate, the fact remains that Islamophobia is still very much prevalent in Germany. The seemingly obvious cause of such lasting fear of Muslims is a lack of integration. If Germans and Muslim Turks were better integrated, perhaps greater mutual understanding and respect could eventually be achieved.

It is not surprising, given the xenophobia in Germany, that Turks in Germany are facing something of an identity crisis. Integration of Turkish origin citizens into German society essentially failed. Policies that were implemented were ineffective and caused many Germans to harbor resentment for the Turks.²⁷ As more Turkish families moved to Germany, they began a trend of ghettoization, in which Turkish migrants and their families occupied whole neighborhoods, establishing their own television networks, shops, schools, etc., which aggravated Germans and eventually lead to animosity from the German majority.²⁸ Assimilation was not only made difficult by the German populous, but also by the migrants themselves. Essentially, Turkish origin migrants had no need to assimilate if they lacked the desire to do so; there was little need to learn German or to integrate since they effectively had their own Turkish societies in Germany.²⁹ This then perpetuated a vicious cycle as Turkish origin children often did not learn German, causing them to fall behind in schooling and ultimately leading to social immobility (think Döner shops).³⁰ Given the societal separation of Turks and Germans in Germany, it comes as no surprise that a 2008 interview

of Turkish migrant workers found that 60% of migrants interviewed had only a minority of German friends.³¹ The data do not imply that no Turks or Germans work towards better relations. Groups such as the DeuKische (Deutsche-Türkische) Generation work towards assimilation, it is just that these groups are not effective enough to challenge the popular and political xenophobic mindsets prevalent in Germany.³² Adding to the problem is that those Turkish origin people living in Germany are forced at age 23 to choose either a Turkish or a German passport—they are unable to obtain dual citizenship.³³ This policy stems from the fact that Turkey is not a EU member state, that is, if Turkey was in the EU, Turkish origin citizens in Germany would be allowed to enjoy dual citizenship.³⁴ This brings up the national identity issue of Turkey: is it a part of the Middle East or of Europe? Historically, the Ottoman Empire was considered equal to Europe until its downward trend, at which point it became seen as exotic.³⁵ Turkey is in a geographically unique area and is culturally distinct from the Arab and Persian cultures dominant in the Middle East. The nation is also not seen as European in contemporary times, as it bids for EU membership. It is clear, then, why people with origins to a state with a regional identity conflict struggle to self-identify as they live between two motherlands.

The choice of citizenship is especially difficult considering the fact that return to Turkey is not always the most appealing option. From the beginning of the Gastarbeiter program, the intent was, as the name suggests, that the workers would eventually leave.³⁶ Turkey, on the other hand, hoped that unskilled laborers would go to Germany temporarily and return with money, education and training.³⁷ There are now more job prospects in Turkey than there were in the 1960s. Despite 9.2% unemployment and 16.9% of the population living below the poverty line, Turkey maintains a GDP of \$1.142 trillion, seventeenth largest in the world.³⁸ Germany is no longer the great opportunity it was in the 1960s and Turkey may be more appealing.³⁹ Despite economic incentives to return to Turkey, Turkish-Germans are not exactly welcomed back. Many Turks who “return” to

Turkey from Germany have never actually been to Turkey before or have only visited on vacation.⁴⁰ Those who do return are faced with challenges. They are accepted neither as Germans in Germany nor as Turks in Turkey. Their culture is different than that of the Turks in Turkey and they do not speak Turkish as well as the native Turks.⁴¹ One article claims, “The ‘Almancilar,’ meaning roughly ‘Germany-ers,’ are preceded by a dubious reputation, seen as either overly pious country bumpkins or nouveau riche recently of the working class”.⁴² What ends up happening, then, is that the better educated and trained Turks leave Germany for Ankara or Istanbul, while low wage workers stay in Germany, where there is less competition and a greater social net.⁴³ The talented Turks leave Germany, as there are few prospects for advancement. One account recalls a famous Turkish actor/director in Germany, Sükriye Dönmez, who applied for German citizenship: “Her irregular source of income was the problem, the authorities explained in their rejection, and if Dönmez wanted German citizenship, she would need steady employment. ‘Why don't you get a housecleaning job,’ the woman at the registration office suggested. ‘I declined politely,’ Dönmez says, ‘and moved to Turkey instead’”.⁴⁴ One can extrapolate what might happen if the trend continues: as skilled Turks leave Germany for Turkey and unskilled laborers remain, ghettoization should likely continue, which would result in greater failure of integration and more rampant xenophobia.

The Gastarbeiter program has had lasting and unforeseen social and economic effects. As the guest workers were expected to leave, the problems were uncalculated. The reality, however, is that many stayed in Germany and eventually brought their families with them. Since the end of the program, Turks make up the largest population of foreigners in Germany, though efforts to integrate the Turks into German society have failed on both the Turkish and German sides. Being unwanted by the Germans and unwelcomed by the Turks, the migrant workers and their families face a self-identity crisis. They are forced to choose their citizenship and face the question of

whether to stay or go. For skilled Turks, relocating to Turkey, as Turkey originally desired, is much easier than for the low-skill workers who would face immense competition and lower standards of living in Turkey. As more skilled Turks return to Turkey and less skilled Turks remain in Germany, the social and cultural gaps in Germany between the Germans and Turks will widen and xenophobia will increase. What then, can be done? The EU and Turkey should take steps to grant Turkey admittance into the EU, so as to establish a regional identity for the state. This in turn would give Turks in Germany the opportunity to hold dual citizenship, rather than forcing them to choose an identity. Meanwhile, Germany should reconsider the options policy, so that even if Turkey is not a EU member state, dual citizenship for Turks in Germany can still be a possibility. Germany should also not give up on integration. Multikulti is not dead and should remain an obtainable goal for the Germans and Turkish politicians should take a more open-minded approach to foreigners and quell ethnocentric policies and policy makers. Greater Turkish representation in German politics would help this matter. Turkish government officials should encourage Turks to integrate into German society, learning German and educating their children. This would benefit the Turks abroad, who may eventually return to Turkey, and would ease xenophobic views held by the Germans. Also, Turkey should make return more welcoming by accepting the German-cultured Turks without prejudice and improving economic conditions for low-wage workers. This, of course, would come with a stronger economy and democracy. As for the rest of the world, it is important to learn from this situation so as to reduce xenophobia and help foreigners find a stable self-identity.

Notes

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