

**Ohio University  
Center for International Studies**

**Country Profile: Turkey**

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**Geography:**

Turkey is the only country in the world to span two continents, Asia and in Europe. The part of Turkey located in Europe is approximately the size of Massachusetts while the portion in Asia is about the size of Texas. Because of this, Turkey can be listed as either a European country (normally in political and cultural terms) or an Asian country (in geographical terms). The country is surrounded on three sides by seas: the Aegean Sea to the west, the Black Sea to the north, and the Mediterranean Sea to the south, making it a peninsula. Its neighbors are Greece and Bulgaria to the west; Russia, Ukraine, and Romania to the north (across the Black Sea); Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Iran to the east; and Syria and Iraq to the south. Turkey is divided into eighty-one provinces and has eight major cities (in order of the size of population): Istanbul, Ankara (the capital), Izmir, Bursa, Adana, Konya, Gaziantep, and Antalya.

Much like the United States, Turkey has a wide variety of landscapes from the mountainous region in the east, a high plateau in the central region, and coastal plains. One of the highest points in the country is Mount Ararat, the supposed landing spot of Noah's Ark, at a height of 16, 946 feet. These landscapes, especially the mountain ranges, are due to fault lines located underneath the country. A major fault line is in the northern part of the country, spanning from east to west, and was the major cause of the earthquake in 1999.

Having a Mediterranean climate, Turkey has hot, dry summer and mild, cold winters. However, the inner plateau region have harsher winters, with temperatures reaching -40° F and snow on the ground for 120 days out of the year. May is generally the wettest month of the year with July and August being the driest with annual precipitation averaging about 15 inches.

**History:**

The Anatolian peninsula is one of the oldest inhabited regions of the world due to its location between Europe and Asia. The earliest settlements date back to the Neolithic Age. Cities such as Mersin in southern Turkey are considered to be some of the world's earliest human settlements. The first of the major empires in the region was the Hittite Empire dating back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. The Persians (from modern day Iran) conquered the region in the fifth century B.C.E. and Alexander the Great claimed the area for the Greeks in 334 B.C.E. In the first century B.C.E., the Romans won the area and in 324 C.E. Byzantium (present day Istanbul) became the capital of the Byzantine Empire after the western portion of the Roman Empire collapsed. The Seljuk Turks defeated the Byzantines in 1071 and remained in power for less than two hundred years when the Mongols attacked in 1243. With the Seljuks out of power and the Mongols having difficulties consolidating their power, the Ottoman Turks rose to power in one of the Turkish regions and came to power in the early 1300s.

The Ottoman Empire ruled the Anatolian peninsula for 623 years, reaching its height in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The empire began to decline after the reign of Fatih Sultan Mehmet, who conquered Istanbul, due to numerous weak sultans after his reign. In 1914, Turkey and its ally Germany were defeated in World War I and was occupied by European powers. A new Turkish state was created in 1922 when Mustafa Kemal, an officer in the Turkish army, led a movement that became the Turkish War for Independence. Turkey was declared a country on September 18<sup>th</sup>, 1922 after the movements victory. The Sultanate was abolished on November 1<sup>st</sup>, 1922 when a new

parliament was formed and the country was internationally recognized in 1923.

Mustafa Kemal was given the honorific “Ataturk”, meaning “father of the Turks” and was appointed the first president of Turkey. He instituted a series of radical reforms to create a secular state, distancing the new nation from its religious roots. Turkey entered World War II on the side of the Allies and helped Great Britain and the United States defeat Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. In return, Turkey was given a spot in the newly formed United Nations in 1945. During the Cold War, Turkey and the United States became closer allies due to the Soviet threat. The Truman Doctrine of 1945 guaranteed the United States’ intentions to protect Turkey and Greece from a Soviet invasion by providing military and economic aid. Between 1945 and 2000, Turkey faced a period of political instability with military coups in 1960, 1971, 1980, and 1997.

### **Culture:**

It is very difficult to answer the question “Who are Turks?” when attempting to describe the culture. During the Ottoman reign, many countries were claimed by the empire but those people were not forced to assimilate. The Ottoman system was multi-ethnic and allowed people to keep their own ethnic and religious identities. After the fall of the empire, the Turkish state forced the different cultures to interact with one another in its attempt to create Turkish nationalism. This produced the ‘cultural bridge’ between East and West, especially with the large influx of Kurds who retained their own culture when they moved into the country.

Turkey also has a very rich musical heritage due to it being a crossroad between Europe, North Africa, the Caucasus, and South and Central Asia. Turkish music contains

elements of Central Asian folk music, Arabic, Persian classical music, ancient Greco-Roman music, and modern European and American music. European classical composers during the 18<sup>th</sup> century dedicated numerous symphonies to Turkish music, from Joseph Hayden's Military Symphony to Mozart's "Ronda alla turca" in his Sonata in A major. Beethoven's Symphony Number 9 used Turkish instruments. Turkish pop music is one of the most popular styles of music although rock music and underground music (electronica, hip-hop, rap, and dance music) are seeing increasing demand.

Turkish classical architecture is one of the most popular styles (next to modern day skyscrapers of course). Ottoman architecture emerged in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. It was heavily influenced by the Iranian, Memluk, and Byzantine styles. For example, the Byzantine church, Hagia Sophia, served as a model for many Ottoman mosques. Ottoman architecture is known for its vast inner spaces, massive yet seemingly weightless domes, and achieving perfect harmony between the inner and outer spaces such as light and shadow. Most of the more notable Ottoman buildings are from the classical period (1437-1703). The major architect of this time period was Mimar Sinan, whose most significant work was the Suleymaniye Mosque in Istanbul. This mosque, as well as the 333 other buildings he built across Turkey, have become the definition of Turkish architecture. The 19<sup>th</sup> century also saw a rise in Western style buildings to crop up across the major cities. Palaces such as Dolmabahce and mosques like Ortakoy were built parallel to the westernization process in the country.

One of the more important (and more interesting) parts of Turkish culture is, of course, the food. Turkish food has influences from Turkic, Arabic, Greek, Armenian, and Persian cuisines. Some of the more popular Turkish dishes were created in the kitchens of

the Ottoman palaces. Although Turkish dishes can be found throughout the country, there are also region-specific specialties. The southeast is famous for its kebabs and dough-based desserts like baklava. The north is known for its corn and anchovies. Mediterranean regions are known for cuisines rich in vegetables, herbs, and fish. Central Turkey is known for its pastry specialties and a pasta dish known as manti. Some key ingredients used in meals include meat, rice, pasta, eggs, eggplants, green peppers, onions, garlic, lentils, beans, tomatoes, nuts, and a wide variety of spices like parsley, cumin, paprika, mint, oregano, and thyme. Yogurt, cheese, and bread are also included in the daily diet.

Unlike other Muslim countries, alcohol is widely available and it is not looked down upon if it is drunk. Generally, Turks tend to avoid alcohol during Ramadan, the fasting month. Tea and Turkish coffee is very popular, although Western style coffee is also becoming popular due to the convenience in making it for guests.

### **Language:**

The official language of Turkey is Turkish, which is a member of the Turkic family. About forty percent of Turkic speakers speak Turkish, equaling to about 74 million people worldwide. Modern day Turkish evolved from Ottoman Turkish, which was a mixture of Arabic, Persian, and Turkish. In 1932, Ataturk created the Turkish Language Association and gave them the task of removing the Arabic and Persian words from the Turkish language, replacing them with Turkish equivalents. However, there are still numerous Arabic words used in Turkey such as the Islamic greeting 'as-salaamu alaykum', 'inshallah', and 'mashallah'. Arabic script was also replaced with a new

Turkish alphabet similar to the Western alphabet.

**Customs:**

Although Turkey is a very Westernized nation, it still holds on to some of the traditional customs from the Ottoman Empire. Turks are a very social people and it is for this reason that some have trouble adapting to the colder personalities of Americans and Europeans.

For example, although people will greet each other using 'hello', among friends it is still common to use the Islamic greeting 'as-salaamu alaykum'. It is also normal for people to kiss each others' cheeks in greeting, although shaking hands is also perfectly acceptable.

Manners are a very important aspect of Turkish customs. This is very important when there are visitors as it is expected that everyone in the family and among the guests show their very best manners. Visiting is a very important part of Turkish culture. Because of this, the majority of Turkish households will have a stash of tea, coffee, and snacks ready for any unexpected guests, even if they are family members, that may show up. If a guest is not served with these, it is considered extremely rude. It is also polite for guests to bring their host some sort of gift in the way of candy, trinkets, or other gifts depending on their relationship. It is unacceptable to eat with the left hand, for example, as this is was forbidden in the Qu'ran. It is expected that girls of an appropriate age (usually ten and older) serve meals, serving the guests first. However, eating at a Turkish floor table is acceptable and commonplace. These tables are generally ankle high and it is expected that everyone join together around these tables to share a meal. This is

not always the case as Western tables are gaining popularity and are used in cities and wealthier homes in villages. When visiting, it is looked down upon if outdoor shoes are worn inside. This is applicable to both guests and hosts as cleanliness is a very important part of the culture and religion. Guests are expected to take their shoes off when visiting and are provided slippers to walk with. These are some of the most important customs for visitors to the country to know.

### **Lifestyle:**

Turks have a very Western lifestyle although it is easy to notice their Ottoman roots. Lifestyle in the larger cities such as Istanbul and Adana are much like the lifestyles in New York City and Miami. Most families have cars, televisions, and satellite or cable. Going out to eat in restaurants is gaining popularity and the younger generations go to malls and movies, adopting the more Western culture.

The smaller villages and towns vary in their adoption of Western lifestyle. While some towns like Kayseri in central Turkey has adopted most of the technology found in Europe, many of the old customs like arranged marriages are still in practice. Villages tend to have televisions and older cars but not much else in terms of technology and stubbornly hold on to traditions dating back more than a hundred years.

### **Religion:**

Turkey is one of two of the largest non-Arab Muslim majority countries in the Middle East. Turkey is almost 99% Muslim, mostly Sunni Muslims, with the other one percent being composed of Christians and Jews. Islam was spread across Europe, Africa,

and Asia during Ottoman conquests at the height of its power. Ramadan, the month of fasting, is one of the largest Islamic holidays in Turkey. Ramadan is meant to share the emotions of poor people who live with little food and little spending money while a. It is also meant to be a support to poor people as Islam orders Muslims to give 1/40 of their wealth to the poor as a tax. The Ramadan festival lasts three days as families clean their homes and yards before the festival date and wear their cleanest or newest clothes. Children are given gifts by their parents and relatives. Another religious holiday, the Kurban festival, is much the same except with food being exchanged.

However, while most people are Muslim, Turkey is very much a secular state. In the beginning of Ataturk's reforms, a movement arose to separate religion from politics. The constitution recognizes freedom of religion for individuals, whereas religious communities are placed under the protection of the state; but the constitution explicitly states that they cannot become involved in the political process (by forming a religious party, for instance) or establish faith-based schools. No party can claim that it represents a form of religious belief; nevertheless, religious sensibilities are generally represented through conservative parties. Turkey prohibits by law the wearing of the hijab, the religious head-covering, and theo-political symbolic garments for both genders in government buildings, schools, and universities

Thus, while Islamic holidays are celebrated by the people and cities may come to a stop, the government does not officially celebrate these holidays. There are numerous secular holidays that are celebrated. One of the most popular is the Turkish day of Independence, celebrated on October 29. Another very popular holiday is Children's Day on April 23. Children's Day commemorates the opening of the Turkish National

Assembly in 1920 during the Turkish Independence War. Every year on this day, children from all around Turkey gather in the capital city, Ankara, and replace select members from the Grand National Assembly, including the President and Prime Minister. They then govern the country for one day in order to emphasize the importance of children in society. The holiday also has children from other parts of the world come to the country and do artistic performances from their countries of origin. They live in Turkish homes, meet Turkish children, and even participate in the special session at the Grand National Assembly replacing government members. This is meant to allow Turkish children and children from the world to create memories and bonds with each other, thereby fulfilling Turkey's principle of "peace at home, peace in the world".

### **What Kids Do:**

Turkey is a very Westernized country and as such, Turkish children spend their days like American children. Children spend on average about eight to nine hours a day in school learning things like math, reading, and geography. Older children will also go to special study schools in order to get into prestigious high schools and universities.

Family is very important so if there are younger children in the family, it is expected that the older children (especially daughters) help their mothers in taking care of them and the home. Household chores are a large part in the home.

Turkish children are generally very social as well. Younger children, when not in school, will spend the majority of their time playing with neighborhood children in local parks or on the sidewalks. Most games are normally just made up on the spot depending on what the children wish to play that day, although 'Cowboys and Indians'-style game

are popular. Television is also a popular pass time, especially as more cartoons and shows are being imported from Europe, the United States, and Japan. Like the U.S., Pokemon also had its popular phase among Turkish children.

Older children in cities like Istanbul spend their time playing games, visiting friends, or going to places like the mall or movies. Video games and music videos have recently become very popular. In the villages, it is expected that children begin to learn the skills necessary to their lifestyle. Girls spend their time helping their mothers cook, clean, and raising neighborhood children. Boys take on the physical labor. Some sons are hired at their father's place of work or will help in household chores that the women do not do such as chopping firewood.

As far as sports are concerned, soccer is the most popular in the country. Children will have mock games in parks or will spend their time watching their favorite soccer players from teams such as Fenerbahce and Galatasaray play. Other sports, such as baseball and American football, are slowly gaining popularity but nothing in comparison to soccer.

**Resources:**

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turkey#Culture>

<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3432.htm>

<http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0108054.html>

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turkish\\_language](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turkish_language)

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam>

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Culture\\_of\\_Turkey](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Culture_of_Turkey)

<http://www.turkeytravelplanner.com/details/CultureCustoms.html>

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Children%27s\\_Day](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Children%27s_Day)