University of Illinois Study Excursion to Istanbul: It's not 'Constant'inople!

That is correct. There seems to be little constant about it. Turkey and its capital are on the move. Many may ask, „Toward the East or the West?“ Indeed, Turkey is a geographic and quite possibly political link, vacillating between the two. An enlightening study excursion to Istanbul led its nine University of Illinois, German, Austrian, and Turkish participants to conclude that this rapidly developing Middle-Eastern country is more than a physical link between continents. It very well might be a crucial piece in the puzzle of Middle-Eastern conflict and East-West relations.

The post-Easter excursion provided far more than a sightseeing opportunity. It was foremost a chance to become acquainted with the people and perspectives of Istanbul. Like the International Olympic Evaluation Commission that visited the city simultaneously, the group maintained high levels of enthusiasm and focus. Kepabci Mahmut, a popular Fatih restaurant, offered the starting point for getting in touch with Turkish cuisine and culture. After an exquisite meal, the Pierre Loti Café provided a perch for viewing the skyline of Istanbul with its myriad mosques and architectural wonders. The glittering modern bridges suggested that Istanbul does more than connect two landmasses; it is a hotbed of innovation and intercultural exchange.

Istanbul at sunset

A meeting with one of the more fascinating catalysts of positive change in Turkey today highlighted the first morning. Ishak Alaton, a respected entrepreneur in Istanbul, was the host. The discrimination his Jewish family faced during his youth in the 1940s motivated Alaton to succeed in business and advocate democratization, transparency, and human rights. His rationale? „To prove to them that they had made a mistake.“ Although not popular among some conservative Turkish elites, he fights for progressive social change, personally and with his foundations; a process he believes could accelerate with more intense Turkish EU accession negotiations.
Dr. Savas Genc (Fatih University Professor of International Relations and guest at a dinner gathering in the home of Istanbul’s largest baklava baker) notes that Turkey’s fast-paced economic development could influence its interest in EU membership. With a booming economy, Turkey could soon join the BRICS group and strive for greater regional sovereignty. And, while most agree that EU accession could foster more progressive anti-discrimination policy, Prime Minister Recep Erdogan's talks with Abdullah Öcalan, the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) leader, suggest that Turkey might strive to overcome such enduring tensions more on its own.

The growth of civil society is another intriguing development in Turkey. The Journalists and Writers Foundation—an institution of the Hizmet Movement—offers a compelling example with platforms for intercultural dialogue, education, family cohesion, women's rights, and research innovation. As Fatih Ceran, Assistant Director of its Foreign Relations Department, notes, lack of knowledge and poverty contribute greatly to social problems in Turkey and elsewhere. The Foundation’s preferred solution is education. Consequently, it builds schools with an emphasis on preserving local cultures all over the world, from the U.S. to Afghanistan. Its “peace through education” approach also casts education and self education the best means to increase intercultural dialogue and acceptance. The Foundation’s ultimate goal is peaceful coexistence.

Employing knowledge to comprehend and mediate conflicts is exactly what the excursion’s final discussion host, U.S. Consul-General Scott Kilner, promotes. He and his staff assert that Turkish EU accession could bring much needed stability to the Middle East. By resolving the Kurdish conflict and mediating in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Turkey also could strengthen regional stability, enhancing its position as a mediator between East and West. Secretary of State Kerry’s Istanbul visit on the heels of the Illinois excursion aptly underscored that perception.

Yes, one can see Istanbul (and Turkey) as a bridge for intercultural exchange, innovation, and understanding. It possesses a rich culture with great potential—to enhance democracy and tolerance in the Middle East and to contribute to East-West collaboration in the 21st century. That seems greatly preferable to persisting with the tensions and conflicts that plague not only the Middle East today. After all, it is not our differences, but rather our mindsets, that divide us.

Bruce Murray and Laura Orozco Rueda: April 2013