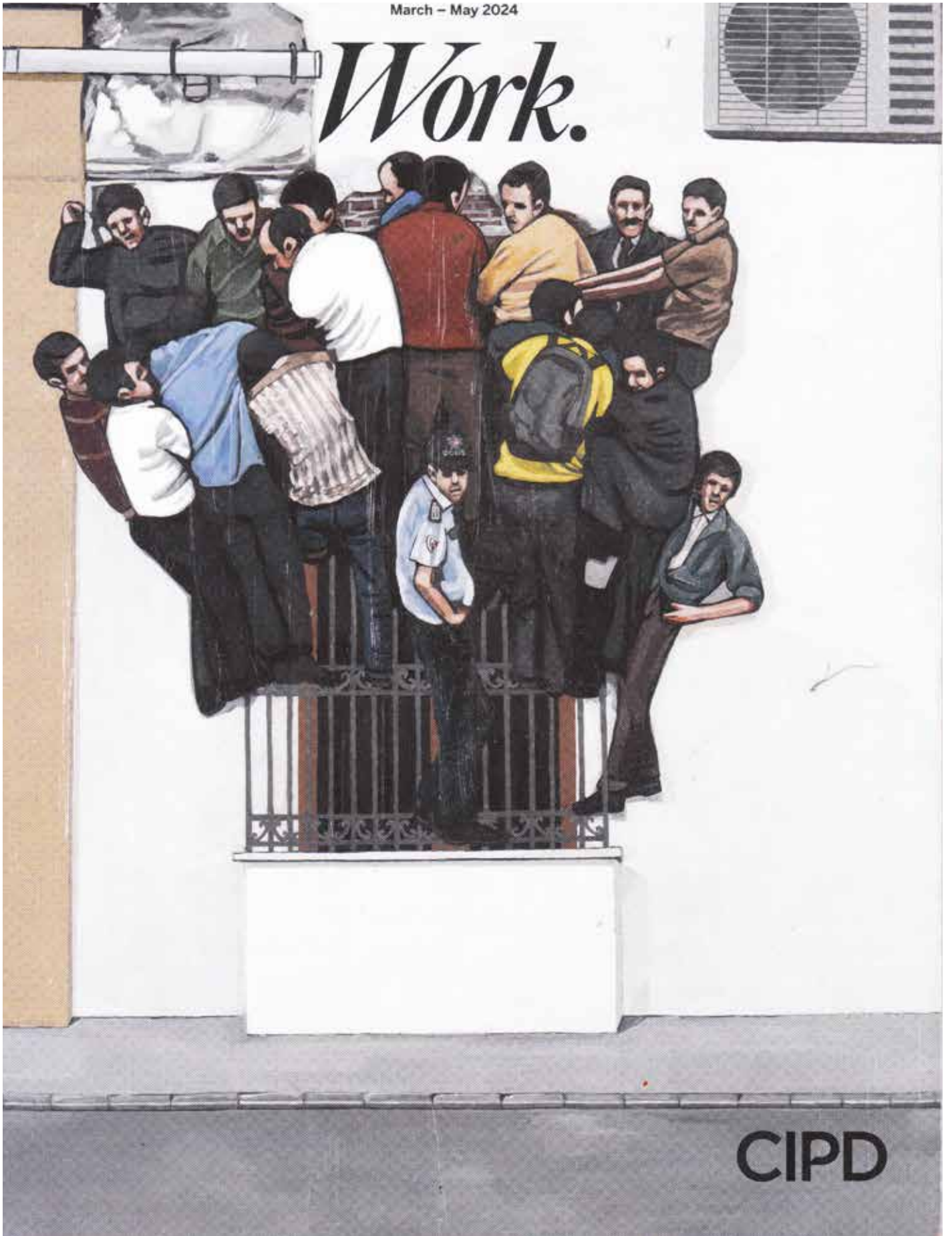
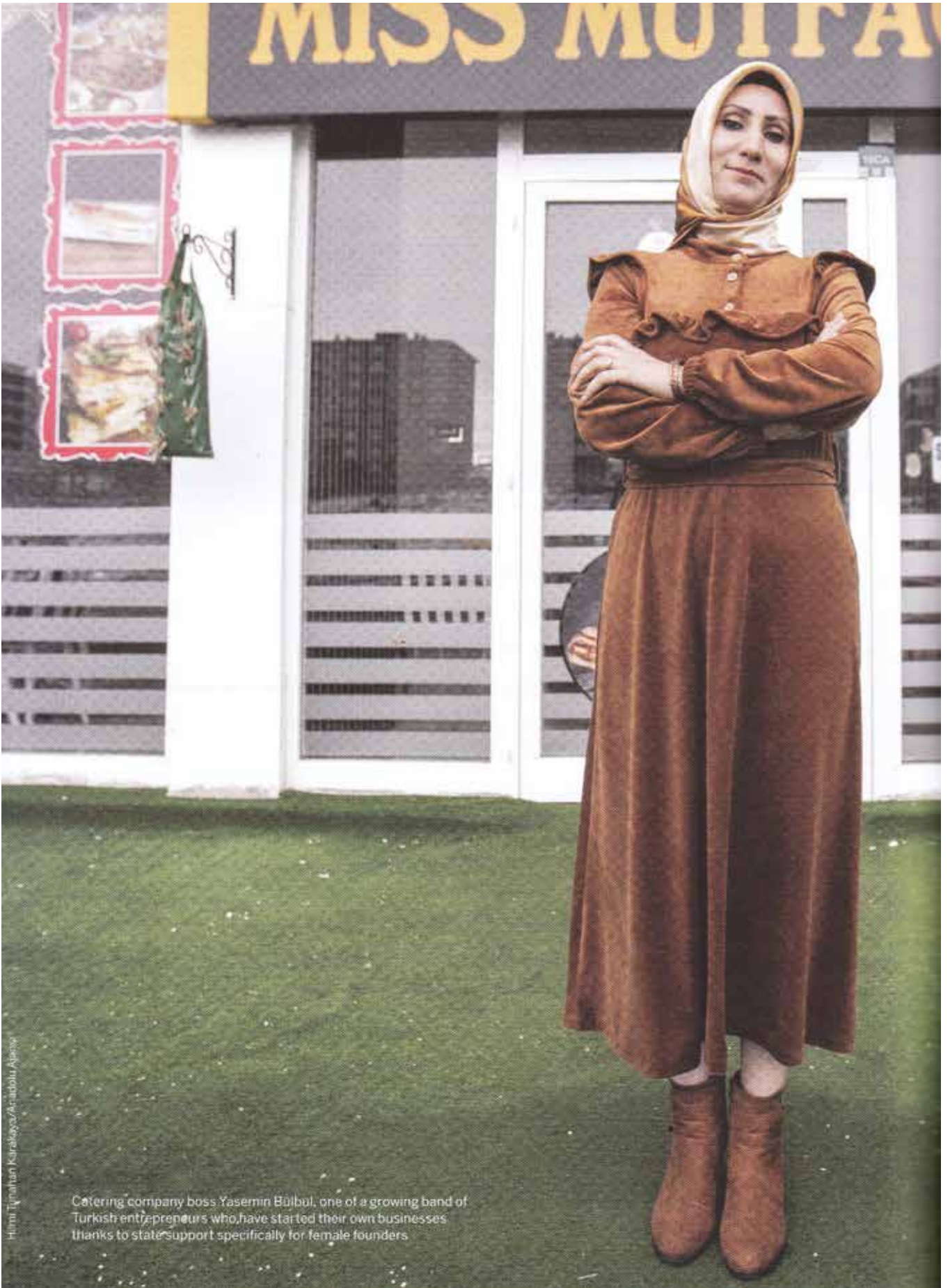


March – May 2024

Work.



CIPD



Hürriyet Tuna Han Karakaya/Akadolu Ajansı

Catering company boss Yasemin Bülbül, one of a growing band of Turkish entrepreneurs who have started their own businesses thanks to state support specifically for female founders.



Fresh Turkey

Shrewdly balancing east with west, it is a country that has always deserved more than the bit player role often ascribed. Now national ambition and economic prowess may be about to propel it to the centre of the world stage, says Matthew Gwyther

Nineteenth century Russian monarch Czar Nicholas I was the first to use the term 'sick man' to describe the Ottoman Empire – centred on what is now Turkey and whose heyday was the 1700s. And while it is true that things did not end well for the Ottomans – what was also known as the Turkish Empire rotted from the head down over hundreds of years until World War I put an end to the agony – modern Turks would add that it was a bold claim for the Czar to make anyway, given he was the weak leader of a country whose non-stop turmoil and savagery has been a constant both pre and post the 1917 revolution.

Either way, it is a long time since anyone dared to repeat the insult. Because if Turkey ever was the sick man of Europe, it certainly isn't anymore. If you are on the hunt, plenty of other options are available (not least the UK). And these days Turkey presents a picture of vigorous, if exuberantly fluctuating, health. Under its populist and authoritarian leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, it is a proud, modern state with a growing population and an apparently complete belief in its own glorious destiny.

Turkey is a founding member of the OECD and G20. And despite the fact that it fails to toe the NATO line on several issues including sanctions on Russia over Ukraine, it is still a member. The country's economy ranked as the seventeenth largest in the world, and seventh largest in Europe, by nominal GDP in 2023. It also ranked as the eleventh largest in the world, and fifth largest in Europe, by purchasing power in 2023. And while it remains only a candidate for EU membership, it has become adept at attracting development funding and was the largest single recipient of European Bank for Reconstruction and Development investment last year, at €2.5bn.

The economy is on something of a wild ride – real GDP rose by a whopping 11 per cent in 2021, driven by household spending. Activity is slowing after aggressive monetary tightening to cool domestic demand and high inflation. The rollercoaster is not helped by the fact that Erdoğan is a rather unorthodox economist. He believes that higher interest rates are a cause of rising prices, not a cure. At the end of 2021, when most countries were either raising base rates or preparing to do so, he ordered Turkey's central bank to take a chainsaw to them. The result could have been predicted, if not perhaps by Erdoğan. Inflation surged to

almost 80 per cent in a matter of months, and the Turkish lira tanked. However, even that did not bring an end to the boom, and remarkably Turkey's economy still managed to grow by 5.9 per cent in the final quarter of the year.

If Turkey has a problem on the international stage it is that it seems a bit too ready to play fast and loose with the rules, both within its borders and without. Political repression is widespread. There is no free press. The Kurdish problem – which dates back centuries, but flared up in the 80s into armed rebellion against attempts by the Turkish government to forcibly assimilate Kurds living there – remains ongoing and unresolved.

Take the Dörtyol oil terminal in southeastern Turkey. Since the war in Ukraine this site has become a staging post for contraband Russian fuels being shipped onwards to European buyers in contravention of the EU embargo. A *Financial Times* investigation recently used ship tracking data to prove how seaborne flows of Russian refined products into the Dörtyol terminal have soared since the first western restrictions on Russian trade took effect in the middle of 2022. The terminal has no capacity to further refine fuels on site, and oil that arrives there is not imported into Turkey. Instead, Dörtyol functions as a trans-shipment hub, before oil is trafficked to buyers in other countries, mostly in Europe. As Turkey refuses to ban its companies from dealing with Russian oil, the terminal officially breaks no rules. Its western allies may be maddened by Turkey's continued economic ties with Russia, but this is exactly the sort of lucrative opportunity that the Turkish government is happy to seize despite the criticism it attracts. It is realpolitik in action.

The leadership can be equally thick-skinned about serious internal issues too. In early February last year, some 55,783 people were estimated to have died in southern Turkey after an earthquake struck. Ever conscious of his image as the sympathetic leader of Turkey's rural poor and working class city dwellers, Erdoğan travelled to the earthquake zone very soon after the initial devastation. His Bosphorus barge-like Mercedes presidential sedan weaved through the wreckage, its passenger apparently oblivious to the role played by widespread corruption in adding to the death toll. Building regulations intended to improve earthquake resistance have been widely flouted during the country's 20-year long construction boom, a hallmark of the president's expansionary rule.

Erdogan nonetheless promised rapid solutions, announcing: "Our citizens should not worry. We will never allow for them to remain unsheltered. We will rebuild these buildings within one year and will hand them back to citizens." Unfortunately, no such thing has happened. In Hatay province nearly two thirds of residents are still in container homes.

A senior international banker in Ankara did not want to talk on record about the country's progress and problems. In Turkey careless talk is costly. "To explain us and what makes us tick, just look at a map," the anonymous banker tells *Work*. "We are at the crossing point of continents north and south, and east and west. We've taken immigrants from Caucasus [between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea] to the north and all over the Middle East to the south. We're a fusion of nationalities and of geographies. That is why Turks, in an entirely pragmatic and self-interested way, maintain lines of communication with Putin and Washington. Israel and Iran. We're great negotiators. We have had to be."

In this context it is hard to account for the fact that the Turkic peoples have been overlooked by the rest of us for many years. How many questions on the Turkic world do you remember from your GCSE history? They make up one of the world's 10 largest linguistic families, numbering more than 140 million – people who are scattered through more than 20 modern states in an amazing crescent across Eurasia, starting at The Great Wall of China through Central Asia, the Caucasus, Iran, Turkey the Balkans and Europe. There is even a fledgling community in the US.

The language spoken by the biggest and most developed Turkic country, Turkey, is also spoken by significant ethnic minorities in European states such as France, Britain, Austria, the Netherlands, Belgium, Russia and Romania. Turkish can be heard on every other street corner of Berlin, the capital of Europe's most powerful country, and the Turkish immigrant *gastarbeiters* of the 1960s are now prominent and significant in German public life.

It was this sense of Turkey as in many ways the world's best kept secret that struck former chief people officer Mira Magecha, now director at coaching, community and leadership development consultancy Play for Change, when she took on the brief to head up HR for on-demand

grocery delivery app Getir – founded in and headquartered in Turkey – in 2021. Several years down the line and the secret is very much out, she says. But still many might not be aware of the wealth of tech talent the nation continues to turn out, with many younger Turks seeing this very much as their route to social – and geographic – mobility.

Other aspects of the modern Turkish workplace that initially struck Magecha – who has worked all over the world, including Switzerland, India, Brazil, Poland and the Middle East – were high levels of respect for authority and hierarchy, as you might expect, and an incredibly strong work ethic: "There was a real pride in working for one of the larger organisations. But just generally there's a lot of pride in what people do: how they show up and what they deliver."

HR leaders new to the territory should beware, then, any sense of Turkey as the poor (or rather cheap labour) relation. While Getir was founded in Turkey and has staged a global takeover from there, many chief people officers may find themselves overseeing something of a reverse manoeuvre, with Turkey – along with the likes of India and Poland – still a popular location for outsourced call centres. "Yes, salaries may be lower than elsewhere in the western world, especially compared to the US and the UK. But their knowledge, their understanding, their educational levels, are all on a par; so it's making sure they're in no way seen as second class."

As well as being home to top-notch digital skills, Turkey is also increasingly the workshop of Europe, a major manufacturing force in everything from cars to washing machines and clothing – the culmination of a 50-year journey that is a testament to the energy of its people. Our banker explains: "We are now developing into a proper industrial nation. Just go back to 1961. A bad year for Turkey." The US military had just taken over in the first of what was eventually four coups, and the economy was a shambles.

"However, that was also the year when the first Ford Transit was built in Germany. You know where most of the Ford Transits in the world are now made? Turkey. They have stopped making them in the US. We've got incredible modern manufacturing efficiency. A massive airline with a serious airport hub in Istanbul. We make white goods, we make textiles. Do we really need membership of the EU, which has been denied us thanks to the likes of Nicolas →



Turkey's populist president Erdoğan has been the country's de facto leader for more than 20 years, modernising the economy, but also, say critics, stoking religious and social division. Here he is visiting the site of the earthquakes that devastated southern and central regions in February 2023

ADEM ALTAN/AFP/Getty Images; Burçak Bingöl; Broken II, 2013 - Stoneware, transfer printed and glazed; glass, wood 172x73x9 cm



Broken II, Burçak Bingöl, 2013: by deconstructing some of the country's traditional materials and imagery – in this case fragments of highly glazed ceramics and stylised floral designs – Bingöl creates strikingly modern yet classical artworks that question Turkish society and heritage

Sarközy? Well we seem to be doing OK without it; if they don't want us, then we'll find other people who do."

Arguably the best book on what makes Turkey tick is Hugh Pope's *Sons of the Conquerors: The Rise of the Turkic World*. Pope explains that unlike their fellow Muslims – the Arabs – the Turkic peoples have been 'lucky' in that their modern interests have largely coincided with, rather than contradicted, the policies of the US. Washington made its opening move quickly in February 1992 following the collapse of Soviet Russia, when US military flights were allowed for the first time over the airspace of the former Soviet Union. The US routed the flights of humanitarian mission Operation Provide Hope via the Turkish capital. It did so deliberately, to underline its wish that the former soviet states should now follow the pro-American Turkish model of secular government and a market economy.

Such moves were mostly about preventing post cold war chaos, but the US also had a more self-interested agenda. It led the west in pushing for access to the huge oil and gas fields of the Caspian basin. And there was the desire to develop a strategic Turkic buffer zone between Russia, China and Iran through which oil and gas could flow to the west in general and the European Union in particular, which had its own vision of opening up new markets. Washington also offered a programme of loans to replace the old Moscow-centric 'lines of communication' with new east-west transit routes for money and goods.

Consequently, governments, companies and international organisations began to treat parts of the Turkic-speaking world at least as a coherent region of operations, if not yet a strategically important block. Fast forward to today, and what was started by US foreign policy may soon be accelerated by global economics, as the pressure to export more energy resources from the region drives more cooperation between fossil fuel-rich Turkic countries such as Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan (which has the second-largest gas field in the world).

Between 2006 and 2009 the UK's ambassador to Turkey – our man in Ankara – was Nick Baird (he subsequently became head of comms at Centrica). A classic foreign office high flyer, he is a mild, unshowy diplomat who became hugely attached to and impressed by Turkey and its

controversial leader during his time there. "What people fail to understand about Erdoğan is that his is a social battle not a fundamentalist religious battle," he says. "His heartland is rural central Anatolia not the urban political western-style [parts of the country]."

So the battle is between rural, more traditional and religious Turkey, and the educated, secular metropolitan urbanites found in the big cities. The latter cohort was effectively created by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk – the first president of the Republic of Turkey in 1923 and as such often called the father of modern Turkey – to modernise his newly formed state. "Erdoğan supporters refer to their [western-style] opponents as 'White Turks'," says Baird. "They [the White Turks] were Atatürk's people – secular, educated, western. They also had the wealth which they guarded, and a huge fear of political Islam. But Erdoğan knew their time was up. It's his time now."

"Erdoğan plays gesture politics all the time by, for example, turning the great Hagia Sophia [a major cultural site in Istanbul] back into an active mosque. The mayor of Istanbul was jailed for reciting an Islamic poem in public. He's an aggressive pragmatist. Forever dreaming up new moves. He's engineered an almost Thatcherite degree of private sector enthusiasm and growth. Their businesses work really hard."

Erdoğan can also be highly impetuous. Baird recounts an extraordinary incident in 2012 when he tried to get Sarah Ferguson, the Duchess of York, extradited to Turkey to face criminal charges over her undercover reporting on Turkish orphanages. The documentary, made by British channel ITV's *Tonight* programme, reported cases of children being tied to beds and disabled children being neglected by overworked staff. A Turkish court accused Fergie of "breaking the law in acquiring footage and violating the privacy of five children", and demanded she be handed over. The charges carried a maximum jail term of 22 years and six months. An Interpol international arrest warrant was even briefly put out for her.

The leader's track record on women is also less than encouraging. At one political rally he called women who are not mothers "deficient". Previously, he has urged women to have at least three children and denounced birth control as "treason". Turkey now ranks 130 of 144 in the World Economic Forum's gender gap index, based on access to health services, educational attainment, economic →



Top: From ancient Byzantium through the Constantinople of the Holy Roman and the Ottoman Empires to modern-day Istanbul, for more than 2,500 years the city that straddles the Bosphorus has been the point at which eastern and western worlds meet

Bottom: *Pregnant Halıç II*, Elif Uras, 2015: Uras's works champion the cause of female empowerment in Turkey by subtly subverting traditional forms and processes

Turks living in Dortmund, Germany, celebrate early signs that Erdoğan is about to win the most recent presidential election. A high proportion of the large Turkish diaspora in Germany turned out to vote for 'RTE' (as he is popularly known) in May last year.

This page: Massimo Sestini's 'Quality Imagines' magazine, opposite page; top artwork: 'Quality Imagines' magazine, opposite page; middle artwork: 'Quality Imagines' magazine, opposite page; bottom artwork: 'Quality Imagines' magazine, opposite page. © Massimo Sestini, 2010. Oil on canvas, 140 x 200 cm.



TURKEY'S TURNING POINTS



Top to bottom: Shade. Tamer Nakisci: the artist's 'light and shade' rugs are inspired by traditional Turkish ceilings; vibrantly coloured spices on sale in an Istanbul bazaar; 1881, Taner Ceylan, 2014 one of a series of provocative works by the German-born Turkish artist, re-examining the Orientalist gaze

1453 Sultan Mehmed II captures Constantinople (now Istanbul), consolidating the Ottoman Empire in Asia Minor and the Balkans. It will later spread to north Africa and the Middle East.

1908 The Young Turk Revolution establishes constitutional rule, but descends into military dictatorship during WWI.

1923 The Grand National Assembly officially ends the Ottoman era by declaring Turkey a republic, with Kemal Atatürk as president.

1945 Turkey – neutral for most of WWII and a non-combatant – joins the UN. It becomes a NATO member in 1952.

1984 The Kurdistan Workers' Party launches separatist guerilla war, starting the modern fight for Kurdish autonomy in Turkey

1993 Having first applied to join the EEC in 1987, Turkey is granted candidate status in its bid to join the EU. To this day it has yet to be granted full membership.

2014 Erdogan wins the first direct election to become president of Turkey.

2016 An attempted coup by factions of the Turkish military fails, but not before tanks take to the streets and fighter jets bomb the parliament building in Ankara. At least 250 die.

2022 Russia invades Ukraine. Erdogan declares his support for Ukraine, but does not impose sanctions on Russia.

2023 Severe earthquakes strike in the south east, near the Syrian border. 55,000 are killed and 680,000 homes destroyed.

2024 Having blocked its membership bid for two years, the government in Ankara suddenly accedes to Sweden's desire to join NATO. Within hours, the US approves the sale of \$2.3bn of F16 fighter jets to Turkey.

participation and political empowerment. Only 34 per cent of women in Turkey work – by far the lowest of the 35 industrialised countries of the OECD, where the average is 63 per cent. Again though, it is a more complicated, nuanced, picture than this. While the overall state of affairs undeniably needs work, there are also encouraging pockets where there are women at the top of corporate life in Turkey. "At Getir there were the same challenges with gender diversity in tech as anywhere else, but I remember being impressed that the senior leadership team was primarily female – and every other team pretty much evenly balanced," reports Magecha.

So where next – geopolitically, economically and culturally – for a country with plenty of challenges, admittedly, but also huge amounts of potential? Despite – or perhaps because of – president Erdogan's disdain for diplomatic niceties, Baird thinks the country could have a big part to play in tackling major international issues such as the war in Ukraine and even the Israel/Palestine conflict. "I can see, if they were minded to, they could get peace talks between Russia and Ukraine going to end the war. Likewise, but possibly improbably, they have lines into both Hamas and Netanyahu. We can but hope."

Zooming back in from the big picture to the day to day of the Turkish world of work, Magecha says Turkey's huge diversity – at once traditional and modern, heavily influenced by both east and west – rather than the source of tensions, pays dividends for employers and employees alike, enriching organisational culture, and making for harmonious and inclusive working relations. "At Getir we celebrated so many different festivals – Diwali and Christmas... They were great at acknowledging different religions. In my experience at least, there was a real appetite for embracing and celebrating difference." **W**

W For further reading, see page 72