



Layla Quran

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“Hear what they hear, see what they see, eat what they eat...and then you will start thinking as they think.” I sat in the living room of a small apartment building in the center of Istanbul, with a young Kurdish artist who had migrated from southeastern Turkey. In the midst of my cup of tea, my rolls of film and hours of sound bites and miles traveled in one of the largest cities in the world, I sat, and listened. There was nothing that could prepare me completely for the summer. I had taken a course on Kurds in Turkey, skyped Turkish diplomats and Kurdish students and organization leaders, and met with Kurds in the US.

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Istanbul

Turkey

“HAPPY IS HE WHO CALLS HIMSELF A TURK”: TURKEY’S KURDISH QUESTION

But one of the most important things I learned in the summer that I couldn’t learn in a classroom was that in order to truly understand someone, you must listen. Listen to their speech, watch their dance, observe their customs, read their cookbooks and understand above all that the role of the researcher is to not to teach, assume, or judge, but to learn.

I traveled to Turkey the summer after my sophomore year at UNC in order to research the Kurdish minority group of the country. Kurds are the largest stateless population in the world, and are the largest minority in Turkey, comprising approximately 20% of the population. I wanted to know if or how Kurds distinguished themselves among a Turkish majority in a nationalist country, what non-violent resistance and cultural practices they undertake in order to maintain a Kurdish identity, and how they view the state of Turkey now.



The holy Muslim month of Ramadan began a few weeks into my visit, and the opportunity to break the fast each night with Kurdish and Turkish individuals was unforgettable. There was a type of tension, silence right before the athan would echo through the crevices of the city. The Aya sofia and Blue mosque took turns with each verse of the call to prayer as the family members and friends took turns with the blessings and dates.

Protests rang through Istanbul and Turkey as often as the call to prayer. The country woke up to the authoritarian regime and many Kurds protested alongside Turks, Arabs, Greeks, and Armenians. Many Kurds told me that, if anything, the protests certainly allowed Turks living in the West to understand what Kurds faced for several years and still do in the southeast. The police brutality, the tear gas and bullets, were experienced for the first time for many Turks, and

many Kurdish individuals had the experience of building barricades, sharing remedies for tear gas, and, as never before, holding real conversations with Turks.

Hidden prejudices in Turkey are still common, as some see Kurds as rebellious, dirty, and of a lower socioeconomic status than the rest of the country. I remember going to a forum in a public park in Istanbul. The topic of the forum was Kurdish rights in Turkey. The discussions included individuals of both Turkish and Kurdish background. Statements at the forum included, “I received my first slap in the face from my father when I told him I had a Kurdish friend,” but also comments of hope and determination to see a Turkey that accepted and celebrated all backgrounds.

In a country where nationalism is taught through the classrooms and the media, demands for Kurdish autonomy and language rights are still hotly debated. Although Kurds are no longer arrested for speaking in their mother tongue in Turkey, some calls for Kurdish autonomy and language rights are seen as a demand for secession and separation from Turkey. The Turkish-Kurdish conflict killed approximately 40,000 individuals, and the prejudices from both sides can be subtly expressed. I heard many stories of Kurds in the past being teased for being Kurdish, and being accused of stealing or lying because of their ethnicity. In reality, the Kurds I interviewed did not want a separate Kurdish state, but did want the right to govern themselves and the right to be educated in their mother tongue.

I had the opportunity to take a course in the summer on the history of the Turkish republic at a public university in Istanbul. The contrast between the narratives of the history of the state from my professor and from the Kurdish individuals I interviewed was often startling. I couldn’t understand how the same history, the same events, could be told so differently. I learned again that there is no set truth, that I should listen to both narratives and respect them both as based on the legitimate experiences



individuals have lived. I had the opportunity to interview Kurdish individuals at newspapers, human rights organizations, universities, and political parties and came to see that Kurds in Istanbul utilize non-governmental organizations, student literature and art groups, and the alternative press as main resources to share information and receive support. Many of the Kurds I spoke with continuously listed three main demands from the Turkish state:

- 1) Education in the Kurdish language
- 2) An autonomous region in southeast Turkey to be governed by Kurds
- 3) The release of Kurdish political prisoners.

Turkey is a fascinating country, and I do have hope that one day all of the ethnic groups in the country—Kurds, Arabs, Greeks, Armenians, and others—can have the same rights and proudly identify with their ethnicity if they choose. I look forward to revisiting Turkey and seeing all of the beautiful individuals I had the privilege to meet and learn from this summer. I have found that my passion to share untold stories with others, along with my interest in ethnic minority groups and their ways of expressing themselves, is developing into my honors thesis. My Burch fellowship experience validated my love for travel, for experiencing new countries, and above all, for learning and sharing stories from people all over the world.

