



THE CITY TOO BIG TO FAIL

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Istanbul is a city as beautiful as Venice or San Francisco, and, once you are away from the water, as brutal and ugly as any metropolis undergoing the trauma of warp speed urbanisation. It is a place in which to sit under the shade of ancient pines and palm trees for a leisurely afternoon watching sun on water, looking out over the Bosphorus.

But also, in some parts, to tread very carefully. Istanbul has as many layers of history beneath the foundations of its buildings as any city in Europe. In 2010, it will become the European Cultural Capital. Depending on how you count, Istanbul has been the capital city of three, or perhaps four, empires. It is still shaped by the surviving fragments of Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Venetian and Ottoman civilisations. It has Orthodox Christian churches, Sunni mosques, and Sephardic synagogues. It has vast classical cisterns, ring upon ring of ancient fortifications, souks and palaces. It also has desolate concrete suburbs of extraordinary bleakness, urban terrorism, and a rootless, dispossessed underclass struggling to come to terms with city life.

It is the largest city in a state that emerged in 1923 from the chaos of World War I and the Versailles treaty, and the vision of modern Turkey's founder, Kemal Atatürk, who, though he was born in what is now Thessaloniki, and so unmistakably a European, moved his capital to Ankara, a city created almost from nothing. For the first few decades of modern Turkey's existence, the state devoted most of its resources to the new capital and its infrastructure. For a while it looked as if Ankara and Istanbul might become twin poles: one a European gate, the other a counterbalance in the heartland of Anatolia. As Turkey's urbanisation started to accelerate in the 1950s, the balance shifted overwhelmingly towards Istanbul. The rural poor poured into the big city and what used to be considered a cosmopolitan enclave,

a demonstration of Turkey's tolerance of other ethnic groups and faiths, has also become the heartland of its most conservative constituency. It is a city in which 3,500 dispossessed gypsies, descendants of a community that has lived in the Sulukule district in the shadow of the Byzantine city walls for centuries, are systematically being moved out of sight and out of mind in an operation that recalls Robert Moses' determination to drive federally funded highways through the black and Puerto Rican neighbourhoods of New York City.

Istanbul is the largest and most febrile urban centre in a country with an army committed to secularism, which, in some extreme cases, shades away from Atatürk's ideals towards authoritarianism. If the generals miscalculate, it has the potential for an insurgency that could make Turkey a kind of Algeria and Istanbul its Algiers. But Istanbul is also what is driving Turkey, toward Brazil, Russia, India and China, the new economic powerhouses. The collapse of the Soviet Union made Turkey in general, and Istanbul in particular, a vital new centre for services and expertise profiting from a rapid growth in the energy-rich former Soviet republics. It is a phenomenon that is reflected in the array of carriers at Istanbul's greatly enlarged airport, from Uzbekistan Airways, and Dniproavia, Tajikistan Airlines, Air Astana, Donbassaero and Tatarstan Airlines, their hulls painted in gaudy colours, more like busses than Boeings.

It is also visible in the stream of ships that clogs the Bosphorus day and night, a continuous double file of tankers and freighters flows past the minarets and the suspension bridges that define the city. Istanbul is the base for the architects, the construction companies, the advertising agencies, and the banks that are reshaping Kazakhstan

and Azerbaijan, and the Ukraine and even Russia. It has banks and television stations; it has manufacturers that are shooting rapidly up the value chain from generic products to designer label kitchen sinks.

Istanbul is Turkey's passport into the European Union. It sees itself as part of a group of cities on an axis running from Dubai to St. Petersburg. If London is Europe's first global city, Istanbul sees itself as its second. It's a city whose influence is shaped by both culture and commerce. Istanbul has a thriving approach to contemporary art, although surprisingly perhaps, given the close personal interest that Ataturk himself took in architectural issues, importing Austrians to plan Ankara, it has not as yet developed a distinctive architectural culture of its own in the way that Mexico or Australia have. Its geographic size and population mean that Istanbul has a strong claim to being regarded as the largest city in Europe, even if it partly lies in Asia, where a third of its citizens now live.

In the European suburb of Levent, one of Istanbul's main business districts where banks cluster, you can find facsimiles of smart London Chinese restaurants and mega shopping centres. But Istanbul is also a place with settlements within its limits, in which Kurdish migrants from rural Anatolia tend flocks of sheep under the gaze of prefabricated concrete apartment blocks.

It is a city like no other and yet it is a city that has things in common with many other cities, even if it does not always recognise it. While Cairo's population has doubled, Istanbul's population, like Lagos, has quadrupled since 1980. It straddles two continents, in a way that is very different from, but inevitably also reminiscent of, the twin cities of El Paso and Ciudad Juarez straddling the Rio Grande, blurring Mexico with the United States.

Istanbul is home to nearly 13 million people, governed in a recently created unitary jurisdiction, which saw the city's land area nearly triple from approximately 1,800 km² to 5,300 km². Even now, it still pulls in another 1.5 million workers every day, swelling its peak time population to 15 million. The city administration is attempting to limit its population to 16 million, fearing that if it is allowed to spread unchecked it will reach an impossible 25 million, in a country that has currently 71 million people. But this is really

in the hands of the national government, rather than the city, given that the GDP of the poorest regions in Turkey is just 20 per cent of that of the richest areas of the country. With such an imbalance, it is no wonder that Istanbul has become a magnet for the rural poor. Turkey's internal migration has had the effect of making the inequalities of Istanbul grow more acute, rather than less, even as it has prospered over the last decades. And it is not the master of its own fate. There is the TOKI state housing programme, run by the Prime Minister.

Very few cities have such a compartmentalised geography. The vast majority of Istanbul's citizens never make the crossing from one continent to the other. But the 10 per cent who do cross from one half of the city to the other every day amount to a still huge total of 1.2 million. And to accommodate them, there is a plan to build a third bridge across the straits. However, it is feared by some that this will destroy the reservoirs that feed the city. Ask civic leaders if there is an environmental problem for Istanbul. The first thing that they talk about is August 17, 1999, when a serious earthquake hit the city, causing 20,000 deaths. Natural resources, population growth, and civil equity barely figure.

But there are ambitious plans to create linear subcentres, both on the east and the west sides of the city, allowing the two sections to function better. The one on the Asian side of the city, at Kartal, is being shaped in its early stages by a dynamic masterplan prepared by Zaha Hadid. Among such privately financed developments, Istanbul has been investing heavily in its infrastructure. A metro system is gradually taking shape, the trams are being revitalised. There is a new rail tunnel under the Bosphorus, which will allow the realisation of the ancient goal of one of Europe's empires: to create a direct rail link from Berlin to Baghdad.

In a world in which an accommodation between competing power blocks is essential for both cultural and political reasons, Istanbul is a key bridge between them. It is a city with more than enough of the usual urban problems, but that also has the energy and the resources to stand a chance of addressing them. It's in nobody's interest that they should fail.

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