

## Turko-Ukrainian Relations and the Crimean Tatars

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Turkey and Ukraine have a very deep history of mutual relations and shared past. Actually, various Turkic peoples had been in close contact with the Slavic inhabitants of the lands which constitute the territory of contemporary Ukraine for at least a millennium, if not more. As for the relations between the Ottoman Empire and the Ukrainian people, they stretch back to as early as to the 15th century. The large strip of lands north of the Black Sea which constitute the southern parts of contemporary Ukraine have been of utmost importance for the politics of the Ottoman Empire. These lands were ruled, from the late 15th until the late 18th century, by the Ottoman Empire and its ally or vassal, the Crimean Khanate. They provided the basis of the Ottoman power and security (as well as far-reaching economic interests) not only towards lands further north but also towards the Central-Eastern Europe and Caucasus-Volga regions. Conversely, the loss of these lands to Russia portended a grave threat to the very heart of Turkey and led to the emergence of the so-called "Eastern Question" concerning the partition of the Ottoman Empire among the European Powers.

Indeed, for more than two centuries -with the exception of but a few brief periods- the basic orientation of the Turkish (or Ottoman) foreign policy was determined in relation to the Russian menace from the north. All alliances in which Turkey has been involved have aimed at, in the final analysis, consolidating its security primarily against the actual or potential threat from Russia. The change of alliances, regimes, and even the very states has not basically changed this picture since the 18th century. Therefore, the partial or total removal of Russian domination from the region has been considered a great relief which would open a wide set of prospects before Turkey. Ironically, this would lead to a much more favorable and pragmatic reevaluation of Russia itself in the psychological and logical sense by Turkey which would begin to view it as an ideal economic partner and even a factor for the stability of the broader region. This was exactly what happened immediately after the break-up of the two Russian empires, the Tsarist and the Soviet ones.

It was in this vein that Turkey euphorically welcomed the independence of Ukraine back in 1918 and again in 1991. The existence and domination of non-imperialist powers in the Black Sea region certainly guarantee the greatest level of strategic security for of Turkey which naturally aspires for the preservation of the status quo irrevocably and considers the other beneficiary states of the status quo in the region (most of whom are the direct products of the new order) as natural allies. No matter how important all the other factors might be, this consideration is bound to be the quintessence of Turkey's evaluation of its relations with the regional states. In other words, the obvious novel aspects and factors notwithstanding, the basics of the Turkish geopolitical assessment of Ukraine have been thus inherited from the past. Therefore, due to the combination of historical and contemporary factors, Turkey simply does not have the luxury of perceiving Ukraine as any foreign country.

The relations between the Ottoman Empire and the Ukrainian people which had experienced a sharp rupture with the Russian annexation of the Zaporozhian lands and other areas inhabited by Ukrainians, as well as the collapse of the Crimean Khanate and the consequent Ottoman withdrawal from the areas north of the Black Sea, was to be revived only during the First World

War. Throughout the war the Ottomans actively supported the Ukrainian nationalist organizations which worked for the independence of Ukraine and provided them with the necessary facilities to conduct their activities in Turkey. It was not surprising that the Ottoman Empire was one of the first four states which recognized the independence of the Ukrainian Democratic Republic and signed the treaties of friendship and alliance with it in 1918. The demise of independent Ukraine and the establishment of Soviet rule there resulted in an even more severe disruption in the relations between Turkey and Ukraine. Still, in spite of the imposed oblivion of 70 years of communism, the memories and traces of these once very important political, strategic, cultural, demographic, and economic interactions have not been totally forgotten. The legacy of the past not only provide a firm basis for today's modern relations, but also determine their fundamental and innate parameters.

Just like in 1918, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Turkey was one of the first countries to recognize the independence of Ukraine. From the very start, Turkish diplomacy viewed Ukraine as the keystone of the post-Soviet order in the Black Sea region. Turkey's enthusiasm to establish cordial relations met with an equally sympathetic response on the part of Ukraine. Indeed, especially during the early years of its independence, many in Ukraine, including the leadership, felt the need to consolidate their independence in the face of those forces who seriously desired to reestablish the old order in the region. In this, the Ukrainian leadership found itself in a fundamental agreement with Turkey which was keen on the same issue. Also, in economic terms, Turkey seemed to be a very plausible outlet for the Ukrainian economy which sought new channels other than the old imperial ones.

Thus, Turko-Ukrainian relations have developed quite impressively. High level diplomatic and political visits have become ordinary affairs since early 1992. The successive Ukrainian presidents Leonid Kravchuk and Leonid Kuchma and the Turkish presidents Özal and Demirel met with each other on a number of occasions and visits. The contacts and actual cooperation of several high ranking diplomatic, political, military, business, technical, and academic figures are an ongoing and promisingly expanding process. At first, the actual Turko-Ukrainian diplomatic relations began to work within the framework of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Act in 1992. The following developments allowed both countries to broaden the areas of relations and cooperation.

From the very outset of its independence, the radical demarches of certain Russian politicians and even the Duma implying or discreetly expressing wishes of Russian separatism on the territory of the Ukrainian state caused a great deal of apprehension in Ukraine. The focal point of such extremist demands and controversy was the Crimea. Indeed, the Crimea stood out even among the other regions of Ukraine where clear Russian majorities existed. The peninsula currently has an ethnic Russian majority (well over 60 %), and the nominal Ukrainian population (close to a quarter of the population) is also very thoroughly Russified, thus resulting in a thorough demographic and administrative domination of the so-called "Russian-speaking" (Russkoyazychnyi) elements in the autonomous republic. Since the Russian annexation of the peninsula in 1783, with its subtropical climate and picturesque appearance so distinct from the characteristic landscape of Russia, as well as with its unique geographical location which offered it an excellent strategic, military, and economic importance, the Crimea has traditionally been held by Russia with special care. It has been no coincidence that among all the territories conquered

from alien peoples, the Crimea was subjected to one of the most thorough and merciless campaigns of Russification throughout the last two centuries, culminating in the deportation of its indigenous people en masse and the annihilation of about half of its population in the horrible process. Another point of great importance about the Crimea is that, since the very annexation of the country to Russia, for more than two centuries, the peninsula, or rather Sevastopol, one of the most fortified harbors and militarily important centers in the world, has served as the main base of the Russian Black Sea Fleet. This has not only allowed Russia to keep a considerable military and technical presence on the Ukrainian soil and thus offering an additional edge to Russia, but also provided the Russian groups which seek the restoration of the empire with one more pretext to claim the peninsula.

Moreover, the peninsula which, within the Soviet framework, used to be a part of the Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic, following the mass deportation of its native people, was transferred to the jurisdiction of the Ukrainian SSR in 1954. At the time, this transfer had but a most academic meaning, since any spot on the territory of the Soviet Union was, for all practical purposes and intentions, ruled and controlled by Moscow anyway. Like many other lands in the former territory of the Soviet Union which were subjected to arbitrary demarcation practices, these once purely theoretical jurisdictions determined by Moscow made critical and in some cases fatal differences, when they happen to remain in the territory of the "wrong" (depending on which side of the fence you sit, of course) state after the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991. In the Crimean case, more than 35 years after it had actually taken place, the so-called "Khrushchov's gift" embittered many Russian chauvinists who considered the whole affair an unjust Ukrainian usurpation of an otherwise purely Russian territory. Fostering such claims, the Crimean peninsula has the status of an autonomous republic within the framework of Ukraine, and thus its attachment to Kiev seemed to be more tenuous in comparison with the ordinary oblasty of the Ukrainian state. Especially between the years 1994-1997, the campaigns for a total or partial transfer of Crimea to the Russian authority on the part of a group of Russian politicians within the Crimea and in Russia culminated to bring about a major crisis. The various forms of provocative statements which came not only from the recidivist extremist or eccentric Russian politicians, but also from several more respectable figures, as well as a number of resolutions by the Russian State Duma which seriously questioned the Ukrainian jurisdiction over the Crimea, Sevastopol, and the Black Sea Fleet, only exacerbated the situation. That the Yeltsin leadership has usually kept itself apart from such claims and repudiated them, was not totally effective in alleviating the popular agitation or removing the discomfort of Kiev. Although, fortunately, the developments were kept under control and did not take a violent turn, the Crimean issue remained a factor which very seriously poisoned the Russo-Ukrainian relations until the final settlement of the Black Sea Fleet question and the final signing of the Russo-Ukrainian treaty which unambiguously stated the Russian recognition of Ukraine's territorial integrity in May 1997. (Still, the issue can hardly be considered to have lost its inflammable potential in the future at the hands of adventurous political forces).

At the height of the Crimean crisis, Ukraine received unequivocal support from the United States, NATO, and other international organizations against the threats to its territorial integrity. There is no doubt that such an immediate support proved to be a crucial factor in the peacefully calming of the crisis. At the same time, Turkey's approach was also significant and clearly supportive of Ukraine. Turkish diplomacy, by forcing the limits of its time-honored cautious, if not utterly vague, style in similar issues, expressed its unequivocal support for the inviolability of the territorial

integrity of Ukraine, and in this case, that the Crimean peninsula belonged and should continue to belong to Ukraine and not to any other state (i.e., Russia). Though quite possibly the staunch stand of the West might have encouraged Ankara to act more forcefully in this matter, assuredly, the matter of the preservation of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, particularly when the area in question was the Crimea, struck a most sensitive cord on the part of Turkey. Nobody in Turkey who had a basic historical knowledge could forget that the primary target of the Black Sea Fleet as well as other conventional and nuclear weapons based in the Crimea had always been Turkey, during both the Tsarist and Soviet times. After all, the very Black Sea Fleet had been founded by Catherine II to force and capture the Straits. In other words, it was most unlikely that Turkey would like to see the sword of Damocles of the Crimean peninsula in hostile hands.

No less a critical factor than the strategic one for Turkey has been inherent in the Crimean issue, that is the question of the Crimean Tatars, the native people of that land. Throughout the consecutive crisis and tension in the Crimea since 1991, stemming from the efforts of Russian separatism, the Crimean Tatars proved to be the sole organized and substantial local force in the Crimea who have been determined to defend that the peninsula belonged to the Republic of Ukraine. As important as their position and stand might be during this crisis, the overall critical significance of the Crimean Tatars for Ukraine, for the region and for Turkey goes much beyond any conjunctural developments.

The Crimean Tatars, a Turkic and Muslim people, are by far the closest group in terms of ethnic make-up, language (or dialect), customs, religion, etc. to the Turks of Turkey. Certain disparate features having been granted, determining the "Turkishness" (Ottomanness) or "Crimean Tatariness" of so many common linguistic or folkloric properties seems to be virtually absurd. That is to say, a certain word which is identical in both "languages," for example, is a "Turkish" or a "Crimean Tatar" one only due to who is then uttering it. Although the Crimean Tatars indeed had their own distinct and rich historical past and national formation, long parts of this history is inextricably entangled with that of Turkey. Turkey's connections and affinities with the Crimea by no means came to an abrupt end after the Russian annexation of the peninsula. As a result of the anti-Tatar policies of the Russian Empire, in the course of two centuries, hundreds of thousands of Crimean Tatars were forced to emigrate to Turkey. Although Turkish official statistical data do not include items about ethnic backgrounds, it has usually been estimated that no less than some five million descendants of Crimean Tatar emigrants currently live in Turkey. This diaspora has been perfectly integrated into Turkish society and has produced countless prominent figures in virtually every sphere of life. Equally, it is very difficult to find a Crimean Tatar family in the Crimea (or in exile on the territory of the former USSR) which has absolutely no relatives in Turkey.

The Crimean Tatar diaspora is found in virtually almost every part of Turkey, from Edirne in the west to Diyarbakir, or even further, in the east. Certainly, there are varying degrees of allegiances to, or in some cases even awareness of, their background among individuals of Crimean Tatar descent in Turkey. In any case, sufficiently substantial proportions of them do harbor feelings of affiliation with their roots, a fact which has been manifested in the existence of several deep-seated and very active diaspora organizations.

The emergence of the first Crimean Tatar émigré organizations in Turkey goes back to 1909. Since then numerous such Crimean Tatar societies have been founded in Turkey. At the present

time there are Crimean Tatar social and cultural associations in Ankara, Istanbul, Izmir, Konya, Izmit, Adapazari, Bursa, Balikesir, Eskisehir, Bolu, Kirikkale, Mersin, Nigde, Aksaray, Çanakkale, Yalova, Bandirma, Sungurlu, Seydisehir, Gebze, Polatli, Tekirdag, Aksehir, Amasya, and Çatalca. Most of these associations have been united under an umbrella organization, namely the General Center of the Crimean Turkish Associations, and are acting in accord. These associations actively promote the preservation of the Crimean Tatar cultural and artistic values, and foster the affiliations of new generations to their past and the Crimea. Working parallel to these associations are a number of Crimean Tatar émigré journals and newsletters, the best known of them being *Emel*, which remains the longest living Crimean Tatar periodical of all times. The Emel Crimean Foundation and the Crimean Foundation publish a variety of books and pamphlets, sponsor researches about the culture and history of the Crimean Tatars, offer scholarships, try to unite scattered members of the Crimean Tatar families all over the world, and provide needy members of the community with social aid. The Emel Crimean Foundation also hosts a very important library and archives donated by communal dignitaries or their inheritors. Cultural and artistic groups from the Crimea are also invited frequently to Turkey and hosted by the diaspora organizations.

Currently a mass return to the Crimea is not a burning issue even among the most nationally conscious groups among the Crimean Tatar diaspora. It seems unlikely that such an issue will become a pressing concern in the foreseeable future, if not for anything else due to the lack of favorable economic conditions. This, however, by no means attests to a lack of interest toward the Crimea. Actually, all the Crimean Tatar diaspora organizations in Turkey take pains to monitor developments there. They have active links with the Crimea and they help the reestablishment of ties between relatives in both countries. Since 1989, through various campaigns, the Crimean Tatar diaspora organizations have been collecting donations for providing humanitarian and cultural help to their compatriots back in the Crimea. Such campaigns attracted large-scale public attention and surely the participation in them went well beyond the Crimean Tatar immigrant communities to include all elements living in Turkey. This aid has been crucial, since in the course of the last decade the Crimean Tatar returnees from exile have faced enormous material difficulties.

Equally important as the emergency humanitarian aid is cultural assistance. The Crimean Tatar national culture has suffered tremendous losses due to Soviet rule and especially the mass deportation. Many a nascent Crimean Tatar cultural organization which began to flourish on the Crimean soil desperately needed support. On the other hand, several elements of the Crimean Tatar culture which had been lost to the exiled population survived among the diaspora. The General Center of the Crimean Turkish Associations has been providing regular support for at least six national schools, a university, and several libraries in the Crimea. Moreover, it opened a printing house and a children's hospital with 30 beds and a modern policlinic near Akmescit (Simferopol). The General Center also actively works to bring the Crimean Tatar repatriates to the attention of the Turkish government. Largely due to the efforts of the General Center, some 500 Crimean Tatar students from the Crimea who lacked financial means have been offered university education in Turkey by the Turkish government. It was also the General Center which proposed to Süleyman Demirel, the President of Turkey, on May 18th 1994 (on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the deportation of the Crimean Tatars) a plan to build 1000 homes for the Crimean Tatars in the Crimea at the expense of the Turkish government. Having welcomed the

proposal, during his visit to Kiev few days later, Demirel brought the issue before Leonid Kravchuk and the plan was included in the joint communiqué of the Turkish and Ukrainian presidents. Consequently, the major Turkish institution to deal with such matters, the Turkish International Cooperation Agency (TICA) has been entrusted with the project. The preliminary examinations were done, and the enterprise was widely publicized. Nevertheless, in the course of more than five years after its official declaration, much still needs to be done for the full implementation of the project. Although it has been reiterated on several occasions during the meetings both with Ukrainian officials and Crimean Tatar leaders (both from the Crimea and the diaspora) and several important steps have been taken, it is obvious that the project has fallen victim to the over engagement of Turkish politicians with an internal agenda constantly crammed with crisis. Still, so far (as of April 2000) a total of 260 Crimean Tatar repatriate families have been provided with 240 houses, 189 of which were bought and 51 of which were built as a part of the project.

The presence of larger or smaller Crimean Tatar communities in almost every part of Turkey enables the Crimean Tatar diaspora to find a welcome audience with most politicians in Turkey. Moreover, the perfect integration of the diaspora with the overall Turkish community and the presence of countless prominent figures in their numbers in virtually every sphere of life provides a critical edge. Not only have most Turkish cabinets included one or more ministers of Crimean descent (even former Prime Minister Mesut Yilmaz was of half Crimean Tatar ancestry), but so many people among the highest officials, businessmen, scholars, artists, and others belong to this category as well.

The Crimean Tatar diaspora organizations in Turkey have close ties with parallel Crimean Tatar organizations and communities in the United States, Germany, the Netherlands, Romania, Bulgaria, and Australia. The General Center of the Crimean Turkish Associations has coordinated various campaigns of aid undertaken by these organizations abroad. It should be noted that the Crimean Tatar diaspora's position towards Ukraine has been remarkably sympathetic. The collective memory preserved virtually nothing hostile against Ukraine or Ukrainians and even a perfunctory research in Crimean Tatar émigré publications testifies to a very warm approach towards the Ukrainians, who have experienced similar sufferings in their history. So far, the above mentioned Crimean Tatar organizations have been champions of friendship and closer ties between Turkey and Ukraine. It is notable that the General Center of the Crimean Turkish Associations readily offered a place for the newly founded Turkish-Ukrainian Friendship Society within its own building. By the way, the pro-Ukrainian stand of the Crimean Tatar diaspora is also in line with the general trend in the Turkish public. In spite of the fact that the Turkish public at large is not very knowledgeable about Ukraine and Ukrainians, almost all individuals and groups who have broader intellectual and international interests foster very warm feelings towards Ukraine. Remarkably, even among the most extreme nationalistic and chauvinistic groups in Turkey who think very aggressively in other issues, there is virtually no talk or intention of irredentist territorial claims or any form of animosity directed against Ukraine. In other words, the large sympathy and concern towards the Crimean Tatars, have never manifested themselves as antagonism against Ukrainians. On the contrary, apart from the official position of Turkish diplomacy, there is indeed a very positive and sympathetic popular approach toward Ukrainians.

Apart from the existence of sizeable Crimean Tatar diaspora communities in Turkey, certain intellectual and political figures from among the Crimean Tatars in the Crimea have played

extraordinary roles in the modern history of Turkey or the Turkic World in general. Ismail Bey Gaspirali, one of the greatest pathfinders and mentors of the idea of modern Turkic national identity, unity, and modernism, stands out among many such figures and his name is still held in deep respect in Turkey. The plight of the Crimean Tatars, culminating in their mass deportation from the Crimea and their decades long assiduous struggle against the Soviet regime (and against the local Crimean authorities in the post-Soviet period) has also attracted a great deal of sympathetic attention in the Turkish public. Currently the charismatic leader of the Crimean Tatars and the current Chairman of the Crimean Tatar National Assembly (Meclis) and the deputy of the Supreme Rada of Ukraine, Mustafa Abdulcemil Kirimoglu (Cemilev) enjoys an enormous popularity and respect as a national hero in Turkey. It is notable that numerous Turkish streets, squares, university auditoria, and parks (including a national nature park in Kirikkale) are named after him, and many Turkish dignitaries of the highest rank, including Presidents Özal and Demirel, were keen on displaying a very high level of respect for Kirimoglu every time they met. It is also noteworthy that Kirimoglu, who spent long decades of imprisonment and persecution under the Soviet regime, is one of the very few distinguished dissidents of the Soviet times who continues to play an active and key role in current politics. This, among other things, clearly distinguishes him among other leaders of post-Soviet times. His indisputable democratic credentials, his almost unanimously sanctioned leadership among his people, and his moderating and sagacious role in the Crimean politics ascribe him a much greater weight than his communal title.

In brief, the Crimean Tatars constitute one of the most important issues determining the essence of the Turko-Ukrainian relations. It is not surprising that from the very outset the Crimean Tatar issue constituted a constant and delicate item on the agenda of both countries. The great deal of attention which the plight of the Crimean Tatars has attracted on the part of both the Turkish public and government was noted by the Ukrainian leadership, which has taken pains to demonstrate its support for the return of the Crimean Tatars to their homeland and their reintegration into local life. Equally, the fact that Ukraine remained the only ex-Soviet state providing material help for the Crimean Tatar families returning to their homelands was deeply appreciated by the Turkish Republic. At every meeting with their Ukrainian colleagues, Turkish statesmen have been keen to stress their gratitude on this matter. Having stated that the issue is very important for Turkey, however, the Turkish officials always made it clear that they consider it to be an internal matter of Ukraine and Turkey has no intentions whatsoever of violating the sovereignty of Ukraine, and is merely displaying its humanitarian concern for the well-being of its kinsmen. In the Turko-Ukrainian diplomatic meetings, the Crimean Tatars were jointly described as "the bridge of friendship" between Ukraine and Turkey on more than one occasion. In consideration of Turko-Ukrainian relations during the last decade, one can very realistically think that this may well be the case, beyond any merely diplomatically endorsed phrases.