CHANGING THE WORLD: From Atatürk’s ‘Six Arrow’s to the ‘Eight Millennium Development Goals’


Keynote by: STEPHEN KINZER
Author of “Crescent & Star: Turkey Between Two Worlds”, and professor of International Relations at Boston University

“For everything in this world for civilization, for life, for success, the truest guide is knowledge and science.” Mustafa Kemal ATATÜRK

Thank you so much, it is really a privilege to be here. And I thank Bircan hanım and the organizers here at Stevens. It is always a pleasure to be in the presence of this great figure (gesturing at wall painting of Ataturk). I love the way he is looking up, and he looks like he is looking into the future all the time. It is great to have the Turkish Ambassador, who is the best we can do in an era of Ataturk right here in New York.

Ataturk really was a remarkable figure. But I think what we are trying to see in this conference now is a little bit new and different about Ataturk. I think this is the real insight that Bircan hanım had in organizing this conference, and that is to try to tie this
great figure, of almost a hundred years ago, to the Millennium Development Goals of the present, which are a quintessential 21st century project. And there really are some very interesting comparisons to be drawn. I want to talk a little bit about those.

First of all, let’s remind ourselves why it is that Ataturk is so widely admired. Ataturk was a dreamer, and not only did he have dreams but he had huge dreams. I would go even beyond that, beyond saying huge, they were really impossible. Ataturk was trying to do things that had he not accomplished them, we would have thought that they were wild fantasies. The Millennium Development Goals too are highly ambitious - they are dreams. The fact that Ataturk was able to realize projects that would have been universally accepted as impossible is really an inspiration for today as we look at the prospect of using the Millennium Development Goals to transform the world. Truly, achievement of the Millennium Development Goals in the world mean on a global scale what Ataturk’s project meant for Turkey – a complete transformation and a quantum leap forward in time and history.

"The harshest settlement that was imposed on any country that was on the losing side in WW1..."

Ataturk had three great stages I would say in his carrier of breaking with reality and in breaking with what would have thought to be possible. First of course was his emergence during WWI. Ataturk, then Mustafa Kemal Pasa was the only Turkish general to win a major victory in WWI. He did this by defeating the Royal Navy of England, which had been sent to Turkey on a military mission designed by none other than Winston Churchill. So Ataturk’s reaction essentially was: "Are you going to send the whole Royal Navy and Winston Churchill’s plans against me? No problem. I can handle that." And he did. That alone would have given him a great place in Turkish history. Then, he went on to his next phase which was to rebel against essentially the entire world, which after the WW1 had at the conference of Sevres, decided that Anatolia would be cut up and handed out to victorious powers.
This was the harshest settlement that was imposed on any country that was on the losing side in WW1, it was even more punishing than the settlement that was imposed on Germany.

Ataturk essentially decided, “I have to face not only the Greeks who are in Anatolia, but I have to fight against the French and the Italians and the British. Essentially, I am going to take this broken and devastated nation and we are going to defeat the coalition that has just won the WW1.” He managed to do this.

Actually, during his fight in the Independence War (1918-1922), there was one American he came to meet, a marine officer who had been sent to Turkey on a mission to figure out what was going on in Anatolia. He listened to Ataturk and explained what he wanted to do. He did say to Ataturk: “What you are proposing to do is impossible.” And Ataturk’s answer was: “You are right, it is impossible but we are going to achieve it.” Some people might say the same things about the Millennium Development Goals.

Some people might say same things today about the Millennium Development Goals. Ataturk is really an example of how force of mind and desire and drive can accomplish great things even though the real conditions of the world suggest that they are unachievable. Finally of course not satisfied with these great achievements, Ataturk went on to become the leader of the new nation of Turkey. He faced a devastated country, it was really, and you have heard some of the statistics from Ambassador Çelik, a backwards country. There were very few hospitals, schools, there were no roads, and almost every citizen of the country was an illiterate peasant.

Ataturk focused on trying to transform a nation. This was a challenge no less for Turkey than the Millennium Development Goals are for the world. It is hard to imagine when driving around Turkey today, what Turkey looked like less than a hundred years ago. It was truly a primitive and backward country. And there are very few countries in
the world that have seen such a huge change from what they looked like 80 or 90 years ago to what they look like now.

"Ataturk was the most successful revolutionary of the 20th century."

Now, Ataturk came to power with the general goal that I think every world leader has, "we want peace, we want prosperity, and we want stability." But it is never a good idea when, I think, individuals looking at political leaders to accept those platitudes on face value. Just saying you are for peace, prosperity, and that you want development that is not enough. Societies always have to develop frameworks, specifics, ways which we can achieve these goals. Ataturk developed a set of his own principles and goals. I think that as we look back, we can honestly say that Ataturk was the most successful revolutionary of the 20th century.

Think of the time he emerged in the early decades of the century - it was a period of great ideological confusion, no one really understood how societies could best be organized. Democracy had been tried but it was failing in most of Europe, not just in Weimar (Republic), Germany but many countries in Europe. Democracy had proven unable to tame turbulent societies. New ideologies were emerging during this period. This was the period when European Fascism emerged which embodied the hopes of many people; it was also the period of when Bolshevism emerged, then we saw the Bolshevik Revolution. That was also an ideology that gave tremendous hope to huge numbers of people. It was the period when Nazism was developing in Germany. In this same period, Kemalism, the ideology of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, emerged. Now, those other ideologies have been consigned to the garbage can of history after having caused immeasurable amounts of suffering during the 20th century.
"Do not forget, there had never been a Republic in a Muslim country, ever. We have countries in the Middle East that don’t have a constitution even today."

But the Kemalism legacy is modern Turkey. Why did the ideology of Ataturk succeed while those other ideologies failed? This is an intriguing question about which books could be written, and, in fact, books have been written. Let me try to give a couple of perspectives on why these other ideologies collapsed in the wake of total suffering Kemalism produced such a successful outcome. Ataturk developed what many of you know, the “Six Arrows.” These were, I think, his version of what we call Millennium Development Goals. These were his goals for Turkey. I like the way that he called them arrows because they are always directional points to push Turkey toward the future. So, let me just remind you, even though I know all of you have the six arrows very clearly in your mind, what they were.

First one was Cumhuriyetçilik, which is Republicanism. So, what that meant was that there will be rule of law. Do not forget that we were coming out of the period of Absolutism during the Ottoman Empire, there were not be Absolutism anymore. There is going to be a constitutional and are going to be laws that everyone will know what is legal and what is not legal, and the law will apply equally to everyone. It also means that law is supposed to respond to the actual needs of living human beings and it is not based on the divine revelation, which is a principle that was very widely accepted in that part of the world during that era. So Republicanism was something quite radical. Do not forget, there had never been a Republic in a Muslim country, ever. We have countries in the Middle East that don’t have a constitution even today.

The second of the six arrows was Halkçilik, Populism, I guess if we translate it. I think Ataturk meant by this that government must rule on behalf of ordinary people. It can’t rule on behalf of the elite. It also had a strong component of women’s rights - that was a very important part of Ataturk’s ideology. And it was an effort to inculcate pride in citizenship. Each individual had a stake in the society, you didn’t just sit and wait to be told what to do, and you were participating in society.
"An end to religious domination of the state."
"We are going to liberate the minds of Turks from narrow dogma."

The third one, still very powerful one, Laiklik, we call it Secularism. It’s not really an accurate translation. But what it meant was an end to religious domination of the state. The state should exist independent of religion and not be subject to the dictate of religion. Religion was retained as a guide for people’s private behavior and for public morality, but it was no longer used as a guide for government. This Laiklik also was an expression of freedom of thought. We are going to liberate the minds of Turks from narrow dogma, and we are going to open their minds up to the modern world. This of course led to the director of religious affairs, Diyanet (Religious Affairs) being established. A system, by which the religious convictions of Turks were used to strengthen their society and not simply strengthening religious power.

Devrimcilik - that might be my favorite one, which is Revolutionism. You can still find people in Turkey today that their first name is Devrim meaning revolution. Great first name. I don’t think it would work too well in America. What I think Ataturk meant by this is: “we are not here to make tiny, small incremental changes, we are here to sweep away all the institutions that have imprisoned us for generations, we are going to be radical, we are going to dare to do great things, we are going to imagine big and we are going to accomplish big.” He had a grand vision for Turkey, and that vision had quite an effect beyond Turkey as well.

Milliyetcilik was the fifth. I guess we would translate that as Nationalism, it may be the best way you can translate it. What it meant was: “we are going to build a coherent modern state on the ruins of this religious based empire.” That also was a very radical view for that era. And it led to, as I mentioned earlier, the first republic in a Muslim country, and it led to this idea of citizenship: “Ne mutlu Turkum diyene.” Everybody can think of themselves as a part of this nation – an integral contributor of Turkey.

Finally, Devletcilik, Statism. During that period there was no capital, there was no private capital in Turkey. There weren’t institutions, there weren’t corporations, or banks to have a lot of money to invest in national development programs. That meant a state had to do it. So the state was going to take on responsibility for not only defining the vision of what Turkey should be but also providing manpower, womanpower, and finances that would make this real. Those were Ataturk’s version, which now I think, would be called the Millennium Development Goals for the world. These are the principles that created the success of modern Turkey. Ataturk showed that it is not enough to have a vague dream, you need to systematize your goals. That is the one thing that I think ties it very closely to the MDGs.

Ataturk was truly a child of the enlightenment. He was a believer in science, in reason, in rationality. I love this quote, "For everything in this world for civilization, for life, for success, the truest guide is knowledge and science." In other words, let’s anchor ourselves into a real world, let’s accept what scientists are discovering, what we are learning from learned people, and let us not be chained to old ideas when science is teaching us new ones. Perhaps one of Ataturk’s most interesting concepts too was his realization that times not only were changing during his lifetime, but the times would continue to change after his lifetime.
“There is a tremendous link between these two lists, one list of six developed in 1920’s, one list of eight developed much more recently.”

Ataturk did something that powerful authoritarian rulers rarely in history have done, and that is, after being in power for number of years, although he maintained himself as the President of Turkey, he essentially withdrew from power and allowed the next generation to begin to emerge. He did not insist that everything that he decided was important for 1920’s - 30’s be etched in stone. This is the other core that I think is relevant for our discussion. Before his death, Ataturk said, “I am leaving no sermon, no dogma, nor am I leaving as my legacy any commandment that is frozen in time or cast in stone.”

Now, as the world changed after Ataturk’s death, the United Nations emerged as a powerful institution and it adopted its own framework for achieving these goals in the world that Ataturk wanted to achieve in Turkey. And that became the Millennium Development Goals. Briefly they are, these modest goals, eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, universal primary education, gender equality, reducing child mortality, improving maternal health, fighting HIV/AIDS, environmental sustainability and the last one we talked about global partnership for development. So, those to me are the Six Arrows of the modern age. There is a tremendous link between these two lists, one list of six developed in 1920’s, and one list of eight developed much more recently.

Here are some of the links I see, one of the first is Idealism. You have to be able to dream. You have to want what is really good for people. However, you must institutionalize your idealism. So this partnership between idealism and institutions I think that is something Ataturk taught us. Another characteristic of Ataturk was impatience; he always wanted things to be done faster than it could possibly be done. In fact, I think this might be one of the factors that contributed to his early death. He was operating in such a speed; he was always frustrated, he was never happy with the amount of progress that he could reach. One of my favorite Ataturk stories is that the time when Ataturk decided that he should change Turkish language by stopping the usage of Arabic script, which Ataturk generously described as indecipherable symbols, and we should move to the Roman alphabet. So he convened the meeting of the
philologists and linguists in Turkey, there could not have been very many of them, and he told them his project. Essentially, I want you to transliterate the entire language, I want you to purge out many words, I want you to change the sound, and he listed the way he wanted it. He asked them to take 24 hours amongst themselves and discuss how long will this be taking, how much time will you need to invent a new language. They came back at the next day and told him if they had no other responsibilities like teaching, writing, speaking at conferences, they would be able to do this in six years. And Ataturk’s answer was “fine, you have six months.” He later wrote that he had already decided before the meeting that however many years they ask for that is how many months he was going to give them to do it. So impatience is a great quality that I think Ataturk possessed to excess.

Another quality that links Ataturk to the Millennium Development Goals is outrage at injustices. Everywhere Ataturk looked, he saw things that angered him, just the way that all of us feel when we look around the world and see the excruciating circumstances that too many people live in. Also, you have to believe in your heart that radical change is possible, you can’t give up. If Ataturk had been more realistic and modest, Turkey wouldn’t be what it is today. It is the audacity to dream huge dreams. That was Ataturk’s great quality and that certainly is reflected in the Millennium Development projects.

Also, another link between them is the development of Turkey towards a modern republic in the Kemalist era is tied to the Millennium Development Goals in the sense that they are not meant to dictate to other countries, they are merely meant to set an example and pull other countries by the strength of this example. Nobody is going around the world and forcing nations to do anything with the Millennium Goals. The United Nations has provided this framework; it is up to governments to decide whether they want to do it.

Ataturk also made a remarkable decision after he became the president of Turkey and that was to turn inward. Turkey did not have an active foreign policy during that period. I think there are two reasons for that. First of all, the country was in desperate need of development and Ataturk wanted to use all of his energy to develop his own country. Second, I think he was very conscious of the effect of fears that he would recreate something like the Ottoman Empire. And he wanted to make clear that this was not Turkey’s ambition and that Turkey was very happy inside its own borders. Nonetheless, the Turkish example did not just start influencing other people in last ten years. While Ataturk was alive, he attracted the attentions of statesmen from other countries that drew on his example. The King of Afghanistan was a great admirer of Ataturk and it was one of the few countries that Turkey sent an aid to during the Kemalist era.

You can see in Jinna (meaning Muhammad al-Jinnah) in Pakistan, another leader who greatly admired Ataturk and made a great effort to make Pakistan something like what Turkey had become. Had he not been assassinated relevantly at an early age and had Pakistan not turned on another direction, Pakistan would have been much more like Turkey than it is today.

And of course another great example is Iran. Reza Shah, who was the great reformer in Iran, did everything after Ataturk did it, you can almost trace every major reform in Iran happening one year after Ataturk did it in Turkey. In fact, although Ataturk never left Turkey after becoming president, Reza Shah made one trip out of Iran and he wanted to go to the see how countries that were more advanced were dealing with
social problems. He had this plan to go to Turkey and he was going to go on to Europe to examine how other countries were developing. After he got to Turkey, he decided, Iran is so far behind Turkey, I don’t want to go to Europe. Let me just concentrate on trying to bring Iran up to the level of Turkey. And the fact that Iran is in many ways much more modern country than the countries around is largely due to the reforms that were implemented in Iran as a result of what happened next door in Turkey. So for all these reasons, I believe that the insight Bircan hanım had of trying to tie Atatürk’s ideology with the ideology behind the Millennium Development Goals is brilliant. There really is that intimate connection; in fact, it is hard to imagine a leader of the 20th century, who produced a list of goals for his country, to be closer to what the United Nations produced almost a century later. I said earlier that Atatürk went in to a kind of semi-retirement in his last few years of his life, but of course the United Nations did not exist then. If it did exist, if it had existed, I think, I have a perfect job that Atatürk could have taken after he decided that he didn’t want to be the active president of Turkey anymore. He would have come to the United Nations and become the director of the Millennium Development Goals project, and he would have been our main speaker today.

Thank you very much.
PART - 1: In this episode (in order to appearance):
http://www.lightmillennium.org/lmtv/mdgs-ataturk-part1.mp4
Introduction: Edward Foster, Co-Chair, Professor of American Studies, College of Arts and Letters at Stevens Institute of Technology;
Welcoming Remarks: Dr. Nariman Farvardin, President, Stevens Institute of Technology and Dr. Lisa A. Dolling, Dean College of Arts and Letters at Stevens Institute of Technology;
Concept: Bircan Unver, Concept, President of The Light Millennium and Permanent Representative to the United Nations;
Chair/High Level Panel: Susan Bilello, Senior Communications and Liaison Officer for UNESCO at the United Nations; and
Opening Remarks: H.E. Halit Çevik, Ambassador, Permanent Representative of Turkey to the United Nations.
PART - 2: High Level Inagurual Panel continues:
http://www.lightmillennium.org/lmtv/mdgs-ataturk-part2.mp4
Panelists: Akan Rakhmetullin, Deputy Permanent Representative of Kazakhstan to the United Nations; and
H.E. Pajo Avirovikj, Ambassador, Permanent Representative of Macedonia to the United Nations.
Introduction: Suzanne Bilello, Senior Communications and Liaison Officer for UNESCO at the United Nations.
PART - 3: CHANGING THE WORLD: From Ataturk's 'Six Arrows' to the 'Eight Millennium Development Goals'

Keynote Speaker: Stephen Kinzer, Author of "Crescent and Star: Turkey Between Two Worlds", and Professor of International Relations at Boston University.
Introduction: Bircan Unver, President of The Light Millennium and Permanent Representative to the United Nations.
Comment: Susan Bilello, Senior Communications and Liaison Officer for UNESCO at the United Nations.
PART - 4: ACHIEVING THE MDGs 8: BEST PRACTICES OF EL SALVADOR ON PARTNERSHIP FOR DEVELOPMENT
http://www.lightmillennium.org/lmtv/mdgs-ataturk-amb-garcia-part4.mp4
Presented by H.E. Mr. Carlos E. Garcia Gonzales, Ambassador Permanent Representative of El Salvador to the United Nations Vice President of the Commission for Social Development - April 19, 2013
Introduction: Susan Bilello, Senior Communications and Liaison Officer for UNESCO at the United Nations.
Comment: Bircan Unver, President of The Light Millennium and Permanent Representative to the United Nations.