

SUNDAY'S ZAMAN

BERİL DEDEOĞLU
b.dedeoglu@todayszaman.com



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A new look at Greece

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This week, the Department of Turkish and Modern Asian Studies of the University of Athens organized a three-day international conference.

Academics from all over the world discussed the outcomes of the Arab Spring, the future of the Muslim world and stability in the Mediterranean basin. Lectures and discussions were in Greek, English and French and they were all quite instructive.

Most participants agreed that people no longer want to fight with each other and that they essentially want peace and prosperity. They suggested that because of this popular will, states will have to stop developing antagonistic policies one day. I hope they are right and that those, like myself, who believe that wars will continue as states will always want more power are wrong.

The best part of academic conferences is the opportunity to meet new and interesting people during coffee breaks. At these little chats, one has the chance to exchange ideas, and that gives one a broad picture of what people really think.

The French participants, for example, gave the impression that their country is going through a serious period of self-criticism; those who came from Egypt reflected perfectly the divisions one can observe in various Arab countries about the region's political future. Almost all participants agreed that it is time for an independent Palestinian state. Another important observation is that the European participants were particularly interested in what is going on in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt, while Turkish participants were mostly preoccupied with Syria, Iraq or Iran.

Most Greeks we met during this conference accused "Europeans" of being behind the bad relations between Greece and Turkey. They all insisted that the two countries need to get closer, now more than ever.

This doesn't mean there aren't any Greeks who have doubts about Turkey, just as there are still

suspicious Turks about Greece here at home. However, it was encouraging to see that young people are mostly in favor of friendly relations between the two nations. They don't hesitate to use menus in Turkish in the restaurants; those Greeks who have their origins in Turkey can speak Turkish publicly without fear. The overall perception about Turkey is quite positive, too. Most Greeks even believe that Turks are now richer than them, which is in fact not correct, as the gross national product (GNP) per capita in Greece is still higher than in Turkey. Despite the ongoing economic crisis, Greeks try to enjoy life and are benefitting from the Christmas atmosphere. They also seem fed up with endless strikes and demonstrations.

The former members of İstanbul's Greek community who had to leave their town and migrate to Greece in the last decades are still very attached to their city of origin. Some of them teach Turkish in the very faculty which organized this conference. It appears that, just as Turkish youth are more and more interested in learning Greek, Bulgarian or Persian, there are many young Greeks who want to learn the Turkish language. Some of them even want to come to Turkey to study. They also emphasize that Turkish television series, "Muhteşem Yüzyıl" (The Magnificent Century) among them, have been very helpful in prompting people to learn more about Turkey.

Maybe it is the right time to start building permanent good relations between the two countries as the general ambiance seems quite adequate for it. People-to-people relations through NGOs or universities should be encouraged. There are many common problems on which the two countries can work together.

When the two countries don't cooperate on common problems, third powers benefit from this and they do everything possible to keep Turkey and Greece distant from each other. If there are common interests, there is no need to share benefits with third powers.