

# Turkey – people, culture, language

## A guide for businesses



### The country

#### Turkey Today:

A modernizing country, created from the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I, and inspired by its first leader of the Turkish Republic, Kemal Ataturk (Father of the Turks) in 1923, Turkey has both an Asian and a European personality, symbolized by the Bosphorus, the dividing line between Europe and Asia.

**Environment:** Most of Turkey is in Asia. It is surrounded by sea on three sides, the Black Sea, the Aegean Sea and the Mediterranean.

It also borders seven countries and its climate varies from Mediterranean in the north (Istanbul) to continental on the central Anatolian plateau (Ankara) to cold in the east. In the hottest part of Turkey, the southeast, the temperature can reach 45°C in summer. Air pollution in winter is an issue in big cities.

#### Growth sectors:

Agriculture (exports cotton, tobacco, fruit and vegetables), tourism, textiles and clothing. Turkey also exports labour, especially to Germany.

### The people, culture & heritage

- With a population of 60 million, Turkey is the third largest country in Europe. It is a predominantly Muslim, western-orientated government, with a secular democracy based in its capital, Ankara. As well as the majority ethnic Turkish population there is a large Kurdish population, mainly in the east. Turkey also supports the Turkish Republic of Cyprus (since 1974) and is the largest contributor of immigrant labour to the EU, mainly to Germany.
- Turkey was created from the ruins of the Ottoman Empire after WW1 and the character of its founder Kemal Ataturk (President 1923 –1938) is revered for modernising the country. He introduced Roman script, the international time and calendar, and a modern secular parliamentary government. He abolished polygamy, gave women the right to vote, introduced European-style family names and replaced the traditional *fez* with the European hat. Every office has his photo on the wall and at 9.05am on November 10th (the time of his death), a five-minute silence is observed across the country.

### Business culture and etiquette

- You need a visa for Turkey, usually obtained at the port of entry. Turkish business works on personal relationships. It is important never to be in a hurry and to spend time socialising and getting to know your potential partner. Until you know someone well, a formal style of address is appropriate. Use the surname with *bey* for a man and *hanım* or  *bayan* for a woman.
- Informal meetings in coffee shops or hotel lobbies are common as a way of leading into business. Turkish business negotiation tends to be circuitous and there is a reluctance to say no. Confirm and reconfirm what you think has been said and agreed. Turkish management tends to be top down, bosses don't expect initiatives from subordinates and they expect orders to be carried out. Problems may be hidden or glossed over to avoid difficulty or embarrassment.
- Flexibility and improvisation are more important than rules. Cash flow and gross margin are prime indicators of performance. In summary, although behaviour varies with age, international training, and experience with multinational companies, the golden rule is to go to the top and cultivate a strong personal relationship.
- Dress is fairly formal on first meetings and working hours are usually 8.30 am to 5.30 or 6.00 pm, although there may be many out-of-hours meetings. Punctuality can be flexible, especially due to heavy traffic in Ankara and Istanbul.



The Mosque of Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent (1557)

- Turks themselves are friendly and hospitable, very family orientated, patriotic and quite serious in business. They are curious and interested in strangers and can be quick tempered. Turks are individualists and can be quite competitive in teams.

## Language

- **Official language:** Turkish is the official language. Turkish is spoken by about 120 million people worldwide.
- **Other languages:** In business, English is widely used and many Turks have been educated overseas. Most Turkish businesspeople have a good command of English. Other international languages spoken include French, German, Arabic and Greek.
- **Finding translators/interpreters:** in the UK, you can search for local, quality-assured providers by contacting the Regional Language Network. In Turkey, translators and interpreters are readily available – the best place to enquire is at the British Embassy.

## Basic Turkish phrases

The positive impression you will make by speaking a few basic Turkish phrases cannot be overestimated. Below are some commonly-used phrases – if you want to learn more, why not download our **FREE Talk the Talk™ podcast** with essential words and phrases in Turkish? Go to [www.rlnpodcast.com](http://www.rlnpodcast.com).

	Turkish
Hello	<i>Merhaba</i>
Good day/ morning	<i>Gunaydin</i>
Good evening	<i>lyi aksamlar</i>
Goodbye	<i>Allaha ismariadik</i>
Yes / no	<i>Evet/hayir</i>
Thank you	<i>Tesekkür or Mersi</i>
You're welcome	<i>Bir sey degil</i>
Excuse me	<i>Affedersiniz, Pardon</i>
My name is...	<i>Adim</i>
What's your name?	<i>Adiniz ne?</i>

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## Food and Drink

Turkish coffee, doner kebabs and Turkish delight (*loucoumi*) are already familiar to the British. In Turkey small dishes of vegetables, meat, rice and pastry are the staples of excellent Turkish cuisine. The *Mezze* (mixed grill) is excellent. There is tasty red (*Yakut*) and white (*Cankara*) local wine and the national liquor is *Rakiya* (slightly sweet aniseed).

## Festivals

Turks celebrate New Years Day, National Sovereignty and Children's Day (April 23rd), Ataturk's Commemoration and Youth and Sports Day (May 19th), Victory Day (August 30th) and National Republic Day (October 29th). There are also important religious holidays, with variable dates. The main ones are *Seker Bayrami* (Festival of Sweets) for three days and *Kurban Bayrami* (Festival of Sacrifices) lasting for four days.

## Did you know?

- Turkey has the largest standing army in Europe and its military spending is the highest in NATO.
- Friday is the traditional Islamic weekly holiday, although this is now Sunday in Turkey. Many Turkish males will attend the Friday congregational prayer - *Cuma Namazi* [pronounced *juma namz-uh*] which will take place from about 1-1:30 p.m.
- You can leave Europe at Ortakoy (and other places) in Istanbul, cross on the ferry and five minutes later you are in Asia. Thousands do it, going to work every day.



A covered bazaar in Istanbul.

## Sources

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Please note: While every effort is made to ensure accuracy, the Regional Language Network does not take responsibility for the content of this briefing. Opinions expressed are not necessarily those of the Regional Language Network or of CILT, the National Centre for Languages.