

A Kid's Guide to
THE MIDDLE EAST



Understanding **TURKEY** Today



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PUBLISHER’S NOTE: The fictionalized narrative used in portions of this book are an aid to comprehension. This narrative is based on the author’s extensive research as to what actually occurs in a child’s life in Turkey. It is subject to interpretation and might not be indicative of every child’s life in Turkey. It is representative of some children and is based on research the author believes to be accurate. Documentation of such research is contained on pp. 60–61.

The Internet sites referenced herein were active as of the publication date. Due to the fleeting nature of some web sites, we cannot guarantee they will all be active when you are reading this book.

To reflect current usage, we have chosen to use the secular era designations BCE (“before the common era”) and CE (“of the common era”) instead of the traditional designations BC (“before Christ”) and AD (*anno Domini*, “in the year of the Lord”).

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Introduction

Turkey is a fascinating country. Located at the intersection of Europe and Asia, Turkey has been influenced by people and ideas from both continents. Turkey's history, food, and political system all reflect this mixture of East and West. Like many countries in the Middle East, Turkish history has seen conflict over the centuries. Even today, different political groups in Turkey don't always see eye-to-eye on the country's future.

Turkey faces challenges in the twenty-first century. Sharing water with its neighbors is one issue. Dealing with earthquakes is another. Helping its Syrian neighbors who are in the middle of a civil war is also difficult. Yet the Turkish people are creative thinkers. They have used Turkey's resources to develop industries and start new businesses. Farmers here grow food that is eaten not only at home, but also by people around the globe. From preschools to universities, Turkey offers wonderful educational opportunities to its people.



Istanbul at Sunset

Family and culture are very important to the Turkish people. Dancers, musicians, and writers create beautiful works of art. Like many Middle Eastern nations, most Turks are Muslims, or followers of Islam. This religion plays an important role in peoples' lives. Families worship, celebrate holidays, and share meals together. Kids and adults in Turkey play sports, watch movies, and enjoy games—just like you do. From the mountains to the Mediterranean Sea, Turkey is a beautiful land with much to learn about.



A typical breakfast in Turkey

CHAPTER 1

Turkey—A Day in the Life

Merhaba (MER-ha-ba)—Hello! My name is Kerem. I am twelve years old. I live with my mother, father, and little sister Kayra in Istanbul, the biggest city in Turkey. Our apartment overlooks the Bosphorus Strait. That’s a narrow strip of water that flows through Istanbul and separates Europe from Asia.

On a normal school day, I wake up around seven o’clock in the morning. I like to eat eggs, olives, and some bread with cheese and ham for breakfast. I always look forward to my cup of tea with breakfast. In Turkey, tea is called *çay* (pronounced “chai”). It is strong black tea. I like mine with sugar. After I eat, I put on my school uniform. Since my grandmother lives in another apartment in my building, she comes to watch Kayra while my parents get ready for work. My mother is a tour guide and my father works in one of the big hotels downtown.

Before I walk down the block to meet my friends, I make sure I have everything I need in my backpack. We always walk to school together. It only takes about ten minutes to get there. Sometimes we start talking about wrestling or movies. Then it takes a little longer.

My first class starts at nine. I study history, science, math, Turkish, and English. There are about thirty kids in my class. My cousin Talya lives in the Turkish countryside. She has over fifty kids in her class! My favorite class is phys ed. I love when we play volleyball or soccer. Sometimes during the ten-minute break between classes, I go to the cafeteria and buy a snack. I usually buy *simit*—bread rings covered in sesame seeds.¹ Yum!

I walk home for lunch halfway through the day. My grandmother makes my lunch. Some days we have cabbage leaves stuffed with

rice and chopped meat. Other days we have soup with rice and meatballs. My favorite lunch is *pide* (PEE-deh). It's like a flatbread pizza with vegetables, meat, or eggs on top.



Kerem attends school in Istanbul, where many students wear uniforms. These seventh-grade students are getting ready to begin their English class.

After lunch, I walk back to school where I have classes until three o'clock. I often go to study hall after school to get my homework done. I want to do well in school now so I can get into a good high school. I really like science and I want to become a biologist. My friend Deniz loves English. He hopes to study at a university in England when he's older.

When I'm back home and my homework is done, I can have some fun. I change out of my uniform and head to the park to see

my friends. Some afternoons we play soccer, dodgeball, or basketball. Other days we play marbles or tag. We often run into the girls in our class at the park. They like to play double dutch, hopscotch, or volleyball.

After my mom and dad get back from work, my grandmother heads back to her apartment. Some nights she'll come back to join us for dinner at around eight o'clock. Dinner is the biggest meal of the day. We usually have some soup or salad first, then lamb or chicken with rice and vegetables. And for dessert? Most nights we have fruit. I like pomegranates, figs, and apricots best. But my favorite dessert is *lokma*— round donuts in syrup.

When dinner is over, I watch television or play a computer game. Some nights I prefer to read a book. Lights are out in my room by ten.

IN CASE YOU WERE WONDERING

What sports do people play in Turkey?

Most **Turks** enjoy a variety of sports. The most popular sport in Turkey is definitely soccer. Basketball and wrestling are also well-liked. Have you ever heard of oil wrestling? It's a Turkish sport where the competitors cover their bodies in olive oil before they wrestle. This makes it hard for the wrestler to get a grip on his opponent. In the mountains of Turkey, people ski. People also enjoy swimming and scuba diving at Turkish beaches.

IN CASE YOU WERE WONDERING

How long do kids have to attend school in Turkey?

The Turks place a high value on education. There are five stages in Turkey's public education system: preschool, elementary school, middle school, high school, and university. Preschool classes are optional for children ages three to five. In March 2012, the Grand National Assembly (Turkey's parliament) passed an education reform bill. This bill extended the length of required education from eight years to twelve years. Kids' primary education (elementary and middle school) begins at age six and continues to age fourteen. Four years of secondary education (high school) are now required as well. Starting in middle school, students may attend general academic schools, or they can choose a technical or vocational school that specializes in fine arts, religion, science, or foreign language.

On Sundays, we usually get together with my whole family. I have lots of cousins, aunts, and uncles. My father's parents live on the other side of the Bosphorus Strait, so we take a ferry to visit them on the weekends. My father's mother, whom I call *Babaanne*, always cooks up a feast. She makes the best *kabak tatlisi*, which is a sweet pumpkin dessert with walnuts. My grandfather likes to play **backgammon** or a tile game called *okey* with us. Kayra and I look forward to Sundays every week.

I hope you enjoyed reading about my life here in Turkey. *Hoşçakal* (hoash-CHA-kahl) Goodbye!



Okey

WHAT'S TO DRINK? BEVERAGES IN TURKEY

From breakfast to bedtime, Turks have a wide variety of drink options. Juice, tea, and coffee are all popular choices. Tea, also known as çay, is appropriate any time of day. Turks brew it in a large urn called a samovar. Normally, tea is served in tulip-shaped glasses. Turks take sugar in their tea, but not milk. Stopping in to visit a friend? She'll offer you tea. Looking in the window at a shop? The owner might offer tea to a customer to get him into the shop. People in Turkey often enjoy mint, rose hip, apple, **linden**, or lime flower teas.



A samovar and tulip-shaped glasses make teatime feel special.

Turkey is also known for its coffee. Called *kahve* (kah-VEH), Turkish coffee is strong and somewhat bitter.² Unlike Americans, who often drink very large mugs of coffee, people in Turkey enjoy their coffee in small cups. It is typically found on the table with dessert. People often add sugar to their coffee as it's made. And the grounds at the bottom of one's cup? They get left behind.

It's interesting to note that traditionally, women have had tea and pastries at home, while men were more likely to meet up at a local coffeehouse. Most Turkish women still do not go to coffeehouses in rural areas. In cities, however, both men and women can be found at the corner coffeehouse.

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