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33

Symbol of Turkish Modernity and Bastion of the West: The Hilton Hotel in İstanbul

Hans Theunissen

The Hilton Hotel in İstanbul is one of the city's most iconic twentieth-century buildings. It was built in the years 1952–55 in the so-called “international style” and is undoubtedly one of the prime examples of post-war modernism in Turkey. It was the first Hilton Hotel outside the USA and received financial support from the Marshall Plan. The İstanbul Hilton was the first 5-star hotel in the city and for several decades remained one of its most prestigious hotels. The construction of the Hilton Hotel was followed by drastic interventions in the urban fabric of İstanbul which aimed at renovating and modernising the dilapidated city. Although highway building had been a priority of Turkish governments since the late 1940s, in the second half of the 1950s the modernisation craze also reached the streets of İstanbul. Plans to “upgrade” the street network of İstanbul consciously took into account the location of the Hilton Hotel in the north of the European side of the city and that of the international airport in Yeşilköy to the south of the city. These new roads created a “corridor of modernity” between the airport and the hotel. Both the construction of the hotel and the interventions carried out in the urban fabric of İstanbul demonstrate the international and national ambitions of the governments of Prime Minister Adnan Menderes (1899–1961) in the 1950s. From the day it was opened (10 June 1955), the İstanbul Hilton played a multifaceted role in Turkish politics and society, both in practical and symbolic ways. Visual and textual sources dating from the 1950s show what the İstanbul Hilton expressed for different people in those times, in both national and international contexts.

Images of the İstanbul Hilton Hotel



First day of issue cover (FDC) with four stamps and the special stamp cancellation marks issued on the occasion of the Tenth Annual Meeting of the Board of Governors of the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) and the Board of Governors of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) on 12–16 September 1955 in İstanbul. From the collection of the author.



Early full-colour tourist postcard from 1956 showing the İstanbul Hilton with the İstanbul Hilton stamp and the special İstanbul Hilton cancellation mark. From the collection of the author.

The series of four stamps on the first day of issue cover was issued by the Turkish postal service on the occasion of the Tenth Annual Meeting of the Board of Governors of the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) and the Board of Governors of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) which took place on 12–16 September 1955 in İstanbul. This meeting was also commemorated with a special stamp cancellation mark which was also used on the envelope. The upper left stamp depicts the Hilton Hotel, the two other stamps below portray İstanbul University buildings, and the upper right stamp shows the *Kız Kulesi* (Maiden's or Leander's Tower) in the Bosphorus. The depictions on three of the stamps are closely related to the IBRD-IMF meeting because the participants stayed at the Hilton Hotel, while the meeting itself was held in the building housing İstanbul University's Faculty of Economics and the stamp bearing the image of the Bosphorus highlights the country's strategic position between the East and the West. As such, the envelope with the four stamps and special cancellation marks expresses the aspirations of the Demokrat Party (DP) governments in the 1950s to modernise Turkey and integrate the country into the international institutions of the West. In that way, the stamps embody the international and national political ambitions of the Menderes governments of the 1950s. Moreover, the full-colour postcard presents the İstanbul Hilton as a symbol of Turkish-American friendship (appropriately expressed by the flags of the two countries in front of the hotel) and as a beacon of Turkish modernity. The governor and mayor of İstanbul, Fahrettin Kerim Gökay (1900–1987), reformulated this image in a speech that he gave during the official inauguration of the hotel as follows: “Today the Turkish moon and sun stand together with the American stars. The old world embraces the new world.”

Although the images emphasise Turkey's close relations with the West, Turkish sources usually do not explicitly point out the ideological role the hotel played for Conrad Hilton (1887–1979) and the US government. The Americans considered the İstanbul Hilton to be a forward bastion against Soviet Communism. The following quotes from Conrad Hilton's autobiography *Be My Guest* illustrate this ideological aspect of the İstanbul Hilton:

The Istanbul Hilton stands thirty miles from the Iron Curtain. (Hilton, *Be My Guest*, 326)

We humbly believe ... that our Hilton house flag is one small flag of freedom which is being waved defiantly against Communism.... (Ibid., 323)

“Each of our hotels,” I said, “is a little America,” not as a symbol of bristling power, but as a friendly center where men of many nations and of good will may speak the language of peace.” (Ibid., 327–28)

Turkish politicians of the 1950s also used the phrase “a little America” in their political propaganda (i.e., “Türkiye'yi küçük bir Amerika yapacağız,” “We will make Turkey a little America”) in order to express their ambitions and promises to the electorate to create a modern and

prosperous Turkey which could rival other modern nations in the West and where every neighbourhood had its own millionaire (“Her mahallede bir milyoner”). Although in Turkish the phrase “a little America” did not refer to the İstanbul Hilton but to Turkey, without a doubt for the urban segments of Turkish society the hotel became a symbol of the modern American-oriented lifestyle of Turkey in the 1950s.

The postcard of the İstanbul Hilton, bearing the Hilton stamp and the special Hilton cancellation mark (from 1956), is one of the many Turkish Hilton postcards produced in the 1950s and 1960s. This rare, early full-colour postcard also highlights the role the İstanbul Hilton played in the development of international tourism in Turkey, which was one of the other goals of the Menderes government in the 1950s. That goal was expressed by numerous Turkish government officials, for instance Finance Minister Hasan Polatkan (1915–1961) who, in a speech he gave at the hotel’s opening ceremony, emphasised Turkey’s rich history and heritage and the role the Hilton would play in the development of tourism in Turkey. As part of the government’s efforts to stimulate tourism, shortly before the opening of the İstanbul Hilton, an English-language *Tourist’s Guide to Istanbul* was published. In the introduction of the guide, Director-General of the Turkish Press, Broadcasting, and Tourist Department Halim Alyot (1909–1980) wrote, “Istanbul unrolls a panorama where [the] fabulous East meets [the] progressive West. Istanbul is the climax to every tourist’s voyage. Turkey is making every effort to increase the number of visitors to this country and to ensure them a happy vacation. The construction in Istanbul of a modern hotel in cooperation with the Hilton Hotels International Inc. of America marks the first concrete stage in our endeavours.”

The East-meets-West motif was also used in the interior decoration of the Hilton Hotel, which had some (Ottoman-) Turkish features (including tilework and carpets). In addition, a number of spaces in the hotel bore names referring to (Ottoman-) Turkish culture, while some hotel employees, such as female staff members who were known as “coffee beauties” (*kahveci güzelleri*), wore traditional outfits. Within the context of such references to an Ottoman past, the undulating roof of the entrance to the hotel, which was designed by the Turkish architect Sedat Hakkı Eldem (1908–1988), was often interpreted in an Orientalist way as signifying a “flying carpet from the Tales of the Thousand and One Nights.” The Orientalist East-West contrast was also used in American advertisements, which juxtaposed the bright, sleek, and modern Hilton Hotel in the foreground with the dark, mysterious, and picturesque Blue Mosque in the background. For the American public, these references to an Ottoman past surely created an Orientalist image of Turkey, and in such an Orientalist view, Turkish modernity originated in the West and was like the Hilton Hotel brought to İstanbul by America.

The visual and textual sources from the 1950s related to the İstanbul Hilton reflect the international and national political ambitions of the Menderes governments directed towards Turkey’s integration into the West, the upgrading of the country’s infrastructure, and the modernisation of Turkish society. At the same time, for the Americans the Hilton Hotel and

other infrastructure projects such as new highways embodied American modernity, which had to be brought to Turkey in order for the Cold War to be won. In their eyes, Turkey constituted an exemplary model of American modernisation in the 1950s. Turkish stamps, cancellation marks, and postcards contributed to the dissemination and popularisation of the idea of Turkish modernity and as such these sources offer alternative insights into the Turkish political and socio-cultural life of the 1950s.

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