

Building

a

Spy Plot

in

Istanbul

Espionage is no stranger to Istanbul, a city that has served as the capital of great civilizations, from the Romans to the Ottomans, and a place that found itself in the midst of immense conflict and tragedy, from World War I to the Greco-Turkish Wars, to the Cold War, and to the current global fight against terrorism.



Thriller author A.C. Frieden at the Galata Tower in Istanbul.

Turkey's membership in NATO and its strategic location on the Black Sea and Mediterranean contributed to its importance during the Cold War, a conflict that inducted Istanbul into an elite club of top espionage cities, joining Berlin, Moscow, London, and Paris, among others. Consequently, this bustling waterfront metropolis of 13 million turned into an ideal setting for spy movies, like the James Bond hits *From Russia with Love* (1963) and *The World is Not Enough* (1999), the

acclaimed Israeli film *Walk on Water* (2004), and the recent thriller *The International* (2009). Turkey's largest city also became a chosen venue for countless espionage novels, such as Forrest Devoe Jr.'s *Into the Volcano*, Claire Berlinski's *Lion Eyes*, and John Le Carré's classic tale *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*, which has been adapted for a movie set for release in December 2011. With such a rich history of cloak-and-dagger gamesmanship, it is no wonder that spy



The Blue Mosque in Sultanahmet

novelist A.C. Frieden headed to Istanbul this summer to hunt for scenes for his upcoming spy thriller, *Letter from Istanbul* (Aventia Publ.), the third installment in the Jonathan Brooks series due out in early 2013.

“As I stroll the cobbled streets and shadowy alleyways of lower Taksim and Tünel,” says Frieden, exploring two of Istanbul’s neighborhoods, “I already envision my fictional characters immersed in the same environment, going about their tasks as the convoluted plot unfolds.” But as he continues to weave through the downhill maze of narrow streets toward the Ataturk Bridge, Frieden confesses, “it is not just the historical buildings, or the quaint streets, or the cafés that give this gritty, mystical city the ideal credentials for an espionage setting, it’s the people, especially their attitudes and contradictions as they navigate the cultural intersection of East and West.”

The Games Spies Play

It is also no coincidence that Frieden selected his hotel in Taksim adjacent to the British Consulate, a diplomatic post targetted in 2003 by an Al Qaeda truck bomb that killed dozens, including the UK’s top diplomat. His top-floor room overlooks the fortress-like compound that serves not only as a hub of consular activities but also functions as an important base of operations for a handful of MI-6 intelligence agents and counterterrorism officials. Their responsibilities, not unlike those of many of their foreign counterparts stationed in Istanbul, are varied, among them: surveying ships crossing the Bosphorus; keeping tabs on Iranian, Syrian, Russian and Ukrainian diplomats and operatives; conducting joint missions with Turkey’s National Intelligence Organization (*Milli İstihbarat Teşkilatı*, or MIT) agents and other local authorities; and

“

It is not just the historical buildings, or the quaint streets, or the cafés, that give this gritty, mystical city the perfect credentials for an espionage setting, it’s the people, especially their attitudes and contradictions as they navigate the cultural crossroads of East and West.”

tracking couriers and middlemen working for Middle East terror groups, arms traders and drug dealers.

The Cold War as we know it is over, but what emerged in its place is an unstable morass of shifting alliances, caused in part by the influence of emerging powers and the perceived relative decline of traditional powers, all vying for limited natural resources, technological leadership, and greater wealth using a variety of overt and

and covert means. Whether this is a Second Cold War or something less sinister, Istanbul is not about to lose its spot as a center of espionage activity. “Today, dozens of intelligence and law enforcement agencies deploy people and assets to scour this age-old city for the secrets it harbors,” says Frieden.

Most recently, Turkey’s southern neighbor Syria launched a violent crackdown on protestors, which has heightened the need to track Syrian agents and diplomats operating in

Istanbul, some of whom have been tasked with identifying and disrupting dissident networks operating from Turkey. Istanbul is also buzzing with Iranian and Israeli operatives, particularly after the Israeli Mossad and Shin Bet are believed to have orchestrated the “defection” of an Iranian general earlier this year. General Ali Reza Asgari, formerly of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, transited through Istanbul from Damascus after apparently being lured by Mossad agents in cahoots with the

CIA. Asgari never made it to his hotel, and there are conflicting accounts of what happened next, except that Turkish authorities were unhappy to see this happen on their soil. For Israel, this comes not long after several other incidents have harmed relations with Turkey, including the killing of protestors by Israeli troops aboard a Turkish vessel and the unauthorized use of Turkish airspace by Israeli jets in a mission that destroyed a nuclear facility in neighboring Syria.



“
Today, dozens of intelligence and law enforcement agencies deploy people and assets to scour this age-old city for the secrets it harbors.”

Frieden explores Karaköy, a working class neighborhood at the bottom of Galata Hill.



Following in James Bond's footsteps, Frieden visits Istanbul's ancient cisterns.

Turkish Eyes

Any visitor to Istanbul will readily see the city’s heavy police presence. One or two armored vehicles remain strategically parked in each neighborhood, and paramilitary forces wait in local police stations and windowless vans for orders to swing into action. “There are police, cameras and all kinds of surveillance all over the city,” observed Frieden as he surveyed sites for his fictional plot. “But there is so much more unseen.” Indeed, the local security apparatus has a growing

clandestine presence, driven by the Turkish intelligence services, the MIT. The country’s heightened scrutiny of foreign intelligence activities on its territory, and particularly in its most populous city, coincides with MIT’s restructuring under the new leadership of Hakan Fidan, a political expert with substantial foreign experience. With the close support of newly reelected Prime Minister Recep Erdoğan, MIT is evolving into a more dynamic and internationally-focused spy agency. “Its younger recruits have better language skills, technical proficiency,

and specialized knowledge that are essential to properly transform what is collected into actionable intelligence. This growing capability comes after some recent investments in tracking technology. For example, improvements include more effective cell phone surveillance and data analysis, which is helping MIT keep better tabs on targeted individuals. Turkish banks have also implemented new data sharing arrangements to help track suspicious funds transfers. “Another area of improvement is maritime surveillance,” says Frieden, as he toured the Bosphorus by boat. In the last three years, Turkish authorities have installed advanced software, radar and communications systems to better monitor cargo ships in Turkish waters, including this strategic waterway that links the Black Sea with the Mediterranean. “Cargo ship security is a key aspect of my novel’s plot,” he adds. “Some of my story’s most important action takes place here, and they tie in to other maritime-related scenes in the thriller, including Panama, Ho Chi Minh City, New Orleans and Saint Petersburg.”



A Tanzania-flagged cargo vessel heads north through the Bosphorus.



The Bosphorus is one of the world’s most strategic waterways, linking the Black Sea with the Mediterranean.

A Wealth of Thriller Scenes

While tourists tend to flock to Istanbul’s most popular areas like Sultanahmet, which hosts the Blue Mosque, the Hagia Sophia and the Topkapi Palace, or central Taksim, a hip area for shops and restaurants, many fiction authors in search of interesting venues look to Istanbul’s other offerings—and there are plenty. “Given Istanbul’s long-held association with espionage and international crime, perhaps the greatest challenge for authors is to avoid cliché settings or places featured in prior books and movies,” says Frieden, who had done extensive background research on several parts of the city before arriving. Istanbul offers thriller authors in particular a hugely diverse selection of settings, ranging from seedy urban locales, to sites of extreme opulence, from ancient ruins to ultramodern places, from tranquil escapes to heart-thumping chaos.

Take for instance the narrow hillside streets of the lower Galata neighborhood, with its sloping cobbled streets, tired facades, and shoddy dwellings squeezed together like haphazardly stacked Lego pieces—perfect for a terrorist or arms trafficker hideout, or a druglord’s command center, you

name it. The area’s untouristy three- or four-table cafes and narrow kiosks can add a tantalizingly mysterious edge to any scene, as can the residents’ more serious, reserved moods, expressions, and gestures.

On the other end of the scale, Istanbul hosts the affluent, historical neighborhood of Bebek, with its haute fashion boutiques, luxurious condos and trendy restaurants, many of them sitting on the richly forested banks of the Bosphorus. The area was also a center of affluence during the Ottoman times. Just off the bay in Bebek is Suada, an artificial island with several restaurants, a night club and a huge, opulently equipped pool that attracts Turkey’s rich and famous. In this part of town, authors can house their villains in any number of stunning waterfront mansions, with balconies and floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the Bosphorus and the distant lush green, hilly banks on the Asia side.

Alternatively, an author may simply opt for a more mundane setting, such as a scene in Kadıköy, a large, fairly modern middle-class district on the Asian side of Istanbul, facing the historical center from across the Bosphorus. Some might find parts of

Kadıköy similar to Cleveland or Oakland, but don't be fooled. While it is more Western than many other neighborhoods, the area retains many distinctive Turkish features and is a perfect reminder of the crossroads of civilizations that makes this city such a magnet for mystery and thriller authors, particularly those delving into the opaque world of espionage.

All Five Senses, Istanbul-Style

For an author building thriller scenes in Istanbul, the city is what you make of it. Everything in some form or other is here for the taking. But what ultimately will elevate any scene to an exciting, near-hypnotic experience for readers depends on whether the story retains the ultimate gift Istanbul has to offer: its cocktail of senses. The ultimate literary challenge is to successfully marry these rich elements into each scene, bringing readers into it, as if they are in fact walking the cobbled streets, hearing the cacophony of car horns, pedestrian chatter, Turkish curse words, and the echoing calling to prayer, while siphoning the aroma of lamb kebab, rising sewer fumes and the damp, salty breeze. "I was always taught that writing a scene is more about immersing the reader into the surroundings than simply to describing what's around," says Frieden. "That's why I'm spending hours sitting at sidewalk cafes and walking the streets — to take it all in and digest this mental stimulus into something I can write well."

More importantly, this immersion transcends fiction. It forms the reality that this amazing city offers for the real world of espionage and crime, where agents, handlers, informants, defectors, traitors, security forces, diplomats and others fight their battles and play out their roles, often with the highest stakes. For them, and the authors who replicate this reality on the pages of novels, Istanbul has the literary gravitas to anchor a storyline to a rich mix of intrigue and mystique that few other places on earth can do so easily. ⊕

For a fiction author there is a fascinating mix of sights and sounds in the various neighborhoods of Turkey's largest city.

