

A strong strategic partner

INTERVIEW WITH HIS EXCELLENCY ABDULLAH GÜL

PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF TURKEY

Within our foreign policy we have emphasised security, stability and economic cooperation

How significant is winning the 2010 Chatham House prize for you and how did this award come about?

First of all I would like to say that the Chatham House Prize is one of the world's most prestigious awards and for that reason I am very much honoured to be awarded the prize and I thank all the people who made it possible. I believe I was awarded the Chatham House prize not only for my personal achievements, but also for the achievements of Turkey in recent years.

Over the last seven to eight years we have been reforming Turkey – putting our house in order, if you like, and during this period I served as Prime Minister, Minister of Foreign Affairs and now as President. Through these reforms we have been able to improve our democracy and democratic standards as well as our politics. I believe that this is an important message to convey, that in this democratic country with its large population we have succeeded in improving the political life and helped to consolidate the standards of democracy.

In addition to political reform, we also carried out significant economic reforms. It is worth noting that this country, which went through a major economic crisis in 2001, is now considered amongst the healthiest and strongest economies. Thus we have achieved the political reform to meet the Copenhagen criteria for a democratic country as well as economic reform for the functioning of a free market economy. By meeting these standards we have also advanced the accession talks for joining the European Union. We have made some very important decisions and been able to start the accession negotiations for full membership of the European Union, which has been a very important step.

A further point to highlight is the foreign policy of Turkey. Within our foreign policy, both with our neighbours and within our region, we have emphasised security, stability and economic cooperation. This is a policy that we are following and implementing and I believe puts the spotlight on Turkey. With regard to the Cyprus issue, we worked with both the United Nations and the European Union on what was known as the “Annan Plan”. As you know the Turkish Cypriots said yes to the plan and signed up to it in a referendum. I believe that all of these efforts and all of these results have created a positive and a constructive framework which also allows us to be perceived in a positive and constructive way.

My visit to Armenia, which initiated a normalisation process in our relations, was started by a letter I addressed to President Serzh Saksian in order to congratulate him and which then led to him inviting me to his country. I think all these efforts show our contribution to stability, peace and trust in the Caucasus region and with our neighbours.

We have also contributed to tackling other major issues of the day such as terrorism, energy security and the conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan. All these efforts as well as our role in the Middle East have been made in good faith and with a positive agenda in mind. I imagine this work has been taken into consideration in the decision to award the Chatham House Prize.

With regard to the specific issues you have mentioned, do you feel that the European Union is dragging its feet and has failed to live up to the commitments made to the Turkish Cypriots, Cyprus of course being one of the obstacles on the road to EU accession?

I think you are right on this issue because the European Union, as you know, has a basic principle that applies to all countries that wish to become members, and that is that they must resolve the domestic or regional issues within their country and with countries in their region. But this principle has been not just neglected, but violated, with Cyprus. As you know the referendum produced a ‘Yes’ vote on the Turkish side, with a ‘No’ vote on the Greek side. Thus the campaign to resolve the problem was spoilt for the EU. Subsequently Southern Cyprus became a full member of the European Union and afterwards started using its full membership to create certain obstacles, and take certain initiatives, in order to block Turkey's accession. This state of affairs is also being abused by some of the other EU countries to hinder Turkey's accession. I would like to state very clearly that a certain game is being played regarding the accession negotiations. Accession negotiations should really be technical negotiations; politics has been tied to the technical, which has begun to poison the process.

One must remember that the “Annan Plan” was also the European Union's plan. The EU Commissioner responsible for enlargement at that time, Günter Verheugen, himself used the word “cheated” when referring to the rejection of the referendum by the Greek Cypriot side.

Opposite:
Eamonn Daly, Chief
Operating Officer
of FIRST, with
HE Abdullah Gül,
President of the
Republic of Turkey

Are you concerned about recent statements from some European leaders about the supposed failure of multiculturalism, from the point of view of a largely Islamic country, such as Turkey, seeking to join the European Union?

Of course, I do not know in what context these comments were made. But I do know that such attitudes are wrong because I believe Islam is part of Europe. There are many Muslim British citizens, and Muslim citizens in France and Germany as well. If we look at the history of the Balkan countries we see that throughout their history there has always been a significant Muslim influence. When we look at Europe in an historical context, going back to the 1300s for example, we see that there has always been a significant Muslim component. Andalucía was ruled by a Muslim regime – ruled by the Moors for 600 years – and for these reasons I believe that there is an important Muslim aspect to the history of Europe

If we are to talk about European values today, we are talking about democracy, human rights and a free market economy. If it were to exclude others, for example Muslims, then the European Union would become a Christian club, something which would be against the values of the European Union. This of course would create a more introvert Europe and a ‘small’ Europe, and this issue needs to be seriously debated. Of course there may be people in some circles who advocate such an inward looking ‘small’ Europe and would wish to have such a Europe. However, in a globalising world people should be thinking of a larger and a stronger Europe and be considering what Europe should be like 25, 40, or even 75 years in the future.

If you look at the shared values of Europe and Turkey it is clear that they are the values of democracy, human rights, transparency and accountability. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk envisioned all these values and that is why his orientation in the past was also to the West.

Before you came to power your political origins were in an Islamic party. Have your attitudes changed since you came to power?

Of course, there is one thing that I want everyone to understand clearly, which is the fact that sometimes perceptions and reality may be different from each other. Politicians who are working in certain positions and running the State are sometimes perceived in an incorrect way when it comes to making certain decisions. However, neither my lifestyle nor my thoughts have changed before and after I became President.

But even within Turkey there is debate about whether the AKP party has an Islamic agenda.

First of all, I need to state that even though I’m one of the prominent figures and one of the founders of that

party, I am now neutral as I am working as President of the country. For that reason I cannot talk just about the party. My position now has to be impartial. However, I believe that much that is said can be credited to people who have the wrong perception. When we talk about basic rights and freedoms, one of the things to be highlighted is freedom of faith. Exercising one’s own individual beliefs in an individual capacity is different from the state being secular – there are two different issues – but they are often confused and misperceived. Sometimes some people who advocate freedom of faith have been misunderstood and misinterpreted as if they would like to see a religious state.

So you believe that secularism is still a fundamental part of a true democracy for Turkey?

This situation is not only better for Turkey but it should be the case for the UK and for Germany and other countries as well. Turkey is a democracy and a secular country, these are our basic principles. Just as is the case with the predominantly Christian countries, where there is a separation of church and state, it is the same for us, separation of mosque and state, if I can put it that way. It is the same in my country as in other countries where some people will have faith and will believe in certain values, whereas others may have different religions and faith, or may not believe at all. All these must be respected and this is one of the basic principles of democracy.

If you look at the shared values of Europe and Turkey it is clear that they are the values of democracy, human rights, transparency and accountability



Becoming a full member of the European Union is our strategic objective

Do you think that being a predominantly Muslim country is actually one of Turkey's strengths in that it can act as both a role model and a bridge between East and West, between the more fundamental Islamic world and Western Europe?

I think that one should not say more fundamentalist, but more traditional. Some states are more 'Islamic' because of tradition and they take a more traditional approach. We need to make the distinction between these two concepts very clearly. As I have already mentioned in looking at Turkey one can see all the reforms that have been realised in the areas of democracy, human rights and meeting certain standards. We have the rule of law in Turkey and in addition to all the reforms we have completed and are completing, we have a strong economy. The Turkish economy is strong in spite of the fact that we do not have any indigenous gas or oil as natural resources. I think it is quite natural that Turkey can be a source of inspiration to other countries, given all the things we have achieved.

I should note, however, that we are not perfect. We still have deficiencies and we need to make progress in some areas. But there is no such thing as a perfect country or a perfect democracy. However, we are aware of our shortcomings and we know that we have to make progress and we have to go further in this reform process. The process continues, it has not stopped.

How do you answer your critics on specific issues such as freedom of the press and the issue of Kurdish rights?

I believe that Turkey is no different from other European countries in terms of press freedom. Everyone can write and state whatever they want as long as they do not advocate violence. It must be made clear that there can be no incitements following insults and humiliations. There are court cases in Turkey that have been decided against certain ministers and the Prime Minister because the courts considered that no incitement or defamation had taken place, and the actual issue was considered to be one of freedom of the press.

Regarding the Turkish issues that you mention, it is important to state that terrorism and democratic standards are sometimes confused. You would be amazed to listen to the divergent views in the Turkish Grand National Assembly, and how far those views go and are held. There is complete freedom of expression but again, sometimes misperceptions get in the way and Turkey is still perceived as the country it used to be ten years ago and not the country it is now. I repeat that before Turkish law, every individual has equal rights and freedoms; nobody is discriminated against.

If Turkey fails to join the EU, what will be the consequences both for Turkey and the EU?

Becoming a full member of the European Union is our strategic objective and once the accession negotiations started we went through a specific process through which to identify which standards needed to be upgraded in our country and how they could be transposed into our own legal system.

As we have gone along with the negotiations some things have changed; some chapters opened and some closed, if you like. Because of the political obstacles within the European Union, we will consider that even those 'chapters' that are not officially open will still be treated by us as if they were and we will try to upgrade our laws where they need to be upgraded and do whatever is necessary to fulfil what is required in the chapter. Of course when we finalise the negotiations, what will the Turkish people say? I do not know now what the answer will be because the Turkey of that day will be different from the Turkey of today, just like the Turkey of ten years ago was quite different from the Turkey of today. However, we intend to be a model, like Norway is a certain model. I do not foresee negative consequences for us but there would be negative consequences for the European Union.

And what are those?

Turkey adds major strategic value to the European Union. This is understood in the United Kingdom which is why the UK is among the strongest supporters of Turkey's EU membership. Let us not forget that the world's economic and political gravity is shifting towards Asia. We do not have to wait twenty-five years for that to happen, it will happen within ten years. Turkey is a country that is located in both Asia and Europe. Throughout the Cold War period Turkey helped protect the free world with major sacrifices within NATO. If for any reason Turkey's full membership is not to be realised, all of this strategic value will not be available to the EU.

Finally, can you give us your insights into the most important strengths of the UK-Turkish relationship?

I think that the United Kingdom and Turkey both approach global issues in a very strategic manner. This may be as a result of history as both countries have had major experiences and an accumulation of knowledge. In our bilateral relations we are co-operating in both the political and economic arenas. We share the same values and throughout the EU process the UK has always been our strong supporter. In the cold war era we co-operated very closely. We are still very strong allies today in fighting terrorism, for example.

Opposite:
HE Abdullah Gül,
President of the
Republic of Turkey