

A significant asset to Europe

INTERVIEW WITH RT HON JACK STRAW MP

FORMER FOREIGN SECRETARY OF THE UNITED KINGDOM



JACK STRAW has been MP for Blackburn since 1979. He served as Home Secretary from 1997 to 2001, Foreign Secretary from 2001 to 2006 and Lord Privy Seal and Leader of the House of Commons from 2006 to 2007 under Tony Blair. From 2007-2010 he was the Lord High Chancellor of Great Britain and the Secretary of State for Justice, appointed as part of Prime Minister Gordon Brown's first Cabinet. Mr Straw is one of only three people to have served in Cabinet continuously from 1997 to 2010.

How would you describe President Abdullah Gül as a person, a politician and a statesman?

He is a very skilled politician, in my opinion, and along with Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan he really developed the AK Party into the influential force it is today.

The AK Party is similar to the Christian Democratic parties in other parts of Europe, such as those in Italy and Germany. It is a very modern party which has provided an extraordinary renaissance in Turkey's fortunes. This renaissance has been especially successful on the economic front with the Turkish economy now experiencing very high and sustainable rates of growth. Turkey's leadership, headed by Abdullah Gül, has set about building on this economic strength and putting Turkey on the map in terms of international relations. Turkey has, for example, played a very important role as a broker in relations between Israel and the rest of the Middle East.

How do you see the UK-Turkey relationship? The UK is widely seen as Turkey's 'best friend' in Europe.

We are certainly amongst their best friends but it would be presumptuous of us to judge whether we are their best friend – though I would like to think we were. One of the really interesting things is that much of European policy making is subject to partisan disputes, both between the parties and within parties but in the UK Turkey's move towards European Union membership has received cross-party support. Everyone has recognised the strategic importance of having Turkey within the European Union family.

How important is the UK-Turkey relationship economically, diplomatically and strategically?

It is very important in terms of the economy. For example, some 80 per cent of white goods sold in this country are actually made in Turkey, regardless of the front of the casing. So Turkey is a very important trade and investment market. We also have many Turkish nationals living and working in the UK, and Turkish Cypriots as well, and there is a growing sense of interdependence. Internationally Turkey is a vital ally – as a founder member of NATO, Turkey provided a key bulwark in the Cold War against the Soviet Union, something which the rest of Europe should remember. Turkey has been a loyal member of the NATO family.

What are the greatest commonalities between the UK and Turkey?

Well, for a start there is a great deal of shared history. For the most part we have been on the same side as we were in the Crimea but with exceptions such as in the Balkans.

On the issue of religion I often point out, when I am in countries such as Turkey, that Britain is not a secular state at all, we have a church intertwined with the state and we have the Monarch as the ecclesiastical head of the Church of England as well as the temporal head. We have, however, managed to achieve a balance between secularism and the established Church which I think is interesting for people in Turkey, so we have much to learn from each other in terms of institution building and economic development.

One of the challenges facing the Turkish leadership is addressing the human rights base of their law, in practice as well as in theory. Huge advances have been made in this area and I believe that the UK has played a significant part in that development. So, Turkey is part of the European family and we, as a nation, also have much to learn from Turkey, given the significant British Muslim population and the challenge in improving the integration of these sectors of our communities.

And what would you say are the greatest complementarities between the two countries?

The greatest complementarities are that we are similar sized countries with clear lines of decision making. I think the other point worth mentioning is that, in the last decade, Turkey has become a very popular destination for British tourists and tourism helps build up natural connections.

In what direction do you see UK-Turkey and EU-Turkey relations heading in the medium term?

I think Britain's relationship with Turkey will remain sound – this is clear from our deeds as well as our words. Relations with the rest of Europe I think are more difficult to judge and it will depend on whether the log jam in the negotiations over European Union membership – which are coming to a fairly critical point in the next couple of months – can be unblocked.

Turkey is now becoming an extremely significant player in the wider world and that was illustrated by the approach they took on United Nations Security Council Resolution 1929 on Iran where they decided, with Brazil, to adopt their own approach. This growing international role would be a significant asset to Europe.

F