

An essential relationship

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 assess President Gül as a politician and international Statesman on the eve of his State Visit to the United Kingdom?

I have known President Abdullah Gül for almost a decade and regard him as a very skilled politician who, with Prime Minister Recep Erdoğan, has developed the AK Party into an important and influential force. I first worked with him when he was Foreign Minister and have maintained close contacts ever since.

Under Abdullah Gül's leadership, Turkey has become Europe's most significant emerging power. Turkey is now an important force and an influential actor with a multi-dimensional foreign policy and significant 'soft power' both within the region and more widely. Turkey has also emerged as an economic powerhouse – now the world's 15th and Europe's 6th largest economy and Abdullah Gül has succeeded in combining a predominantly Muslim population with a secular and democratic state – what in New Labour we called triangulation.

To what extent is Turkey a helpful partner for the UK Government's foreign and security policy in the Middle East, North Africa, south Caucasus, Central Asia and the Western Balkans?

Given all that has been achieved in Turkey over the last decade, I believe that Turkey feels a responsibility to make a positive contribution to peace and stability in the region. Indeed Turkey would like to become an 'order instituting country' in the Middle East. I have no doubt that Turkey understands more about Europe and the West than any other Middle Eastern country and understands more about the Middle East than any other European country. Turkey therefore enjoys particular authority in the region and is now pursuing a proactive foreign policy and is promoting dialogue and co-operation. It is not a country blessed, however, with its neighbours – Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu's policy of seeking zero problems with its neighbours is a difficult objective.

Against this background Turkey is not only a helpful partner for the UK Government's foreign and security policy in the region, but I would argue, a vital one. We are working closely with the transitional authorities in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia alongside Turkey. Both the UK and Turkey are strong supporters of reform in the region and we are both working towards resolving

conflicts in a peaceful way.

Turkey is also contributing to the development of the south Caucasus and Central Asian region through major strategic projects such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan Oil pipeline, the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum Natural Gas pipeline and the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars Railway. These initiatives promote both economic activity and political contacts.

Turkey's approach to the Balkans is also very similar to the United Kingdom's stance – attaching particularly importance to stability, dialogue and co-operation.

Our partnership with Turkey in the field of security is growing rapidly – particularly within the context of NATO where the UK and Turkey co-operate closely and work together on NATO operations and missions. A good example of this co-operation was demonstrated in the NATO-led Operation United Protector (OUP) in Libya – Turkey being an active participant from the outset.

So I believe that Turkey is a vital partner to the United Kingdom in the pursuit of our foreign policy. William Hague, the Foreign Secretary, recently mentioned that he has spoken more often with his Turkish counterpart than with Hillary Clinton – testament indeed to the UK-Turkey relationship.

Is Turkey and the AKP a suitable role model for other Muslim countries – especially in the context of the 'Arab Spring'?

The 'Arab Spring' is a critical moment for the people in the Middle East and North Africa who have long desired more democracy and freedom and higher living standards. Turkey can certainly be seen to be a role model in the sense that it represents the peaceful co-existence of Islam and democracy – indeed Islam places a very high value on equality and respect.

The Turkish Authorities have kept in close contact with the regional administrations and have encouraged and supported the emerging reform movements. Turkey's own path to democracy and modernisation started nearly two hundred years ago and followed a unique course culminating in close interaction with the West and participation in the EU accession process. In this sense Turkey can rightly be viewed as an inspiration to those seeking change rather than a model to be replicated exactly.

I was struck by an interesting comment at the

recent British-Turkish Tartlidil held at Ditchley Park, with a dinner at the Bodleian Library, Oxford which I co-chaired with HE Yaşar Yakış, in which one of the Turkish delegates said ‘we are going to export democracy from Turkey but only when we have a surplus’. The clear inference is that the Turks acknowledge that they themselves still have further to go in this respect.

There is no doubt, however, that Turkey is very well placed to assist with reforms in these countries especially in the areas of education, civil society and the economy.

Is the Government right to support Turkey's membership of the EU? How can this process be given greater impetus?

I sincerely believe that Turkey's membership of the EU would help the EU play a more effective role in the wider region. Turkey is a strong regional power and subscribes to similar objectives and principles as the EU. It is also an economic powerhouse which could help bolster the EU's economic deficiencies. Turkey, with a majority Muslim population would demonstrate that the EU represents a true community of values. I am absolutely clear that Europe needs Turkey more than Turkey needs Europe and I have always considered the lack of support from France and Germany to be short-sighted.

So I believe that the UK's strong and active support of Turkey's EU membership process is right and that our vocal support should be maintained.

How important is Turkey to the energy security of the United Kingdom and European Union?

Turkey occupies a pivotal position and is a key player in ensuring the energy security of both the UK and the whole EU region. I have already mentioned the energy transit routes – the Southern Energy Corridor. Turkey has signed the Memorandum of Understanding with Azerbaijan agreeing the supply and transit of Azeri gas to Europe. The Baku-Tblisi-Ceyhan Pipeline, the Turkey-Greece-Italy Gas Interconnector and the Nabucco Natural Gas Pipelines are all part of this transit network.

Britain also has significant commercial interests in Turkey's energy sector and energy is a component of the Strategic Partnership between the UK and Turkey signed by David Cameron in July 2010.


The Turkish economy now ranks as the 15th largest in the world and the 6th largest in Europe. How should the UK further strengthen the economic and commercial relationship?

Turkey's economic potential is vast – being the EU's fifteenth largest export partner and predicted to be the

second largest economy in Europe by 2050. Turkey is one of the world's fastest growing economies after China and India and is now a leading member of the G20. The United Kingdom has an ambitious target of doubling the value of trade with Turkey within five years. Some 3000 British companies operate in Turkey with an investment value of US\$ 5 billion and the Turkish private sector has a significant presence in the UK. Our commercial links are very important and should, where possible, be further strengthened.

How do you see the UK-Turkey and EU-Turkey relationships developing in the medium term?

I believe that Britain's relationship with Turkey is built on very solid foundations – Turkey is an important partner in terms of geopolitics, energy security, trade and investment, and the UK supports Turkey's EU Accession. Turkey's relations with the rest of Europe are more difficult to judge – especially given France and Germany's opposition to their EU membership.

In my view a democratic and stable Turkey is good for Britain, good for Europe and good for the wider world. Turkey is a strong NATO ally, member of the OSCE and Council of Europe and an important trade and energy partner. The President of Turkey is a distinguished guest and this State Visit a very welcome occasion. 

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Hagia Sophia in Istanbul is universally acknowledged as one of the greatest buildings in the world

