



## Turkey's Role In an Emerging Network World

On 8<sup>th</sup> February 2010, Global Strategy Forum hosted a seminar, '*Turkey's Role In an Emerging Network World*'. The seminar took place in the House of Lords and was moderated by the Rt Hon Michael Ancram QC MP, Chairman of GSF.

As may be seen in the attached programme, the seminar covered three areas:

- *Turkey's Role as a Regional and Global Actor;*
- *Turkey, the EU and the UK: the New Dynamics;*
- *Turkey's Role in a Networked World: Looking to the Future.*

Over the course of 12 presentations and three Q&A sessions, a number of common themes emerged, of which the following is a summary.

### **Turkey's Transformation: no longer the 'sick man of Europe'**

*"Turkey has never been as European, prosperous and democratic as now. I am not claiming that Turkey is perfect, but it is in a much better position than the past. We have started to dialogue with different groups for the first time. The Armenian citizens, Kurds, women, workers all have a direct dialogue with the government. We have started to diagnosis some of our problems. In the past we were ignoring or hiding our problems. Now we are trying to solve them."*

HE Egemen Bagis

There was unanimity among both Turkish and British speakers that the modern Turkey was a transformed nation. Whether this was expressed as Turkey having progressed beyond its former "taboos" and being prepared to discuss sensitive issues and that Europe should also be prepared to do the same (Bagis) or as Turkey being a "rising power" (Ancram, Hannay) or as Turkey no longer being "an afterthought" (Kiniklioglu) or as a "shift in power" having taken place (Howell) or as Turkey as a "new actor" (Ogutcu), speakers recognized that Turkey was a much changed country. Democracy (Grieve, Kalin, Memecan) had made "enormous strides" in Turkey, with the former uneasy relations between the civilian and military structures, that is, the "social contract" (Yakis, Wallace, Nicholson) now much improved, as illustrated by the calm manner in which the Ergenekon issue was being handled. Turkey was a founding member of the Alliance of Civilization (Bagis) and the G-20 (Hannay). Economic progress (Tuzmen) had been dramatic. Much of the seminar's discussion centred on the ramifications of this transformation, both for Turkey and its international partners.

### **The Need for a Post-Cold War Narrative**

Among these ramifications, one of the more important was the need for a “new narrative” (Wallace, Howell) that recognized that the traditional Western policy of regarding Turkey as an “anchor” of the West was both “patronizing” and “no longer applicable”. It was necessary to “get beyond” (Hannay) this stereotype. The corollary of this was to recognize that to interpret Turkish decisions such as its refusal to act as a transit country for the 2003 invasion of Iraq (Hannay) as an indication of “drifting away” (Wallace) was to ask the wrong question. On the Turkish side, speakers (Yakis, Ogutcu) made the same point. Simply because Turkey’s policies no longer automatically tracked those of the West did not imply that Turkey was turning its back on the West. The more sensible analysis was to understand that Turkey was more conscious of its own “responsibilities” (Bagis) in its capacity to be a “solution” in regional affairs. Speakers (Yakis, Kiniklioglu) stressed Turkey’s “complementary” and “strong ally” role in relation to US and EU policies in the region. Some (Bagis) drew attention to Turkey’s military peacekeeping presence in more than 30 countries.

### **The Internal Dynamics**

Several of the Turkish speakers (Bagis, Yakis, Kalin) stressed the connection between Turkey’s internal reforms and its external role. A “culture of democracy”, human rights, emphasis on cultural co-existence, recognition of ethnic minority rights especially those of Kurds, a secular relationship with Islam fed directly into Turkey’s foreign policy approach of peace with its neighbours. At the top level of the Turkish government a review was underway (Kalin) of the objectives Turkey wished to achieve by 2023, the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Republic. Turkey was also seen as having some shortcomings (Ogutcu) in the field of inefficient bureaucracy and corruption. In general, the British side accepted and welcomed this positive assessment of developments inside Turkey, but some speakers (Grieve, Wallace, Nicholson, Hannay) raised questions about whether Turkey’s transformation was complete. The comment (Hannay) that the process was a “work in progress” might be a fair summary of some of the British commentary.

### **Turkey as a Regional Hub**

Speakers on the Turkish side (Bagis, Ogutcu, Tuzmen) emphasized Turkey’s role as a regional hub, drawing attention to its membership of multiple organizations and involvement in the political, economic and energy dynamics of the region. Turkey tried to make the most of its location at “crossroads” (Tuzmen) of so much history and geography, but did not overlook the fact (Yakis) that the Ottoman legacy was not always seen as positive in the region.

### **Continuity and Change**

Alongside the change theme, there was some stress (Yakis) on continuities in Turkish policies. In particular, the “zero problems” with neighbours approach dated to the

earliest days of the Turkish republic. The major discontinuity arose from World War II and the Cold War, during which Turkey's membership of NATO forced it to choose sides. Some of the most dramatic changes have taken place in the economic sphere (Tuzmen, Ogutcu). For example, from 2002 to 2008 regional trade grew from 7% of Turkey's foreign trade to 48%. In the same period, trade with Greece has increased from \$250 million-\$3.5 billion, with Russia from \$7 billion-\$35 billion, and with Iran from \$1 billion-\$10 billion. Turkey has 359 construction projects in Iraq alone.

### **Foreign Policy**

Turkey's foreign policy was evolving. The Turkish speakers (Bagis, Yakis) emphasized the approach of "zero problems" with neighbours, with Turkey acting as a mediator and offering "soft power." Turkey's improving relations with Armenia, Georgia, and the Kurdish region of Iraq were highlighted. Some areas of "discrepancy" (Bagis) with the West were noted, especially Iran, which in the Turkish view should be engaged rather than isolated, and Russia, which Turkey recognized as a regional superpower. In general, the British side (Grieve, Wallace, Nicholson, Howell) accepted this assessment and particularly welcomed Turkey's NATO role (Grieve), but some "traps" (Hannay) remained with regard to Turkish policy toward Iran, Russia and Cyprus. There were unanswered questions of Turkish relations with Israel, Azerbaijan and the PKK.

### **Relations with the EU**

Given its salience as a sub-set of Turkey's foreign policy, EU issues attracted much discussion – and highlighted some divergences. While the British side (Grieve, Wallace, Nicholson, Hannay) expressed strong support for Turkish accession to the EU, calling it "inevitable" (Nicholson), a number of potential roadblocks surfaced. Cyprus, the Turkish "identity" (as opposed to diversity) and human rights (e.g. capital punishment) were chief among these. Some British speakers (Grieve, Wallace) drew attention to the lobbying influence of the Turkish Cypriot and Kurdish communities in the UK, but noted that the British Conservative Party was intent on building an "overwhelming case" for Turkish accession. The Kurdish problem was now "better understood" and loomed less large (Nicholson), as did other stereotypical barriers like the difficulty of absorption or the closet opposition of Germany and France. Austria was perhaps the single most forceful opponent of Turkish EU accession. From the Turkish side (Bagis, Kalin) and from comments raised during the Q&A sessions, it was clear that there was a feeling of double standards and "broken promises" on the part of the EU on this front, especially over Cyprus. While speakers (Kalin, Kiniklioglu) welcomed the British "principled" support role for EU accession, they pointed out that, if further rebuffed, Turkey might not keep open its application indefinitely. Questions were asked (Bagis) about why Turkey was deemed a suitable member of NATO but not of the EU. Emphasizing Turkey's determination about EU process, Bagis said "*Turkey's membership would bring a new dynamism for the issues encountered by Europe.*"

### **Human Rights and Religion**

On their own initiative and in response to questions from the audience, speakers (Bagis, Yakis, Memecan) stressed the Islamic but secular aspect of Turkey, with its legal system grounded in its constitution not in Islam. There was some discussion of the headscarf issue (Kiniklioglu) and the strong emotions it generated. The current bout of Western “Islamophobia” (accepted by one British speaker – Grieve) was singled out for criticism, especially the growing trend in the EU to make Turkish accession subject to popular referendum when anti-Islamic sentiments might come to the fore. It was emphasized (Nicholson) that religion played no part in EU accession criteria, but that nationalism, especially in Eastern Europe, was on the rise.

### **The Problem Areas**

As noted above, the overall dynamics of the presentation emphasized the areas of agreement between Turkey, the UK and the wider Western community. However, speakers acknowledged that there are some problem areas. Cyprus is well understood and the discussion on this issue revealed some wide digression in points of view. The Turkish policy of engagement with Iran might emerge as a serious difficulty (Hannay) but a more general point (Grieve, Wallace) related to Turkish governance, in particular to the relative weakness of the opposition political structures and an unusual (in relation to UK) stress on Turkish national identity to the detriment of cultural plurality. Turkish speakers (Bagis) disputed this critique.

### **Energy**

The importance of energy as a driver of Turkish policy was singled out (Ogutcu), especially with regard to the government’s dependency on energy-related taxes. Turkey’s role as a “hub” nation in relation to energy distribution was noted as a new element in regional geopolitics.

### **Summary**

Given the diverse debate, it is perhaps misleading to isolate a dominant theme. But the Chairman (Ancram) did identify a unifying thread to the discussion. This was that, in a world where traditional ‘bloc’ power was less effective, Turkey’s combination of hard and soft power made its “work in progress” one of the most interesting case studies in global politics.