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Perspectives on Anglo-Turkish Diplomatic Relations:

An interview with His Excellency Mr. Ümit Yalçın, the Ambassador of the Republic of Turkey to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland¹

Çiğdem Balım²

Q-1: What would you like to tell our readers about yourself, your mission, and the activities of the Embassy?

I Joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1989. I served in the office of the Turkish Consulate General in Rotterdam and in the Turkish Embassies in Baghdad and Moscow. I was Consul General at the Turkish Consulate General in Plovdiv and Dubai and served as the Ambassador of Turkey to Kuwait. While stationed in Ankara, I worked mostly on issues concerning the Middle East. Between October 2016 and August 2018, I served as the Permanent Undersecretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. On 1 October 2018, I was appointed as the Ambassador of the Republic of Turkey to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

We have historical ties with the United Kingdom. Hence, our relations continue in many dimensions on a wide scale with the accumulated wisdom of many centuries. As the Embassy, we are working to deepen our bilateral relations and cooperation even more in every area starting with economy, trade, tourism, education and security. Our bilateral political relations are on a positive route. Having left Brexit behind, we are predicting an increase in reciprocal visits this year. Last year, although the agendas of both Turkey and the UK were fully booked, several visits at ministerial and upper level bureaucratic levels were realized. We ended the year with the visit of the Turkish President to London during the NATO Leaders' Summit. During his visit, the President opened the Cambridge Central Mosque.

Other departments under the Embassy also give valuable support to deepening our relations. For example, our Office of the Commercial Counsellor lends it support to businesspeople who do or who want to do business in UK; it carries out activities to encourage the UK firms to invest in Turkey. Our Office of the Culture and Tourism Counsellor, makes important contributions in UK to the promotion of our country, our historical and cultural heritage and our shores.

Moreover, as the Turkish Embassy, we try to provide the needed support to many Turks who live in the United Kingdom and make significant contributions to the economic, political

¹ The interview took place at the Turkish Embassy in London on 20 February 2020.

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and cultural life here. The Office of the Consulate General, which is in a separate building, provides civil registry and citizenship services.

Q-2: What are your views about the diplomatic relations between the two countries over history?

Our diplomatic relations with the UK has a long history. British Empire is one of the first countries which sent an Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire. William Harborne, in 1583, was sent as an Ambassador to the court of Murad the Third. Yusuf Agah Effendi, who was one of the first Ambassadors of the Ottoman Empire, started to serve during George the Third in 1793.

Despite the fact that historically Turkey and the United Kingdom fought against each other sometimes, bilateral relations cooperation in the face of joint interests has always been in the forefront. And today we work in close cooperation with the United Kingdom for the aim of spreading economic prosperity, stability, peace and security in different parts of the world. As members of NATO, we act together against many common issues from terrorist attacks to illegal immigration. During the time she was a member of the EU, the United Kingdom was a prominent supporter of our application to EU membership. With Middle East, North Africa and Cyprus in the first place, developments in our region, issues of global security, and the development of economic and trade cooperation both bilaterally and with the third parties are the main items on our common agenda. Our bilateral relations have gained a new momentum in all areas with the establishment of strategic partnership set up in 2007.

Q-3: Can you expand on the economic and trade relations between the two countries- past and future?

Our economic and trade relations go back a long time in history as I said before. Before the establishment of reciprocal continuous diplomatic representation, the British merchants used to travel to Istanbul, a major world city then as well. In fact, the first British Ambassador to Istanbul, William Hargrave, was a merchant and knew Istanbul from his earlier trips to the city.

Today also, economy and trade continue to be an important driving force of our relations. United Kingdom is the second largest export market of Turkey with our bilateral trade volume of 16,5 billion dollars by the end of 2019. In 2019, our export was nearly 11 billion dollars, our import was close to 5,5 billion dollars. Major groups of our exports to United Kingdom are the products of automotive industry and automotive supplies, textiles, electric and non-electric machinery and utensils, iron and steel. During the past 15 years, the United Kingdom with an investment over 10 billion dollars, is the fifth in line among the countries which have invested in Turkey the most.

Our tourism relations continue to develop as well. In 2018, 2.2 million British tourists visited Turkey. That number was up to 2.5 million in 2019. On March 2, 2020 Turkish visa requirement has been abolished for the UK citizens, which will help to increase this number even higher.

The efforts to increase cooperation between the two countries in the areas of innovation, health, education, renewable energy is continuing. In international health services, to promote the services offered by Turkey and to support the state and private sector activities in health tourism, in February 2019 USHAŞ (Uluslararası Sağlık Hizmetleri/ International Health Services) was set up within the Ministry of Health, and it is working to increase cooperation with UK.

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To strengthen the cooperation between the UK and Turkey in science and innovation, there are foundations like Newton - Katip Çelebi Fund Bilateral Cooperation Program. In Defence industry we have cooperation and projects for joint production. Turkish and British economies are not in competition. Just the opposite, they complement each other. There is potential for cooperation in many areas in this context.

Q-4: How about cultural relations?

During the recent years, with the deepening of trade, economic and political relations, we are observing a dynamic development in our relations in the fields of culture, education, science and technology, and it makes us very happy.

In the UK we carry out our cultural and promotional activities through the coordinated efforts of the Yunus Emre Institute (YEE) and the Office of the Culture and Information Counsellor in the Embassy. In this context many diverse activities such as meetings with authors, lectures on culture and art, screening of films, book launches, activities on gastronomy, presentations on archaeology and design, exhibitions and concerts are realized. Moreover, YEE organizes courses and workshops on many areas. We continue to support the cultural and art activities organized by the non-governmental organizations set up by the members of our community. We continue to take part in and support the cultural activities in London by our performers and artists, or with their contribution, such as concerts, exhibitions, activities for charities. Pretty soon there are going to be many activities. For example, in the London Book Exhibition between March 10-12, we will have a Turkish National Stand. Moreover, on the evening of April 1st, "Turkish Waltzes Project" will take place in the Cardogan Hall, which will bring together the unforgettable works of the Turkish composers of the Ottoman and Republican period.

In Tourism, Turkey is among the most preferred destinations of the British tourists. The fact that the number of British tourists who came to Turkey during 2019 is over 2,5 million, enables our historical and cultural wealth to be better known by the British. It increases our human communication.

Our cooperation in higher education with the UK has gathered momentum during the past few years. Moreover, within the framework of cooperation in science and innovation, from our country support is given to many innovative projects and initiatives in areas of health, agriculture, food security, management of natural disasters and risk, energy and climate change.

Q-5: What do you think about the relations between the two countries following BREXIT?

The United Kingdom is an important partner and ally for us. Before BREXIT, she has been among the countries which supported our membership to EU most. However, people of the UK have made a decision and the Government has taken steps suitable with that decision.

We have to look forward and not back from the point we are now. And that is what we are doing. We are striving that our bilateral trade and our citizens settled here are not affected. Within the context of various meeting mechanisms, we have set up with the UK, we get together regularly. We discuss these issues in detail. Our labour has started to bear fruit. The authorities of both countries will carry out talks to sign an STA between Turkey and the United Kingdom at the same time as with EU.

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The United Kingdom aims to limit the side effects of Brexit and become a stronger global actor. And within the context of this aim, new trade strategies are being structured. For example, starting on the 1st of February the UK has started the “Ready to Trade” campaign in 13 countries and 18 cities, directed to future global partners. Turkey and Istanbul are among these cities and countries.

Finally, when we look at the future, we see that both parties are determined to deepen the relations after the period following Brexit. The UK, leaving behind the restrictions brought on by EU, will reach a wider area of movement. We want to make use of this new area in the best way possible.

Q-6: How about the contributions of the Turkish community in the UK?

Signed in 1963 and known as the Ankara Agreement, The Agreement Creating an Association Between the Republic of Turkey and the European Economic Community, provides the framework for co-operation between Turkey and the European Union. It created the basis especially after the 2000s, for our countrymen to come to the UK to settle. This is actually an agreement which creates the legal basis for relations between Turkey and the European Union. It was not only for the UK but for the other EU countries as well. However, it will lose its validity for the UK after 31 December 2020. We are following up on new regulations which will be put in action.

Turkish community here take part in almost all areas of life including economy, finance, trade, culture, sports, arts, politics and science, and they make important contributions to the community they live in. They have a reputation of being hard working, practical, skilful, hospitable and communicative people. We have over 5000 students in universities the UK.

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Ambassador Ümit Yalçın

Ambassador Ümit Yalçın was born in Ankara in 1967. He graduated from Ankara University, Faculty of Political Science, Department of International Relations in 1989.

Ambassador Yalçın joined the foreign service in 1989. He served in the Turkish Consulate General in Rotterdam and in the Turkish Embassies in Baghdad and Moscow. He was Consul General at the Turkish Consulate General in Plovdiv from 2005 to 2009 and Consul General at the Turkish Consulate General in Dubai from 2009 to 2012. He also served in different political departments in the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He was promoted to the rank of Ambassador in 2012 and served as Ambassador of Turkey to Kuwait.

Ambassador Yalçın held the positions of Director General for Bilateral Political Affairs and Deputy Undersecretary for Bilateral Political Affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. His portfolio covered North Africa & Middle East and Asia-Pacific. He was appointed as Permanent Undersecretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in October 2016. He held this role until August 2018. Since 1 October 2018, he has been serving as the Ambassador of the Republic of Turkey to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Ambassador Ümit Yalçın is married to Mrs. Gül Yalçın. They have one son.