

**Perspectives on Anglo-Turkish Diplomatic Relations:  
An interview with Sir Dominick Chilcott (KCMG), British Ambassador to Turkey\***

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**Photograph:** Sir Dominick Chilcott (KCMG), Prof. Dr. Amanda Jane Audrey Yeşilbursa, Prof. Dr. Behçet Kemal Yeşilbursa, British Embassy, Ankara, 10.01.2020.

***Q: What are your views on the diplomatic, economic and cultural relations between Turkey and Britain over history?***

**A:** The fact that we are both geographically positioned at the opposite ends of the European continent has been a great aid to our friendship, our relationship, because we've been too far away to threaten each other over the centuries. And our interests haven't clashed generally. But we've both had the common interest of preventing any one power on the European continent becoming so dominant that it threatens us both. So, we think of Philip II of Spain, at

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the time that Queen Elizabeth sent the first ambassador here. We were nearly invaded in Spain by the famous Spanish Armada, and the Spanish were a big threat to life in our part of the World. And I think at the same time, too, in the Ottoman Empire they were also worried about the rise of Catholic Spain, and the kind of intrinsic animosity with, obviously, the Muslim empire. So, there we had something in common. And I think the first ambassador was sent partly because this would be a friendly country, because we faced a common enemy, and partly I think because we thought we were not exploiting, or making full use of, the trading opportunities between us. Again, I think a function of distance. But again, we thought there was more that we could be doing.

And in an odd way really, that kind of theme goes all the way through. So, if you think of the Napoleonic times, there again we had a shared interest, as it were, of putting Napoleon back in his box. And I'm very conscious that one of the nice stories you can tell about British-Turkish relations in the early 19th Century was when in the Battle of the Nile, Admiral Lord Nelson's fleet destroyed the French fleet, just off Egypt, and the Sultan Selim III gave Nelson as a reward this wonderful diamond brooch, which had a kind of mechanism inside it. It was rather unusual. But there are people who write about this brooch in the UK now. There's a man who came to İstanbul last year, and he's written a book about the brooch and what it meant for Nelson and what it meant for British-Turkish relations. So, this brooch continues to fascinate people. One of my predecessors, David Reddaway, who is now the master of Goldsmiths College in South London, has a copy of the brooch. Because it's a piece of jewellery and Goldsmiths, I think their origins were in jewellery, unconnected to David, they have a copy of the old diamond chelengk. Which gives us a kind of sense of the relations. Although when the Ottoman Empire began to collapse, Victorian public opinion was very inflamed by stories of massacres of Bulgarians, and that soured the relationship for a while.

One of the high points in our alliance of course was against Russia. So, you have Spain first, then you have France, and you have Russia. And they're a worry to both of us for different reasons. But essentially, they're a common enemy that we need to combine against. And of course, Turkey fought how many wars against Russia? I think the only one you won convincingly was the Crimean War, when the French and the British and the Ottomans were aligned against the Russians. That was a decisive victory in the end. And, of course, we have the memory of Florence Nightingale in Üsküdar, and all those wonderful advances in medicine which were a result of that terrible conflict. I think those a three really big highlights. But they're a bit overshadowed in the popular modern consciousness I think now by the First World War and that whole episode, because I think much of Turkey's popular discourse when it thinks about itself often thinks about those years and about "Çanakkale Geçilmez" and, you know, the Gallipoli, Campaign, and similarly the early days of the struggle for the republic. Those are really important, and it's not taking away the importance, but it's not the whole story of British-Turkish relations.

So, I think that sense in Britain, that is shared in Turkey, of the strategic importance of the relationship has never really gone away. In the modern era, that is demonstrated by the support that the UK as a member state of the European Union, a status of course that ends in a couple of weeks time, that we've been the champion of the Turkish goal of integrating with European Union institutions and getting membership one day. And we've done that because we've really, really believed that it's strongly in the West's interest for Turkey to be part of the European Union, to be a member state of the European Union because of the strength that would bring to the Union, and of also what it would mean for Turkey itself. And a more prosperous, stable ally, because it is an ally already, but it could be an even more significant ally for us. So, I think that strategic appreciation is there, and maybe that is one of the factors that means our relationship continues to be a good, strong relationship at a time when many of Turkey's relationships with individual European countries has been much more volatile. So, long may that continue. I think post-Brexit things may change a bit, but you may want to get onto that later.

I suppose another thing to say about the more recent past we've had a strong interest since the independence of Cyprus in 1960, with our status of us being a guarantor power inside Greece and Turkey, and because of the events in Cyprus since its independence we've worked with Turkey cooperatively and to some degree competitively to try and pursue a settlement on the island. And I think since the Annan Plan, since after Denktaş left, it became much easier to contemplate a united island on the basis of a bi-communal, bi-zonal federation. And that's been the thrust of our work with the Turkish government which has broadly supported that, and made great efforts for that to succeed. I think that's a new area of cooperation that's going very well, and I think had we achieved a settlement in Cyprus back in 2004, when the Annan Plan was drawn up, the present rivalry that we have now and the tension in the Eastern Mediterranean wouldn't exist. I think the whole area would be transformed. I think that's an area where we were trying to do the right thing, but we were unfortunately frustrated by others.

I guess also, if you think about our membership of the European Union, what we've had in common as a function of that membership of the European Union with Turkey has been the Customs Union. Both countries are participating in the Customs Union. And it's undoubtedly the case that the Customs Union has been a huge boost to our bilateral trade. Particularly to Turkish exports to the UK, because the overheads for manufacturing here are lower than almost anywhere else inside the Customs Union, and because Turkey benefits from getting all the facilitating arrangements within the Customs Union. If you're a business and you want to export across the European Union, this must be one of the best places to invest in your factory and put it up. A skilled, hard-working workforce, generally lower costs, and I think a lot of businesses have been set up with this big 60 million market of fairly well-to-do British consumers buying textiles, white goods, vehicles, vehicle parts designed for the British

market but made here in Turkey. That's worked really well. And, of course, that's one of the challenges when we leave the European Union and the Customs Union, how we've managed to maintain our trade. Because we are the second largest export destination for goods from Turkey. So, we're a massively valuable market for Turkey. And there's a big trade-surplus in Turkey's favour, which people remind me about from time to time, because part of my job should be to try and re-balance it a bit. But obviously this is a medium to longer-term goal.

***Q: You mentioned that the events of the First World War shaped the collective consciousness of the Turkish people. Obviously, the formation of the Republic does represent a huge change in the course of Turkish history, which brings me on to the second part of this question. Regarding Atatürk, how do you view his leadership and his revolutions? How did he influence the relations between the two countries on a diplomatic level?***

**A:** Well, I think there's an enormous admiration for him in the UK, and I think it's because of the changes he brought about within Turkey. So, he was obviously an adversary in the First World War, and in the immediate aftermath of the First World War when he was beginning the struggle for the Republic, again it was not British policy at the time. You know, we were looking for a different kind of future. But I think once he had established the Republic we recognised that this was a new Turkey, and when we saw the direction the new Turkey was going to take in aligning itself more and more to Western standards and adopting the Italian penal code, and other kinds of European models for important institutions, then I think we thought, well, here's a country that's trying to rediscover itself and its potential. There was a huge amount of support for the reforms that he was introducing. When the Second World War came along, although Turkey was neutral obviously, nevertheless its neutrality was not unhelpful to the Allies' cause. That's obviously after Atatürk's time, but it was the Turkey which he had created that we were then dealing with. Then after that, when we get into the Cold War, although we might have taken a little time to recognise the value of Turkey as a NATO ally, once it became a NATO ally, I think we then had a massive partner on our side of the Cold War divide that was going to be extremely valuable. So, again, I think that's a function of where Atatürk was taking the country from the start. Because the Cold War wasn't a power struggle, it was a kind of an ideological competition between what we might call the Western way of organising society, with all the freedoms we enjoy and the liberal economic model, which was something very different from totalitarianism, authoritarianism and command economies, and non-pluralistic politics. Turkey clearly belonged in the Western camp. That again is his legacy.

Though I think when he was alive, Edward VIII was the only monarch, British monarch, who came here and met him. There's some quite nice archival footage of him arriving by boat on the Bosphorus at the Dolmabahçe Palace steps. I think that's a nice little vignette, too. My

wife said what they both have in common is that they are both snappy dressers, Atatürk always looks immaculate. And, also King Edward VIII, although he doesn't have too many fans these days, but one of the things you can't take away from him was that he was always very well turned out. I think you go back to those days, there was much less face-to-face contact between heads of government and heads of state, so it's maybe not that surprising that there wasn't more contact with the monarchy at the time.

One indication of how important we thought Atatürk was in the new republic was the establishment of this embassy. Because this plot of land was taken because of its proximity to the Pembe Köşk, and one of my predecessors, maybe it was Percy Loraine, one of the things he was well-known for was playing backgammon with Atatürk in the evenings, not every evening I'm sure, but he'd be invited up to play backgammon with the President in the evening, because he was the neighbour. And I think this shows that he thought this was the man that mattered, this is the person we wanted to stay close to and build a relationship with.

(The positioning of the embassy) was quite deliberate. We've got some old photographs of Ankara at the time we came, photographs taken by people who were thinking "Should we be building here?" making recommendations back to London. And because we're quite high up here, you're looking right across Ankara to the Kale, and there's nothing between here and the Kale. It's just open countryside, and there's this little place of about 2,000 souls at the Kale. Quite a few miles in the distance. So the decision to come here as quite far-sighted, because it's not the obvious place to be. You'd want to be in town somewhere.

***Q: Moving on now to the present. At the current time, given Brexit and the trade deals you mentioned, could you expand a bit more on that?***

**A:** There's a very close relationship actually. I think it's been good for a while. I think it's good because, as I was talking about a little bit earlier, of the strategic appreciation we've had because of Turkey's importance for peace and stability in this region. And I think that's been pretty constant, whether we've had a Labour government in power, or the coalition, or the Conservatives. It hasn't changed much. So that's been a strong foundation. And I think in the last few years, particularly with the challenges we face in the fight against terrorism, I think our level of cooperation also is something of which we're proud. We always want to do more, but I think we're doing quite well. And that's both in terms of what we do with the PKK in the UK, and the cooperation we have against DAESH here in Turkey. That's an area which isn't easy, but nonetheless I think we work well together. And that's another reason for being pleased with the state of the bilateral relationship.

And there's trade. We're both important trading partners for each other. That matters hugely. I think also there's a certain people-to-people, I mean here you are! I'm preaching to the

converted! There's a strong people-to-people connection. It's not like Germany, the Netherlands, or Belgium, or even in France, where the people-to-people connection is often between Turkish people who have gone to live in those countries and here. So, there's a lot of backwards and forwards, and the numbers are quite high. But I bet if you look behind the numbers, I think you'll see a lot of people coming back to Turkey are in fact Turkish people who live in Germany coming back to see their family. Whereas in the UK we don't have a big community, so when we talk of two and half a million British people coming to Turkey this year, which is the likely figure we're expecting when we get the final month's figures, we'll have two and a half million British people who are curious about Turkey coming here because they've heard it's a good place to come to. And most of those will be coming for summer holidays, and all the reasons you come for summer holidays – sunshine, seaside, interesting cuisine, local culture, and the warm welcome, and all those kinds of things. But it's still, even though it sounds perhaps not particularly deep, nonetheless the frequency of the numbers of people coming means that the populations get to know each other.

***Q: Also in Fethiye, there's a settled British population there, which is interesting. People have chosen to stay in Turkey, but turned it into a little bit of Britain.***

**A:** I think the number of the residents is quite small, if you look at the population of the countries, when you think of Spain or France, it's really quite small. But nonetheless, there are parts of the country which people have settled in. I think most of the Brits that come here either as they're preparing to retire, because they see the advantages of being retired here. Your pension goes a bit further and you can have a kind of lifestyle which you couldn't expect to have as a pensioner in the UK. So I think that works for people, too. So, I think people-to-people links are another source of satisfaction.

So, the trade links are good, and the strategic defence, the armed forces connection is very strong. We've had the Chief Defence Staff visiting here last autumn. And I think we have army to army talks next week. There's always something going on on the defence side, and I think there's a lot of mutual respect between the sets of armed forces. I mentioned the counter-terrorism and the national security question which were very important. I think, too, because we're a permanent member of the Security Council of the United Nations, we feel we have a responsibility to take an interest in threats to peace and security wherever they occur. And at the moment a lot of them seem to be happening around this part of the world. And, of course, that's Turkey's region, so Turkey's fully involved in Syria, Iran, Iraq, Yemen, Libya. And as a permanent member of the Security Council, our responsibility is to be fully involved in these questions. Then I think that the foreign policy dialogue we have with Turkey is rather more operational and meaningful, that it might be in a country of comparable size but less happening. So, I think our foreign policy exchanges are also another reason for thinking this is a proper, substantive relationship. That works well for us.

A few years ago, we asked, how would you define international relations very broadly? And we said that there are relations that you might file under the heading ‘prosperity’, which is essentially about trade and investment; and the relations about ‘national security’, which are about foreign policy, defence, cooperation and defence alliances; and the third area, which would be broadly ‘consular issues’, which is helping people who get into distress, and sort of people-to-people connections. And under those three headings, we’re both important partners for each other, but I think particularly prosperity, I think the trade figures speak for themselves; and on the defence side, I think the national security questions, we are both valuable to each other. On people, I think we have more people coming here than Turks visiting the UK at the moment. But even so, I think it’s a strong people-to-people relationship. So I think in each of those three areas we’re strong. And another way of looking at it, which I think will be useful in the post-Brexit calculations that we have to do about where our most important relationships lie, is that if you think about countries which are broadly strategically aligned with which you broadly share the same values, you’re close enough to have an important economic, trading relationship with. Then you look at Turkey and say, Turkey’s a member of NATO, so there’s strategic alignment for you. It’s a founder member of the Council of Europe, so on the basis of values, it aspires to be living to the same values that we aspire to live to. There’s also G20, so in terms of the economic and trade relationships, we’re both G20 economies. And I think Turkey has ambitions to rise from the bottom of the G20 list to be somewhere in the middle, or even in the top half. That shows there’s a lot of potential there as well. So if you look at how we’ve divided it up to analyse it, you can see that Turkey and Britain have an important thing in common.

***Q: And these are not affected by Brexit?***

**A:** And these are not affected by Brexit, no. It doesn’t matter whether we’re in the European Union or out of it.

***Q: So, this is related to my next question, which is what would be the opportunities and challenges, so these would be the opportunities?***

**A:** Well, I think they’re kind of foundations. I think the challenges are easier to identify than the opportunities. I’d say that the biggest challenge would be our future trading relationship. And I’m pretty confident that we will find a way of facilitating trade on a preferential basis, which is what we enjoy now through the Customs Union. But until we get there, I think it will feel like quite a task. And we’ve given ourselves a year, this year, to complete the negotiation on the trade relationship with the European Union. And we’re agreed too that because of the Customs Union relationship, when we’re ready with the UK-EU trade treaty, whatever it looks like, we need to be ready at the same time with the UK-Turkey trade deal. So, those two

have to run in parallel, and the immediate challenge for this year is to just make sure it happens. I think that's the most obvious challenge.

On the opportunity side, I think that when we're out of the European Union, the UK will have to take greater responsibility for its own international relations, because we won't have the comfort of the European Union doing quite a lot of this for us. And that means you have to invest more in bilateral relationships in the future. And for all the reasons we've just been talking about, G20, NATO, Council of Europe, I would have thought Turkey was one of the countries we would want to invest heavily in in the future. So, quite how you express how that opportunity looks like in concrete terms now is a bit hard to say. But I think those are the reasons why we as two countries matter enormously to each other. And I think the extra dimension, because that obviously applies now at the moment, the extra dimension post-Brexit is that we will both have the challenge from opposite ends of the European continent of learning to live alongside the European Union as a third country as big and important powers in our own right. But nonetheless, compared to the size and the economic weight of the European Union, much smaller. And we have to decide how much do we align our own systems with the European Union, because that facilitates a lot of things; or to what extent do we choose to take our own path and use our individual sovereignty to do something different? And I think those are questions that will be with use for a long time. But it'll give us a sense of commonality, which will be good for the relationship as well.

***Q: You were here in Turkey between 1985 and 1988. Obviously there have been huge changes in the country since then. What are the most notable ones for you? When you first came back after that time, what struck you?***

**A:** Well, I think the physical look of Turkey, certainly in terms of infrastructure and buildings, has changed enormously since the 1980s. We used to go between Ankara and İstanbul in the old days. I remember the first time I made the journey coming from İstanbul this way to come and join the Embassy in 1985 the weather was a bit foggy. And the people at the Embassy said don't come via Bolu in the fog, it's just too dangerous, so we came via Eskişehir. But even via Eskişehir, I remember it was so foggy we couldn't really see the road properly, and it was a single lane road in each direction. So we just sat on the tail lights of a coach that we hoped was going to Ankara, and we just followed this coach wherever it was going. It could have gone anywhere, but fortunately it did go to Ankara. And that's how we got here. Whereas these days, you have spectacularly good roads and they go everywhere. So that's an enormous change. Roads and bridges, hospitals and schools. When I came to Ankara, there was one tall building, which was the Büyük Ankara Oteli, and that was it. It's still here on Atatürk Bulvarı, I can't remember how many storeys it is, it's not very high. But that was it, the only tall building. But now, of course, all the development on the Eskişehir road, it's extraordinary.



I suppose the second thing to say, which is connected with the first, is that the cities now are enormous. So, there's been this general rise in population, but an absolutely spectacular rise in the movement of people from the countryside into the big cities. And that wasn't the case, I think it was just starting when I came here before. I mean in 1985-86, when I was here before, Ankara province had about a million people, and the city here was maybe just under a million people. And, what, it's now five and a half million or something? I mean, it's absolutely enormous.

İstanbul, when I came back to İstanbul for the first time, having been away for thirty years, I was here as a language student, trying to brush up my Turkish a bit, and I was taken by someone up to Sarıyer, to look down from a high point, to look down the Bosphorus. And I couldn't believe...well, I could believe because I could see it! But I was really surprised to see how much development there had been along, particularly on the European side of the Bosphorus. It was kind of continuous development almost the length of the Bosphorus, all the way down from Sarıyer, down to the Golden Horn. Whereas the İstanbul I had remembered was really a series of little towns and little villages along the Bosphorous with lots of, kind of, greenery in between.

But it's not all bad news, I mean it's not bad news because it's development. But actually, on greenery, there were very few trees in Turkey in the 1980s. And you used drive around this kind of lunar landscape, you know, just bareness, bare hills everywhere, and it looked really barren, and not very inviting. Now I'm struck when driving around that you're driving through forests most of the time. I mean, quite a lot of the time you're driving through woods. So, I think whoever's responsible for the reforestation plans deserves a credit, because it's made a big difference in thirty years.

And, of course, along with all these things people are much wealthier than they used to be. I mean, the general standard of living is much higher. You know, there were no traffic jams in Ankara in the '80s, because there was very little traffic. And what little traffic there was, people were driving – what were those cars called in those days? The Kartal? The Şahin? There were two, kind of, versions of Renaults. But I mean now the place is full of sophisticated, expensive cars. And traffic jams. I think that's a sign of...and also the shops...Tunalı Hilmi, we used to go down to Tunalı Hilmi in the old days, and there were bakkals...I don't remember, well, there were certainly no AVMs. And there was no kind of big Vakko and all the rest of it, it was all kind of pretty, you know, it was all much less developed than now. I mean, Turkey's gone crazy for shopping malls. They didn't exist when I was here before. So that's a big change.

***Q: So now my final question...as I mentioned before, we've read all these valedictory despatches of previous British ambassadors to Ankara, for example, Sir Alexander Knox***

***Helm, I think, who was involved in acquiring this land, apparently. James Bowker and Roderick Sarell...in these final despatches, they always wrote about their own personal observations regarding Turkey and the Turks. Briefly, what are your observations about Turkey and the Turkish people?***

**A:** Well, I mean this is the country that I came to in the 1980s. I originally came as a student in 1984. I knew absolutely nothing about ... I mean, almost nothing about. But after three years being here, I wanted to come back here as quickly as I could. It didn't take me very long to realise what a wonderful place this is. And that's partly because of the country – there's so much diversity and interest, and, you know, if you like history and archaeology, I can't think of anywhere better to be than to be here. And it's partly about the people, of course, the welcoming, the traditional, warm hospitality. You know, all the things people talk about which happen to be true. You know, the hospitality that you get, and the sense of fun, too. I think it's a country you can have a lot of fun in. And if you enjoy travelling around, anyway, all these reasons. And, of course, I'd spent the best part of a year trying to learn Turkish, so I was quite invested in the country personally when I came. So, I just wanted to come back, really. And it took me thirty years, but it shows that if you keep trying you eventually might succeed. And so, my sense is that, for all the changes we have talked about, actually the kind of core values, or qualities that appealed to me as a twenty-four-year-old appeal to me as a sixty-year-old now. So, I think they're still there. I think one thing that has changed is, though I don't know if other people would agree with me, but I think there's more kind of energy, colour in modern society in Turkey now. There's more kind of noise. And I think everyone has a view on something. When I was here before, for example, the broadcasting, there was TRT1 and TRT2, and TRT2 only broadcasted for a few hours in the evening. I think they were both black and white. There was very limited local radio. There was no internet, obviously. There was none of that sort of stuff. And it was kind of simpler. More deferential. Those first few years after the 1980 coup, things were opening up again, but they were still pretty...people knew their place and what was expected from them as a whole. Whereas now I think that it's more kind of disputative, there's more kind of, I know people worry about the state of democracy and things, but there's a lot of noise in the system, a lot of colour and interest. And it feels, for me, very healthy. It's fun being here for all that local debate as well. And travelling around, particularly where the tourists go in the west, there's a kind of freedom, a tolerance there, a lifestyle which is very attractive as well.

***Thank you very much.***

## **Short Biography of Sir Dominick Chilcott**

Sir Dominick Chilcott is a career diplomat who joined the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in 1982. He has served as:

- High Commissioner to Sri Lanka and Maldives (2006 to 2007)
- Deputy Ambassador to the United States (2008 to 2011)
- Ambassador to Iran (for six weeks only in late 2011 - the posting was ended by the attack on the embassy)
- Ambassador to Ireland. (2012 to 2016)
- He is now serving as the UK's ambassador to the Republic of Turkey.

In addition to those postings, Dominick has served in Ankara (1985-8), Lisbon (1993-5) and at the UK's mission to the European Union in Brussels (1998-2002). Between overseas assignments, Dominick has worked in the FCO in London on European, African and Middle Eastern affairs. He has been a private secretary to two Foreign Secretaries, Sir Malcolm Rifkind and the late Mr Robin Cook. He was director of the Iraq Policy Unit in 2003 and director for bilateral relations with European countries from 2003-6.

Dominick is married to Jane and they have a daughter and three sons. They met at Oxford University where Dominick read philosophy and theology and Jane read English literature. Before Oxford, Dominick spent a year in the Royal Navy as a midshipman. He went to school at St Joseph's College, Ipswich. Dominick's hobbies include walking, sport of all kinds, reading, history, music and the theatre.

## **British Ambassador to Turkey**

The Ambassador represents Her Majesty The Queen and the UK government in the country to which they are appointed. They are responsible for the direction and work of the Embassy and its Consulates, including political work, trade and investment, press and cultural relations, and visa and consular services.