

Prudent optimism: Turkish Ambassador. The Defence Viewpoints interview by Nick Watts

Turkey sits at the nexus of a region beset with geopolitical issues. Developments in Syria; the prospects for the Middle East Peace Process; developments in the north and south Caucasus; the continuing tensions with Iran and the situation in Iraq. Reflecting on these matters and on its relationship with the EU Turkey's Ambassador to London HE Mr Ahmet Ünal Çeviköz characterized his outlook as being based on "prudent optimism."

The most pressing area of concern is on Turkey's door step: Syria. "Two years ago the revolt in Syria seemed to be a logical consequence of the Arab Spring." The uprising started from the desire for a more egalitarian society. "We reached out to the Syrian government" and Turkey received a positive response from Assad. "But he never kept his promises. That was discouraging, but we continue to search for a political solution." As the Turkish government realized that bilateral dialogue wasn't achieving anything, it started reaching out to neighbours. Firstly to the Arab League. Then the focus shifted to the UN, where China and Russia are blocking any consensus on the Kofi Annan peace plan. "The current administration and Assad himself have lost legitimacy". Two years of bloodshed and an estimated 70,000 casualties mean that Assad and his regime cannot be sustainable.

Mr Çeviköz can see similarities between developments in Syria and Iraq, where he has previously served. This alludes both to the nature of the regime and the sectarian lines increasingly dividing the country. After the removal of Saddam Hussein and the Ba'athist (Sunni) regime a power vacuum resulted. This enabled Shia militias to vie for influence through the use of violence. The west must guard against a repetition of this. Ousting Assad could mean events follow a similar pattern. The international community needs a plan or it "shouldn't attempt it." Currently the Annan plan is the only basis on which all parties seem to agree – but this is badly stalled.

Syria is a Soviet style monolithic system. If this is demolished there will be a similar situation. It may be that some members of the current regime can be included in a new administration, but there can be no immunity from prosecution. Turkey has no preferred favourite to replace the Assad regime, but it notes the emergence of a more coherent opposition in the form of the Syrian National Coalition, based around the person of Moaz al Khatib. This has brought the various political and military groups under one umbrella. Initially this was a very disparate group, now it is becoming more coherent.

Turkey is understandably worried about the risk of regional contagion, as various factions seek to accentuate sectarian grievances on a wider scale. The Syrian population is majority Sunni; the Allawites who form the elite are the minority. "Assad very mistakenly sees this as an opportunity to regionalize the conflict." He alluded to the shooting down of a Turkish aircraft; but the Turkish response was measured. Turkey doesn't want trouble with its neighbour, or in the region. The Syrian regime may be supported by the Shi'ites in Iraq. Matters in Iran are not helping – Syria has been seen as an ally of Iran, forming an axis with Hezbollah.

To complicate matters in Iraq the government of President Maliki has been pursuing what looks like increasingly sectarian based policies, despite his government being in a minority. Maliki remains in post with a Shia coalition. For the time being there seems to be no alternative to Maliki. The current situation allows the Kurds sufficient autonomy but the situation will continue to need watching.

Looking to the wider Middle East, Turkey has been trying to use its regional position to play a positive role in addressing the Arab – Israeli dispute. In 2008 Turkey succeeded in bringing Syrians and Israelis together to discuss the Golan issue. Turkey was acting as a messenger to facilitate proximity talks. All seemed to be going well. In December 2008 Israeli Prime minister Olmer visited Turkey. He had talks with his Turkish counterpart Mr Erdogan. On his return Israel attacked Gaza; this left the Turkish Prime minister feeling betrayed. This created an atmosphere of mistrust which continued until the Gaza peace flotilla incident of May 2010. "Israeli soldiers attacked a peaceful mission. During which 9 Turkish citizens were killed." According to the Turkish government the 9 were "deliberately executed – shot at close range."

To normalize relations Turkey seeks an apology and compensation for the families of those killed. Efforts along these lines have been pursued through intermediaries. A form of words has been agreed in discussion, but this has so far been blocked by the Israeli government. Turkey hopes that a new mandate for the Israeli government following recent elections will give impetus to finding a way through this particular problem.

The situation in the Caucasus presents yet another mixed picture. Of the four so called frozen conflicts in the former Soviet Union, three are on Turkey's doorstep. A troubled history with Armenia handicaps the ability for mediation in the disputes between Armenia and Azerbaijan. President Sargysan of Armenia has recently won elections which could give new impetus to resolve the dispute over the territory of Nagorno Karabakh, which has been frozen since 1993. The OSCE sponsored Minsk process intended to address this issue has not made progress.

The Georgian stand-off with Russia since August 2008 also needs addressing. Disagreements between Georgia's President Saakashvili and the newly elected coalition under Prime Minister Ivanishvili on how best to resolve this problem may have to wait the outcome of Presidential elections. Territories with areas under occupation see progress based on the withdrawal of the occupying power. The Balkans offers a parallel as a means of addressing these disputes. However, in the Balkan context the prospect of EU membership was also an incentive for disputing parties to seek solutions. Such an opportunity is not available in the Caucasian context.

Addressing Turkey's long held ambition to join the EU the Ambassador ruefully notes that this year marks the 50th anniversary of the Treaty of Ankara which Turkey signed with the EEC in 1963. In the meantime many countries which were part of the Warsaw Pact and Yugoslavia have preceded Turkey into EU membership. "Turkey wants to be part of the modern community of nations" which it sees as full involvement in the EU. In 7 years since Turkey began negotiations only 13 chapters of the EU acquis have been opened. This frustration finds its way into remarks of ministers. It also serves to diminish support for EU among the Turkish public.

The stalled negotiations mean that since 2010 no new chapters have been opened. The previous French government blocked any progress, along with the Greek Cypriot government. The new Hollande government has made more positive signals and the election of a new Greek Cypriot President in February is encouraging. President Anastasiades was one of those who did not vote to oppose the 2004 UN brokered plan for the re-unification of Cyprus. Before the end of June it may be possible to open new chapters on Turkey's EU accession process. Looking at this and all of the other complicated and nuanced items on Turkey's foreign policy agenda, prudent optimism looks like being the best approach.