

# Reflections on Turkey and the Wider Region

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President, Republic of Turkey (2007-14)

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### Robin Niblett

Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Chatham House. Thank you very much for joining us this evening, a slightly more wintry evening but one which I think we will hopefully warm up a little bit with this conversation that I'm delighted we're going to hold this evening, with the eleventh president of Turkey, Abdullah Gül. Mr President, it's a pleasure to have you back at Chatham House. We've had the pleasure of hosting you here, not least in the context of the 2010 Chatham House Prize, which you won during your time as president. As I think you all know here, President Gül held that position of president of Turkey between 2007 until earlier this year. He had served prior to that briefly as prime minister but then as deputy prime minister and foreign minister, from 2003 to 2007. He was one of the founding members of the AK Party. But I think known to us, certainly to me and to my colleagues in Chatham House, in particular for his great understanding and knowledge of the region – for being a statesman for his region. We were discussing for a few minutes before we came down here what a difficult region it is.

We are going to have a conversation to try and draw out some of these issues between the two of us, for 20 to 25 minutes. This is all on the record, as you would imagine. Then I will give an opportunity to our members and guests here to be able to ask some questions and raise some points.

I should note that President Gül is here on a wild trip, I think, through London, over to Canada (where he participated in the Halifax International Security Forum, one of the important security meetings that takes place each year in Canada), and now on his way back he is stopping off here at Chatham House. He had an evening, I believe a reception, at the embassy yesterday, where a book is conveniently coming out, which you did not write. I was told it's an unauthorized biography: *Abdullah Gül and the Making of the New Turkey*. But it's always good when an unauthorized biography is one you're happy to promote. So for those of you who want to follow up on the detail of what we don't have the opportunity to discuss this evening, they can go and get the book. You won't benefit from the book in terms of being the author, but sounds like it's a good read.

Although I am posing the questions in English to President Gül, who certainly understands and speaks good English, I think we are going to take advantage of the translation here, so his replies will be in Turkish.

If I may say, President Gül, first of all: welcome, delighted to have you back at Chatham House. When our members chose you as the winner of the Prize, it was really on the work you had done in one of the most complicated regions. I think it's fair to say that around about 2010, it was a moment of possibility – possibility with Europe, possibility even in the Middle East, possibility with Armenia (a country where you put a lot of personal effort). I think it would be fair to say now it's a time of problems and risks, and very hard to see the opportunities.

I think we can maybe get into the specifics in a minute, but first of all I wanted you to maybe just share with us at a macro level, at an overview level, how you feel the region has changed in those four years since you were last with us at Chatham House. What are the big things that are changing? Is this something global that is just affecting the region? Is it specific to your region, to the Middle East, to where Turkey finds itself? How have things changed most importantly, in your opinion?

## Abdullah Gül

[English translation] First of all, I'd like to thank Chatham House for giving me the opportunity to talk again here. As you said earlier, I was honoured as being the winner of the Chatham House [Prize] in 2010, and I carry this honour with me.

The greatest change in the region, especially in recent years, is the fact that the region became even more unstable. The stability has deteriorated even more. Maybe I should take you to the first Gulf War years, in which time the only great true risk was Saddam Hussein, but when we look at it now – yes, he has been defeated, but all the problems in the region increased in size and volume. Yes, the problems are being dealt with individually but when we look at the real problems, there has been no improvement. Maybe the greatest issue for the world since the Second World War is the Palestine issue, not being able to establish peace in the Middle East, in Palestine. This is acting as the initiator of problems in other places, other parts of the world, and some are using this, exploiting this issue for other purposes.

At one time, President Reagan and Gorbachev had started a good progress, a process. In fact, Resolution 687 of the United Nations was passed, which foresaw getting rid of all mass destruction weapons in the region. But when we look at the region now, we don't see a positive development, an improvement. In fact, on the contrary: pain and suffering has been suffered.

We see, importantly, that some countries – and Britain and other countries are amongst those – there is recently a new stance in relation to the Palestine issue. I guess frustration, disappointment in relation to the regional issue – I think disappointment or frustration is a good way of defining this reaction. So the cumulative problems post-Saddam Hussein have affected one another, as if the Pandora's box had been opened and new problems came to the surface. I'm expecting that you might ask me about this, or there are elite participants in the hall who might ask me these questions about IS and other developments in the region. They all came out of that box. So what will come out of that box tomorrow could be a bit of a surprise. On the other hand, it shouldn't be a surprise – it won't be a surprise for me if that happens, because the region is capable and the climate in the region is capable of producing such results. Uncertainty creates in the region – and Turkey being a neighbour to the area in question, gives discomfort to Turkey.

Sometimes questions are asked, what is Turkey doing? First of all, Turkey in its region would prefer to establish and protect stability and peace in the area. Certain things can be expected and may not be expected, but when you look at Turkey, Turkey's whole effort, whole desire, is establishing peace and stability in the region. If you like, this is the way I've summarized. I have drawn a rather pessimistic picture but that is a realistic way of looking at it.

There are a few positive developments. For example, a new stream in Europe – perhaps we can call that a new trend in Europe – about Palestine. Subsequent to chemical weapons in Syria, Syria being cleared of chemical weapons. That's a positive development. And the coalition that's been formed against IS. We can see that when you use hard force, military force, against such problems, you do get results very quickly. The relationship between the Iraqi Kurdish administration and Baghdad, and the warming, positive taming of the relationship between the two, are positive developments in the region, next to the greater disappointment and frustration in the area.

### Robin Niblett

Specifically, as you brought up the Islamic State (IS), do you think that this is just another insurgency, or does it reflect something which is much more dangerous for Turkey, which is the breakdown of states that were your neighbours? The breakdown in governments that you used to be able to negotiate with. You had a good relationship with Syria, with the Assad government, in your time. What it would appear, at least to yourself, is that part of this new phenomenon is that we cannot go back to the old system, that maybe Baghdad will not control all of Iraq again, Damascus will not control all of the space of Syria again. That in a way, you will not have a neighbourhood that looks like states and governments. Is this what you fear? Do you think this could be one of the outcomes of the current conflict?

### Abdullah Gül

[English translation] I wouldn't view the IS problem as a bilateral problem involving Turkey and IS. It's a problem for humanity in the region. Of course, Turkey is more deeply involved because of its proximity to the problem area.

This is what I would like to say about IS. About two or three years ago, no one was talking about IS – or four years ago, no one wanted to talk about it. But if you look at 2006, if you investigate into it, they were making announcements and declarations in 2006 and they were talking about borders, how the borders are going to be reshaped. They were using a programme, making historical links about Arab people in Iraq and Syria, and especially taking advantage of the Sunni population's feelings, talking about the south in this way. Then when it came to the north, they were talking about the way it was being split and divided. Using such arguments, they were preparing the population in this way, priming if you like. But no one was reacting or talking about this.

Another positive development in Iraq is the formation of a more inclusive government, new government, which has appreciated now – although belatedly – the problems and mistakes of the past. The previous government was excluding the Sunni population, which was one of the primary factions of Iraq.

So various radical elements came to the region from other parts of the world, and the newly formed group have taken the people hostage. Those who had experienced the fact that they were being excluded, and some were feeling that way – others were concerned that Iraq was being influenced by Iran. So when such emotions grew in people and when they were let to perform freely, this outcome was inevitable.

If IS had not feloniously killed an American citizen, perhaps such attention would not have been attracted to the region. I never thought anyone desired such a picture, such a reality. Who in their human awareness wants to have or accept such a group? They did gain power and strength, and when people gain strength and power they start to act in a maximum way. When they did so, when they went to the extreme of the extreme, they attracted attention. They have been stopped and opposed. Of course, the despicable murders they commit, which we have all witnessed, we felt deep sadness. Of course, we have criticized what they did. The costs are high: pain suffered, people died.

## Robin Niblett

People were not just afraid of IS because of its violence; they were afraid as well because they thought Baghdad might fall. They thought Baghdad might collapse. So it's not just their violence that attracted attention, it was the realization of how weak the government appeared to be in Iraq.

## Abdullah Gül

[English translation] We need to make the distinction between – talking about the Islamic State, they use 'caliphate', all these seemingly Islamic images or elements. It is obvious, the statistics show that they do not have a positive image amongst Muslim countries, the Muslim masses. Muslim people, on the contrary, hate IS. They react to them because they represent Islam in such a horrific way. So they are a group who exploit the status quo. It's a political movement. It is a mistake to look at it as if it's a religious movement. We will have been mistaken and we will find ourselves employing the wrong methods in our struggle against them, and using wrong methods will create other forces to surface. So it is important to make that distinction.

I never thought there is a serious ideological threat in the region, in terms of Turkey or others. But of course there is a terrorist presence in the region. It's an area where terrorists are being trained. It's an area with such a capacity. It doesn't present risks just for the region, the risks are faced in Europe. We do know that people come to that region from all around the globe. I guess sometimes, somehow, they satisfy themselves by doing that. We do know about the murdering of two soldiers in Canada. Yes, there is a link in the region. There are sick people with sick psychologies, coming from broken families. They come to the area with their feelings of spite, revenge and hatred. They do create results.

## Robin Niblett

There is room to say that still the weakness of the states in the region may be part of the problem. But let me turn you to a different question. Your other big neighbour, or neighbourhood, is Russia. Here's another relationship that, at least from the West's point of view – the United States, the EU – has become much more complicated since you won the Chatham House Prize. You saw, in your term as president, the relationship go wrong. How does Turkey – how do you – think about your relationship with Russia today?

## Abdullah Gül

[English translation] I'm sure you can see Turkey is in the centre of all the developments, all the events. We were talking about the south, now the north of the region. We do have a problem of being proximate to the area. We do have historical relationship links to Russia. During the Cold War era, Turkey was a very important wing of NATO. We defended the free world against the Soviet Union and yes, we do not have the same world today, but none of these have been forgotten, no doubt.

Our alliance is quite obvious, where we stand in terms of our alliance. Of course we do work to improve our neighbourly relations and we do buy a large part of our gas from Russia, so in winter we are dependent on the Russian gas to feel warm, although we are trying to diversify the sources.

So we have this instability to our south. Now we are extremely uncomfortable because of the instability or discomfort that's coming from the north of our country. Because the Middle East has always had complications, we were somehow used to that experience, but the Russia-Ukraine issue is a deep issue and it's one of the most serious issues that NATO faces. The meetings involving NATO, Russia and Ukraine, these are taken very seriously by our country. But this is not just an issue of Ukraine and Russia. Everybody knows that it has caused serious discomfort to many countries in the region: the Baltics, the Balkans, the Caucasus, all the way to Central Asia. All of the countries in these regions suddenly took lessons from these events and their comprehension has changed.

So creating a de facto situation in Crimea, including it in Russia, and seemingly everyone accepting the de facto situation has created a situation full of tension. Which way will it develop? We don't know, but of course our wish is for it not to go even worse.

### Robin Niblett

Does it make you think differently about your potential gas relationships towards the south, in particular towards the Mediterranean? There are many new discoveries of gas in the eastern Mediterranean. This could be an effective alternative source of supply if Russia is more unpredictable. You were involved even in the Cyprus question, in your time as president. Do you think the developments with Russia are changing Turkey's attitude toward its energy security? Could this have a positive impact on relationships with Greece and Cyprus?

### Abdullah Gül

[English translation] I'd like to say that in terms of energy security, Turkey has started to achieve that by sourcing energy from the Caucasus, from Iran and other routes, other sources. But I'd like to look at this issue from the point of view of Turkey as well as Europe.

The eastern Mediterranean source, I believe, is going to be an important source. It will help to establish stability in the eastern Mediterranean areas. I have always defended this view and our state policies have been directed in this direction during my presidency. The gas around Cyprus, the gas near the coast of Israel, I can say the most feasible way of carrying that gas to Europe would be through Turkey. So when a constructive approach is taken, a win-win situation will come. This will help establish stability in the eastern Mediterranean.

The issue of gas, the pipeline issues, are not simple economic actions. These are political-strategic issues. On the one hand you can use that as a threat which gives you power, but on the other hand you can use it to help establish peace and stability. This is one of the issues that is a priority for Turkey.

### Robin Niblett

Thank you very much. I have more questions, but I'd like to get a chance to get some comments or questions in from our participants and members here.

