

INTERVIEW OF THE TURKISH AMBASSADOR

ATHENS NEWS AGENCY

1. The refugee crisis is in the focus of our bilateral relations. Do you believe that it may have a negative effect or it might even play a positive role in our relations, through the upgrading of our cooperation?

Turkey and Greece are unfortunately both the victims of the refugee crisis and this understanding does play a positive role in our bilateral relations. We have frequent contacts to tackle this problem. A bilateral meeting was held on this issue, between the Turkish and Greek Prime Ministers in Brussels on 17 December.

However, our cooperation is not limited to high-level contacts, but goes down to the operative and bureaucratic level. We have a very open dialogue and good mutual understanding at all levels, starting from the Ministries of Foreign Affairs. After Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras' visit to Turkey on 17-18 November 2015, the two countries established a "Joint Inter-governmental Working Group" for the refugee problem, composed of all relevant institutions from both countries. The first meeting of this group already took place and now we are working on the dates for the second meeting.

There is also a mechanism of annual meetings of the Commanders of the Turkish and Greek Coast Guards. During the last visit to Turkey in November, the Commanders decided to establish bi-annual technical contacts. As a first step, the Turkish Coast Guard Commander for the Aegean visited Athens in December. We are taking measures to further improve our real-time communication and cooperation.

Such meetings and mechanisms have confirmed that both countries have a similar understanding and above all, a strong willingness to solve and manage this problem together. This is indeed very positive.

2. Do you believe that Turkey has done as much as possible to intercept the refugees and migrants' inflow to Greece as it has pledged at the recent agreement with EU?

We are happy that this issue has entered the EU agenda, even if only recently. As you know, Turkey has been facing this heavy humanitarian burden and security challenge for five years, since the beginning of the Syrian crisis in 2011. Perhaps the analogy of a “sponge” is in order. Indeed, Turkey is like a sponge that has taken water for 5 years and has now reached its absorption capacity with above 2.5 million registered migrants. That is why we are seeing increasing movements towards Europe today.

If we look at the figures and the real potential, the picture is unfortunately not bright. In our wider region around 60-65 million people are affected by conflict or internal strife. These are the potential refugees of tomorrow. This shows how important building a workable framework and developing cooperation actually are. As for Syria, where the problem is much more acute and closer to home, more than 12 million people –half the population- have been internally displaced and 4.5 million people have sought shelter in the neighbouring countries, Turkey and Greece being at the forefront.

Currently Turkey already hosts the highest number of refugees in the world, and is home to more than 2.2 million Syrians, 300 thousand Iraqis and 50 thousand Afghans. Until now, Turkey has spent 7 billion Euros from its own resources, for Syrians in the camps. The figures of migrants in Turkey are impressive: 600 thousand children at school age; 4.5 million visits to a doctor, 800 thousand people hospitalized, 300 thousand surgeries; 71 thousand Syrians born in Turkey, to name a few.

The contribution we have received from the international community is only 418 million Euros. The 3 billion Euros recently allocated by the EU (which is one fourth of a windfall due to a budget cut) will go directly to the Syrians to improve

their conditions, such as work, education, health and lodging. We hope this will help us stem the flow of migrants.

At the same time, we are exerting every possible effort to minimize irregular migration, through a combination of economic measures, deterrence and police measures. The Turkish Coast Guard continues its operations to contribute to the safety and security at sea. Since the beginning of 2015, the Turkish Coast Guard has rescued 91,611 migrants at sea (this number was less than 15,000 in 2014) and apprehended 190 migrant smugglers. 1,696 migrants have already been apprehended in the first 11 days of 2016. I would like to underline that 63% of all the resources of the Turkish Coast Guard is deployed in the region with a 3,000 km coastline and the cost of operations at sea alone is 5 million Euros per month, again from national resources.

On the other hand, we are trying to prevent refugees from coming on the sea, where it is more difficult to handle and stop them on land. Thus, in 2015, 101,646 migrants and 3,631 migrant smugglers have been apprehended within our land borders.

For the land and sea in total, 189,038 irregular migrants and 3,807 smugglers have been apprehended by Turkish authorities in the year 2015. This is an impressive performance by any count.

While assessing the situation, one must bear in mind the fact that it is not illegal for a migrant to travel to the seaside and no crime has been committed before they board the boats to make a crossing. We do however discourage migrants from traveling out of the cities or camps in which they are registered and they lose their free healthcare, allowance and education benefits if they move to another town without a good reason and transferring their registration. A second point is that Turkey is a democratic country, with a strong rule of law, visited by 40 million tourists a year. While combatting refugee flows, we must respect the laws, but

also respect the free environment a tourist expects when they visit our most valuable tourism destinations.

We observe that there are some in Greece and in Europe who believe that Turkey should continue to undertake this heavy burden alone and “keep” the migrants in Turkey as it did for the past five years. Firstly, this is obviously not possible, nor is it a realistic expectation. Secondly, it strips the word “solidarity” of all its meaning. The refugee crisis has become a global problem. Thirdly, it is simply unfair to accuse in such a way a country which has singlehandedly prevented this problem from reaching Europe for years, while we received about no assistance and our warnings that these people might one day decide to move to Europe fell upon deaf ears.

Another important point in this context, is to address the root causes. Security measures without addressing the root causes of irregular migration, such as economic, political, social instabilities and armed conflicts in particular, would only yield temporary and limited success. Turkey is doing its best to address these root causes and actively participates in diplomatic efforts to put an end to the fighting in source countries.

With these facts in mind, for us it is difficult to understand various claims disregarding our massive efforts. The “blame-game” will take us nowhere. No single country can deal with this massive influx, nor does anyone have a magic wand. Any success will come out of serious hard work and good coordination. We must find ways to cooperate more effectively, without losing our humanitarian focus and our joint duty to help these unfortunate people in their day of difficulty.

3. The repatriation agreement between Greece and Turkey is not working. Why?

According to the figures of 2015, the Greek authorities requested Turkey to readmit 11,000 people, Turkey agreed on 4,000 and eventually only a negligible

number of people were actually found and returned. We understand that it is not possible to keep people under control for a long time, thus the readmission process should be implemented more efficiently and swiftly.

This is the common understanding of both delegations to Experts' Meeting on the bilateral Readmission Protocol, the 11th of which took place in Athens on 21-22 December 2015.

As you can imagine, there are many technicalities. For example, there is the problem of proper identification of countries of origin. Since migrants do not want to return, they refrain from fully cooperating and claim they come from different countries. This creates a huge back-log and increases the expenses. The repatriation to their home country of those whose asylum requests have been rejected is crucial because if it is not done they are bound to try to come across again. We must all do a more effective sorting out in order to speed up the process and complete it right back to the country of origin.

As a general approach we are sensitive about the fact that Turkey should not be expected to serve as an "open-air prison for migrants", especially for those who have not been processed and whose asylum claims have not been rejected. The aim should be regulating the migrant flows and creating the necessary environment for orderly and legal migration for those who are willing to migrate, while establishing a functioning and sound resettlement mechanism.

There is political will from both sides regarding the full implementation of the Protocol but it is practical problems like these logistical or legal problems that the experts are working on, with frequent contacts at the technical level.

As a result of these contacts, the current numbers with regard to the Readmission Protocol have been more promising: Only in the first week of 2016, 43 third-country nationals have been returned to Turkey. This is already more than the total of all of 2015. Another 300 applications by the Greek authorities are pending

and Turkish authorities are working hard to conclude these requests favorably within 10-12 days.

4. The key negotiators on the Cyprus issue express their reserved optimism that this time a solution will be reached. Do you share the same optimism and why?

In the history of this 52-year-old problem, there exists a truly positive climate on the Island. The two leaders have a good chemistry and are trying hard for a settlement. The Turkish Government and the Greek Government as two motherlands and guarantors support the negotiations. Looking at it from our angle, the Turkish Cypriots are hopeful, and so are we!

We hope a solution is reached soon and is ready to be put to separate simultaneous referenda. This is an indigenous process and naturally it will be up to the two peoples to determine their own fate, in a truly democratic manner.

Like all multilateral international treaties, the participation of all original signatories is needed in order to make any changes. In this respect, the three guarantors will have to step in and assist the process at some point. We believe all interested parties are determined to play a positive role and assist a positive outcome.

Peace in Cyprus would be a game-changer not only in the region but also for Turkish-Greek bilateral relations. It will surely have far reaching international effects and be a beacon of hope in a distressed region.

5. Is Turkey satisfied with the gains achieved through the recent agreement with the EU and what the European vision means for Turkey this time?

An important element of the recent agreement regards the migrants. From the beginning of the crisis in Syria, Turkey has spent 7 billion Euros on meeting the needs of the migrants. A contribution of 3 billion Euros by the EU is a

considerable contribution and it will ensure better conditions for these people within Turkey and thus hopefully first contain them from migration and then give them an opportunity to return to Syria, when conditions allow. It is essential that the cooperation proceeds in two directions: Burden and responsibility sharing. We should work together on resettlement schemes and programmes in this spirit.

A more frequent and structured dialogue in different areas, be it political, economic or energy-related, will serve to evaluate Turkey-EU relations and to discuss international issues. Visa liberalization is a long overdue aspect which we expect will happen and reinvigorate our economies. The opening of chapters is also long overdue. We see this as a positive move and hope it will eventually lead to full membership. Turkey is a G-20 country with a 75 million vibrant and young population. Membership will be mutually beneficial in many ways.

Holding Summits twice a year would enable us to take stock of these developments. We assess the Turkey-EU relationship from a broader perspective and with a strategic approach. Turkey-EU relations should be based on a strategy with a long-term vision that will be beneficial not only for both sides, but also for the wider region.