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## الواحة

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# TRANSITION THROUGH WHOM? RELIGIONS AND PARTIES TESTED BY DEMOCRACY

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THE IRRESISTIBLE RISE OF TURKEY  
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ART. MALI: A HERITAGE UNDER ATTACK

# MEETINGS

An interview with **Egemen Bağış**, the Turkish Minister for European Affairs and the head of negotiations for **joining the European Union**, takes us into **today's Turkey**, without any filters.

His brilliant career, his **determination** in describing the economic and political direction taken by his country, his **swiftness** in reacting to sensitive subjects: all these aspects refer back to some of the assets that **prompt a renewed attention** – and not only in a geostrategic perspective – to Turkey. Both in the **West** and in the **East**.

**Egemen Bağış explains his Turkey: its desire to enter into a European Union that does not seem in a hurry to welcome it; its extraordinary economic development; its new role as inspirational model for those of the Arab countries which aspire to reproduce its combination of Islam with democracy.**

# Turkey is no Longer too Big, too Poor and too Muslim

**MARIA LAURA CONTE and MICHELE BRIGNONE**

**B**ORN IN BİNGÖL in Anatolia in 1970, the young Egemen Bağış shared the passion for politics he saw in his father, mayor of his town in the late '70s. After studies in New York in the area of Human Resources and Public Administration, he was elected to Parliament in the Istanbul constituency at the age of 32. A leading figure in the Party of Prime Minister Erdoğan, the AKP, and an expert in international relations, he became Minister for European Affairs in 2009. A brilliant career which looks as though it is only just beginning, so much so that some see him as a future Mayor of Istanbul. Thus his office in Ortaköy, at the heart of the most congested capital in Europe, where Oasis met him, feels as though it is simply a noble and austere but temporary resting place.

**As the Minister for European Affairs of Turkey you have declared on a number of occasions, faced with the slowness of the process of admission to the EU, that your country would not give up. Why? Where is Turkey at the present time?**

Well, Turkey's first application dates back to 1959, it took us 45 years, till 2004, just to get a date to start accession negotiations. We did not give up then, we are not giving up now. The decision to start the process was a unanimous one, and thus it can only be stopped by another unanimous decision of the EU member states. Right now we have opened 13 of the 33 chapters, there are 20 more chapters to go, but 17 of them are politically blocked. The only 3 chapters that we could open are chapters that every country left to the very end, because of their economic costs. But the fact that 17 chapters are blocked, does not mean that we have stopped working on them. If the political blocks were lifted today, we could easily open 16 chapters within one year and close 12 of them. As far as the negotiation process is concerned, we have not opened any chapter during the last year. But as far as reforms are concerned, Turkey is doing much better compared to many other member states.

**For example?**

In a country where people were afraid to admit they were Kurds 15 years ago, we now have Kurdish broadcasting on state television 24 hours a day. The Armenian community has started Masses at the historical Akdamar church after a gap of 112 years. The Greek Orthodox

community has started using the Sumela monastery after a gap of 88 years. Turkish citizen of Roma origin were embraced by my Prime Minister at a meeting of 20,000 Roma people, where he announced new housing and career projects. The Alawite community has seen for the first time in history information about their interpretation of Islam in the religion text book in schools. And President Gül was the first President after Atatürk, the founder of the Republic, to visit a place of worship of the Alawite community.

**Do you mean that Europe is helping Turkey to be more 'democratic'?**

Today Turkey is much more democratic, much more transparent, much more prosperous and this is all because of the EU. I consider EU to be the Turkish dietician. Everyone knows that he has to pay attention to what he eats and needs regular exercise. But people sometimes need a good prescription to know what to do. The EU's prescription is its communitarian *acquis*: implementing the EU rules and regulations, and making them a part of the integration process, helps you become a better country for our own children. That's what we are committed to do and that's is what we will continue to do.

**But what is it about Europe today, which is not without is critical elements, that essentially interests Turkey?**

The EU is the grandest peace project in the history of mankind. The EU has ensured that there are no more wars on the continent. Turkey in the EU will convert that peace project from being a continental one to being a global one. We are not after the EU's money, we are not after the EU's political power. But we are after the EU's capacity to ensure peace and stability. Turkey is a full member of every European organization. Except for the EU. We are in the UEFA, we are in the European investment bank, we are in EU security and defense projects, we are in the OECD, we are in the ESDP, we are in European economic projects, 50% of our trade is with Europe, 60% of the tourists we receive in Turkey are from the EU. 85% of foreign direct investments in Turkey have come from the EU. So, it is only natural for Turkey to be in this club as well.

**And yet this entry into this club does not seem, given the slowness of the process, so natural. Who is afraid of Turkey?**

Prejudices! Prejudice is the main obstacle. Prejudice in Turkey against Europe and more importantly prejudice in Europe against Turkey. The historical opponents would claim that Turkey is too big, too poor and too Muslim.

**How do you respond to these three objections?**

We are too big? That is an advantage for Europe, because Europe needs big markets. The fact that we are too poor is no longer correct, because we are already richer than 8 EU members, and we are the fastest growing economy in Europe right now. As for the fact that we are Muslims, I have two counter arguments. The first is: Good morning! We were Muslims too when we first applied in 1959. We were Muslims when we were admitted as a candidate country in 1986. We were Muslims when we became members of the Customs Union in 1996. We were Muslims in 2004 when we started the negotiation process. It is not like we converted into Islam yesterday. The second argument is that Turkey in Europe will prove that the Union is not based on discrimination, that there is room for developments, no matter what your religion is. Europe, if it really wants to become a platform of international cooperation and peace and stability, has to prove that it is not a Christian club.

**In your view, what are the constitutive elements of what you have defined as the Euro-Turkish 'vocation'?**

This vocation is manifold. If you look at it from a labor point of view, Turkey has a median age of 28. It is a very young country, whereas Europe has a median age of 45. Within 20 years there will not be enough people to get the work done in Europe. If you look at it from a security perspective, Turkey has the largest military in Europe right now, to deal with the security and terrorism issues. If you look at it from a peace project issue, Turkey is a country in which you have churches, synagogues and mosques standing side by side. Here in Ortaköy, where my offices are located, 60 meters from here you have a mosque; 70 meters from here you have a synagogue; 80 meters from here, you have a church. This is where cultures have coexisted for centuries, in harmony. And that is what Europe needs today.

#### What advantages would Turkey bring to the European Union?

We see Turkey's EU membership as a 'win-win' process. For the past few years Turkey's economy has begun to be viewed by many as a rising star and if Turkey keeps up with this pace of economic growth, it will be one of the top ten economies of the world in the following decades. Undoubtedly, the dynamism of the Turkish economy will contribute to the economic outlook of the European Union. Besides, Turkey's position as an energy hub will not only provide beneficial outcomes for its own economy but it will also contribute to the energy security of the EU. With Turkey's active peace-making role, the EU will extend its area of influence and its soft power to many more regions of the world.

From your words it seems that Europe and Turkey are inseparable...

## A Portrait of Lights and Shadows

**A**N AVERAGE GDP growth rate of 5.3% since 2002 and a sixteenfold increase in foreign investments over the same period. The data presented by the Turkish premier, Erdoğan, at the World Economic Forum of 2011 document very vigorous economic growth. The secret? A combination of economic reforms and political stability. But the annual report of Amnesty International of 2012 throws a heavy shadow over this brilliant Turkish dash forward. Amongst the critical points, in line with the data of *Reporters sans frontières*, the difficult situation as regards freedom of the press: Turkey with its 15,000 blocked sites and over a hundred journalists in prison (half of whom are Kurds) finds itself at 148, immediately after Malawi.

With its 85 million inhabitants, Turkey is the second nation in population terms in Europe, after Russia. And the fact that the overwhelming majority of its inhabitants are Muslim is not the least of the factors that have helped to slow down the process of joining the European Union, the negotiations for which began in 2005. The long journey towards Europe has been monitored by the European Commission which, in its last report of October 2012 as well, listed the many reforms that have been implemen-

ted but also the questions that are still on the agenda. Although some advances have been made as regards respect for human rights (one reads), important reforms are still required, as is demonstrated by the number of trials underway against human rights activists and the occasional use of torture in places of detention.

As regards freedom of conscience and religious freedom, the European Union has shown that freedom of worship is generally respected. However, non-Muslim communities have reported acts of hatred committed against them and they continue to have problems because of a lack of legal status, with consequences for property rights, the possibility of finding jobs, residence permits for foreign clergy, and fund raising. The case of the Church of St. Paul in Tarsus is emblematic. Despite the battle fought by Msgr. Luigi Padovese, it remains a state museum and can be used for Holy Masses only on certain conditions. Episodes of anti-Semitism in the mass media remain unpunished. Lastly, the Turkish occupation, since 1974, of a part of the island of Cyprus, which has been a member-state of the EU since 2004, remains unacceptable for Europe.

Some claim that Turkey has no real alternative to Europe. This argument might be fair enough taking into account the level of economic integration between Turkey and the EU. However, the opposite is equally valid. Europe has no real alternative to Turkey. Especially in a global order where the balance of power is shifting. I hope it will not be too late before our European friends discover this fact.

**And yet there are some more delicate aspects, such as the situation of minorities, the Christian for example. At the beginning of the twentieth century the present national territory of Turkey was inhabited by Christian populations to the extent of 25%. Today they make up 0.2%. What has gone wrong?**

We unfortunately had some dark periods, when some of the minorities were not dealt with in the correct manner. Members of different religions felt the urge to leave the country. Today however my political party receives 50% of the votes, but when you look at the Christian and Jewish votes in Turkey, we get around 80% of them. Why? Even if we have not solved all of their problems, they see us having the potential to solve their remaining difficulties, since we respect individuals not because of their religion, but as human beings.

I remember when I was a candidate in Istanbul, in 2002. I visited the Holy Father Bartolomeos [The Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, Ed.], with a group of people from my party. We had coffee and everybody was, you know, hesitant. I was the youngest of the delegation and I said: "Patriarch, thank you for your hospitality, but the reason why we are visiting you is that we ask for your support, we have elections coming up, and we are here to ask for your support".

He looked at me and he said: "Son, good luck, it looks like you are going to win". I said: "I beg your pardon?" He stopped for three seconds, looking at me, and he said: "You are right son. *We* are going to win". And then he added: "A party that has been founded by pious believers will protect the rights of all believers, including those who believe in other religions. I am happy that you corrected me". Since then, we have been good friends.

**In your view does the principle of secularity guarantee or injure minorities?**

It depends on how you interpret it. Principles do not guarantee or discriminate, interpretations do.

**Agreed. So how should the Turkish Constitution be interpreted? It defines Turkey as a secular state even though in reality the state manages religious practice, for example by appointing the religious authorities? What do you mean by secularity?**

Secularism is a founding principle of the Republic. As the Constitution declares: 'Turkey is a democratic, secular and social state governed by the rule of law'. However, the implementation of secularity in Turkey cannot be described as the state regulating religious practice. In Turkey, every citizen has the right to practice religious activities under his or her beliefs, and freedom of conscience and freedom of religion are two fundamental aspects of our country.

Moreover, the EU process has contributed to freedom of conscience and freedom of religion. During its 10 year rule, the AK Party government has taken giant steps to enhance fundamental rights in this area. Our top priority at the moment is to get rid of the old fashioned military Constitution, to work on a civilian Constitution.

**The secularity of some is understood as 'abandonment of religion'. How do you answer this objection?**

As far as we are concerned, religion is an individual phenomenon, and, as Prime Minister Erdoğan said in the squares in Libya, at a Muslim Brotherhood gathering: "Do not be afraid of secularity". And he added: "Secularity does not mean aban-

doning your religion. It ensures practicing our religion of choice, as much as you want to practice that religion". And that is what we are trying to do in Turkey. We defend religious rights, not only for Sunni Muslims, and we want them to practice their religion. We see religion as an individual phenomenon, and the government's job should be to protect the individual's right, to practice his religion of choice. No matter what that religion is.

**The Arab world is going through a stage of profound change. How does Turkey see this political process that is underway?**

The Arab Spring is changing the fate of the region and the world as a whole. We sincerely appreciate the courage and the victory of the masses in Middle East and North Africa in overthrowing autocratic regimes and voicing their demands for a new democratic order. Despite such bold steps towards change, some uncertainties still prevail concerning the future. What is important for the people of the region from now on is to set up a new political, social and economic order guided and supervised by the will of the people. The Middle East needs to be backed up at this historical moment.

**Some Arab countries seem to be very attracted by the Turkish model. Do you think that they have something to learn from the Turkish experience?**

As the recent Arab Spring has revealed, Turkey is a reputable regional actor with strong influence in the countries of the region. This inspiration comes from the fact that Turkey demonstrates that democracy can exist and be deeply enrooted in a Muslim society.

**Perhaps one of the interesting aspects for the countries of North African and the Middle East is the extraordinary economic boom of Turkey. What is its secret?**

Our government managed to create confidence in the Turkish economy. Consequently the number of entrepreneurs has increased. They have created employment and an economic surplus. We also managed to consolidate the confidence in Turkey as a safe harbor for foreign investments in turbulent waters.

Turkey did not emerge as an island of peace and prosperity overnight. The last decade has been highly impressive in terms of tremendous strides in strengthening the rule of law and applying the standards and norms of an advanced democracy, which are the basic tenets of a well-functioning free-market economy.

**As regards Syria, what role could Turkey play in this context?**

Turkey and Syria are two countries that share a lot of commonalities. The peoples of Syria and Turkey are close relatives. However, we witness that the sincere efforts of Turkey are not being appreciated by the Syrian regime. They did not take seriously Turkey's advice about the urgency of reforms. We repeatedly warned the Syrian administration that they must satisfy the legitimate demands of the Syrian people. From our perspective the current Syrian administration has lost its legitimacy.

**Is the Islamic identity of your country a key factor in your foreign policy?**

Turkey is situated in a complex region intersecting East and West, North and South, Europe and Eurasia. More than 99% of our population is Muslim. Certainly we want to be in good relations with other Muslim countries in our region and beyond. However, Turkey does not pursue a foreign policy based on religious identity. With the bold reforms carried out in the last nine years by our government, a new Turkey is emerging: a Muslim country with a democratic political system and a strong market economy.