

## ANGLO-TURKISH RELATIONS IN THE 20TH CENTURY

Pioneering a new research agenda on the history of UK-Turkey relations, the British Institute at Ankara introduced this strategic research initiative in 2015 in combination with the undertaking of a major research project entitled 'Turkey and Britain 1914–1952: From Enemies to Allies' that runs until this year. This strategic research initiative aims to build on this project in order to create an active and sustainable network of scholars from Turkey, the UK and other countries that will promote diverse approaches to the study of the early Turkish Republic, especially its foreign policy, its relationship with Britain and its place in the world order. Research and funding administered under this initiative will support diversity and collaboration across different historiographic traditions (for example, diplomatic and military history, oral history and microhistory) with the aim of unearthing and accessing a full range of archival and other source material in the UK, Turkey and elsewhere. The objective is to promote the exploration of new themes significant for the understanding of bilateral relations in the past, as well as their development in the present and future.

doi:10.18866/biaa2019.10

### Turkish perceptions of the UK from 1973 to Brexit

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**M**y research funded by the British Institute at Ankara examines the historical and contemporary perceptions held by the Turkish elite and public regarding Anglo-Turkish bilateral relations from 1973 to today through archival research and interviews conducted in Turkey. It is anticipated that the results of this field research will explain the main drivers of bilateral relations, contribute to the wider discipline of international relations and have an impact on the formulation of foreign policies.

In the first year of research, from August 2018 to April 2019, the Turkish National Assembly (TBMM) archives were examined with the help of the project's research assistant, Nail Elhan. Words related to 'Britain' were mentioned in the minutes of hundreds of parliamentary sessions from 1973 to 2016. Data were collected in around 750 document pages, containing 340,000 words. In the same period, 17 interviews with former and current diplomats, politicians and business people were also conducted. High-profile interviewees included three Turkish Ambassadors to London and the former President of the Turkish Republic (2007–2014), Mr Abdullah Gül, who worked on building stronger relations with the UK during his presidency. In the second year of the project, which commenced in August 2019, archives of the *Milliyet* and *Cumhuriyet* daily newspapers from January 1973 to December 2018 will be examined and data will be collected for the purpose of discerning public perceptions of the UK in Turkey.

Analysis of the data from the TBMM archives and the interviews highlights the fact that Britain has rarely been the principal focus of Turkish parliamentary discussions or high on the Turkish political agenda. However, the frequency of references to Britain in parliamentary debates and how respondents answered interview questions reflect the Turkish elite's own understandings of 'modernity' and 'Westernness'. The data provide indications about the constructive relationship the two countries have forged since the Second World War. Despite major international events and periods that have shaped bilateral relations, such as the Cold War, the Cyprus conflict and the financial crisis of the 2000s, the Turkish elite has perceived the UK in terms of two related and generally positive patterns.

First, the UK has been seen as a 'role model' with reference to its democratic processes and level of socioeconomic development. In the TBMM, this has led to direct calls to imitate the UK with regards to political administration, pertaining especially to standards of democracy, education, judiciary and state organisation. Similarly, government officials have occasionally justified their actions in the TBMM and attempted to avert criticism by offering examples of similar policies from the UK. Although the UK is also frequently mentioned in passing and along with other Western countries in the TBMM, in order to compare practice in Turkey with that in other nations, the direct references to Britain as a 'role model' suggest a deeper respect for the UK among Turkish politicians.

The following quote, from the interview with President Abdullah Gül, exemplifies this type of positive attitude.

[Britain] is a country that, without a doubt, reflects democracy and European values very well. Moreover, it is a country that has achieved plurality. It is a country that has lived plurality without discrimination and with all the peoples in its empire on which the sun never sets ... It has deeply influenced me as a democratic country. It is a place where everyone can state their opinions freely.

The second pattern that marks Turkish elite perceptions of the UK is that of Britain as ‘a colonial power’, and, in particular, one that has had ambitions in the region and fought against the Ottoman Empire. The Gallipoli Campaign and the First World War have been mentioned occasionally by MPs in the TBMM and, during these speeches, Britain has been portrayed as a country with expansionist ambitions.

Although there seems to be a contrast between perceptions of Britain as a ‘colonial power’ and as a ‘role model’, given the Turkish historical context, this outcome is not all that surprising. This type of approach to relations with the West in general is quite common. Yet, with regards to the UK, there seem to be additional nuances. As indicated in the quote above from President Abdullah Gül, especially in the interviews, the ‘colonial power’ perception was associated with positive attitudes, as the respondents showed an appreciation for British global influence and diplomatic skills. Interviewees drew on similarities between the UK and Turkey, as two countries sharing an imperial heritage. Moreover, the ‘colonial power’ perception was linked to understandings of Britain as a ‘role model’, with an emphasis on the UK’s respect for plurality associated with its experience of different cultures and identities as a former global colonial power.

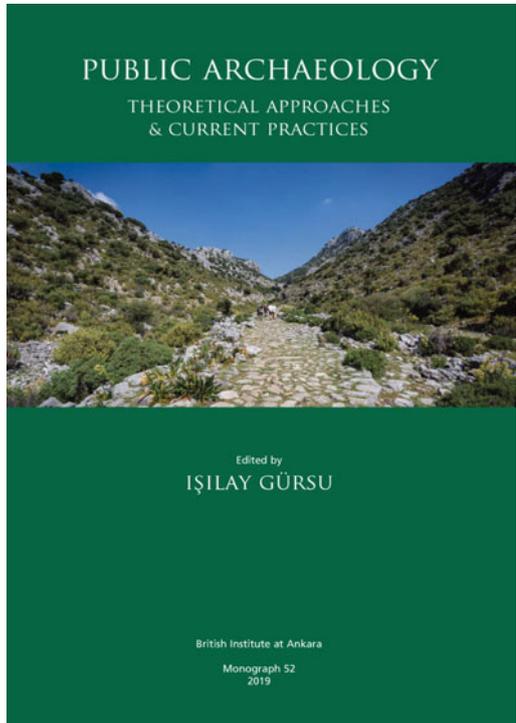
The following two interview quotes from President Abdullah Gül and a former ambassador, respectively, summarise how the perceptions of Britain as a ‘colonial power’ and Britain as a ‘role model’ are interlinked to create overall positive political attitudes toward the UK among the Turkish political elite.

Britain, as a country with a history of a large empire, has met different cultures, religions, races, and lived together with them. Therefore, it is one of the countries that has understood the world and accepted the realities of this world ... Turkey has many things in common with such a big country. Both of them have continued on from large empires. These are countries that have lived together with different cultures and religions for a long time.

Historically, Britain had always regarded the Ottoman Empire as an important actor and perceived it as such ... In the First World War, the Brits and the Turks got to

know each other very well and learned to respect each other... Britain perceived Turkey as an important actor because of its respect for Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in the First World War, Turkey’s determination and, later on, its War of Independence and successes in the Lausanne Treaty. In my opinion, the main foundation of Turkish-UK relations today is the experience of the First World War and mutual respect.

The second year of the project will investigate newspaper archives to see if these types of positive attitudes in the elite sphere toward the UK are matched among the general public. This BIAA-funded project should lead to further research comparing Turkish perceptions toward the UK in the context of Europe. In the age of Brexit, such comparisons will have important policy implications, especially if they maintain that the UK is perceived more positively than Europe due to shared historical legacies.



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Edited by  
**IŞILAY GÜRSU**

British Institute at Ankara  
Monograph 52  
2019

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