

From enemies to allies: Britain and Turkey from 1914 to 1960: Britain, Turkey and NATO during the early Cold War

Stephen Mitchell | British Institute at Ankara

The research project ‘From Enemies to Allies’ is the first overseen by the British Institute at Ankara to deal with the history of the Turkish Republic. Participants in four workshops have taken a critical look at the diplomatic and political relations between Turkey and Britain from the First World War and the Gallipoli Campaign, when the two countries were enemies, to the Cold War of the 1950s, when they were allies under the new umbrella of NATO. Historians and scholars of international relations from Britain and Turkey have been invited to examine the issues from their own national perspectives. A deeper knowledge of these historical developments provides an important perspective on the current, and indeed the future, relationship between Britain and Turkey.

The journey began in spring 2016 with a meeting in Ankara, co-hosted with USAK (the International Strategic Research Foundation), a think-tank co-founded by Özdem Sandberk, a former Turkish Ambassador to the UK, which surveyed the late Ottoman period and the First World War conflict. There have been stops on the way in 2017 at Churchill College, Cambridge, home of the Churchill Archive, dealing with the 1920s and 1930s, and in 2018 at St Antony’s College, Oxford, in collaboration with the British Association for Turkish Area Studies (BATAS), looking at the Anglo-Turkish relationship during the Second World War. The final workshop was held on 26–27 September 2019 at Koç University, Istanbul. Funding was provided by the British Institute at Ankara, the British Embassy in Ankara, the Deans of the Colleges of Administrative Sciences and Economics, and of Social Sciences and the Humanities at Koç University, and by BATAS. We are, of course, very grateful to all of them.

After greetings from the organisers and from Jennifer Anderson, Deputy Head of Mission at the British Embassy in Ankara, who attended the first day of the meeting, the stage for the Istanbul workshop was set in two introductory public lectures. Professor İltar Turan (Bilgi University) laid out the position of Turkey and Britain after 1945: ‘adjusting to post-war realities’ such as the perceived threat of aggression or occupation by the Soviet Union, the new dominance of the USA in the world order, Britain’s retreat from empire and the weakness of an exhausted Europe. Sir David Logan (British Institute at Ankara) spoke about the contribution of Europe to international security and the interdependence between NATO and European defence, in which both the UK and Turkey had parts to play. Recent political developments, including a refocusing of American security priorities away

from Europe, the negative implications of Brexit for security co-operation between Europe and the United Kingdom (the largest single contributor to European defence capability) and Turkey’s new alignment towards Russia, which calls into question its own commitment to NATO, are important reasons to pay attention to the threats to the West’s security, which are very different from those that NATO had been designed to deter at the start of the Cold War.

Turkey had been a neutral country during most of the Second World War. When it joined the alliance against Hitler’s Germany in February 1945, the country’s main diplomatic objective was to establish its place in the post-war world order by becoming a founding member of the United Nations. The British government stressed the importance of the Anglo-Turkish alliance dating back to 1939, but in practice had no plans or intention to secure Turkey against Russian intervention. Ankara was reportedly dismayed not to be included in the Brussels Pact between the UK, France, the Low Countries and Luxembourg of 1948, which was designed to strengthen the unity of western Europe against Soviet expansion. However, Turkish eyes were already fixed on the USA, and Turkish enthusiasm as well as dependence on American support had been demonstrated at the visit of the American warship USS Missouri to the Bosphorus in April 1946, which had great symbolic importance. By 1949 the Anglo-Turkish alliance was effectively a dead letter. In contrast, in 1950 the newly elected government of Adnan Menderes, by-passing parliamentary approval and opposition from the political old guard led by İsmet İnönü, sent 4,500 Turkish troops to join the United Nations forces under US leadership in the Korean War. Turkey’s request to join NATO followed this engagement and was granted, alongside Greek entry, in 1952. The complexities of these developments, and their political and military significance, were covered in lectures by Professors Ekavi Athanassopoulou (Athens) and Şuhnaz Yılmaz (Koç University). British policy was riddled with contradictions, if not outright duplicity, as the British, who took responsibility for NATO’s Mediterranean strategy, tried to reconcile the objectives of an alliance directed against Russia with their own, now faltering, objectives in the Middle East. Turkey tried not to alienate its British ally, while aligning as far as possible with the USA.

Professor Mark Webber (Birmingham) sketched the underlying presuppositions and conditions of the NATO alliance itself, and drew attention to the contradiction between its high-level political objectives, to defend civilisation, and the mundane reality of protecting its

member states. The founding treaty did not mention the USSR, but President Truman's blueprint for a Cold War military strategy (NSC 68) presupposed that the Soviet Union was hell-bent on world domination. The enlargement of NATO to include Turkey and Greece in 1952 was not a routine matter (only Finland in 1955 and Spain in 1986 became new members in the subsequent quarter century), and although Turkey was only mentioned once in the revised article 6 of the treaty document, Professor Webber suggested several aspects of Turkey's NATO membership that required analysis: linkage, trust, credibility, liminality and its place in the hegemonic transition from *pax Britannica* to *pax Americana*. A critical aspect was the opening of a new NATO southern flank across the Mediterranean. This was sceptically regarded as strategic overstretch, but the move eventually paved the way for the Eisenhower Doctrine of 1957, which created a northern tier of allied countries across the Middle East, Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Pakistan, as a forward bulwark against the USSR. Professor Dilek Barlas (Koç University) pursued the implications of these developments by providing a Turkish perspective on the Britain–Turkey–USA triangle in this period.

The contributions on the second day showed that perceptions of the Anglo-Turkish relationship at the highest political level were often dislocated from the details of strategic and military planning for the Cold War. Professor Zafer Toprak (Boğaziçi University) traced the political programmes of Prime Minister Menderes and President Celal Bayar during the Democratic Party's decade in power. There was modest economic growth in Turkey during the early 1950s, while the education system evolved under US influence, including the first appearance of the social sciences in the universities. Turkey's contribution in the

Korean War was rewarded by the invitation to President Bayar to undertake an unprecedented 55-day state visit across the USA in 1954, including a ticker-tape reception in New York for 'the man of the bulwark'. Turkey, with its stable government and democratic institutions, was the USA's principal regional ally within the Baghdad Pact of 1955 (later CENTO). Britain's view of Turkey, meanwhile, was still shaped by anachronistic misconceptions.

Dr Warren Dockter (Aberystwyth) argued that Churchill in and after the Second World War still conceived the country as a re-embodiment of the Ottoman Empire, a notion also shared by Clement Atlee, the post-war Labour Prime Minister. Churchill pushed for Turkey to become a member of the Council of Europe in 1949 and envisaged a Turkey-Europe fulcrum as a key element in the UK's Middle East strategy. This, in turn, was constructed on unrealistic illusions and the growing mismatch between the UK's hegemonism and its dwindling capacity to deliver real regional security. Dr John Kent (London School of Economics) provided an analysis based on archival documentation of British military plans for an outer ring defence against the Soviet Union, embracing Upper Mesopotamia, and an inner ring, which appeared to protect Palestine (now Jordan and Israel). This embodied in military terms the strategy of containing the Soviet threat to the Middle East, which led via the Baghdad Pact to the creation of the CENTO and the Northern Tier alliance. Britain had only limited ability to deter a Russian threat with nuclear weapons, delivered by Canberra bombers from the Akrotiri base in Cyprus. Eisenhower's new Secretary of State from 1953, John Foster Dulles, drew the blunt conclusion that the strategy was built on sand, and the inner ring did little more than protect British bases in Egypt.



Participants at the fourth 'From Enemies to Allies' workshop.



Dr Nagihan Haliloğlu (Üsküdar University) with Jennifer Anderson and Sir David Logan.

From the mid-1950s bilateral Turkish-British relations were increasingly dominated by the problem of Cyprus. Turkey's attitude to the status of the island changed fundamentally from support of British colonial rule in 1954, through a positive acceptance of division between the Greek and Turkish communities (*taksim*) in 1957, to endorsement of the island's independence according to the London-Zurich agreements of 1959. Dr Barış Gülmez (Ege University) posed the question whether the reasons for changing Turkish attitudes lay in the interregional dynamics of foreign policy or in internal factors of Turkish domestic politics. In the mid-1950s Turkish-Greek relations became increasingly strained, not least when the Greek population of Istanbul was largely expelled by the pogrom of September 1955, and after 1957 there was widespread public support in Turkey for the policy of dividing the island into self-governing ethnic communities. Turkey was anxious that NATO countries in Europe, including Germany, France and Italy, would favour the policy of uniting Cyprus with Greece (*enosis*), as the Greeks themselves were aligned with the Middle Eastern Arab states. Menderes accordingly shifted the Turkish stance to accept the creation of Cyprus as a divided sovereign state, but signed the agreement to this effect, without consultation of the Turkish parliament, from his hospital bed after the Gatwick air crash on 19 February 1959, when many of the Turkish delegation and air crew were killed. Robert Holland (King's College London) offered a detailed appraisal of British policy during the later 1950s, based in part on a strategy of 'divide and rule' that could be traced back to the origins of the colony in 1878, which clung to the optimistic objective of securing 'the peace and harmony of good Greeks and good Turks'.

Professor Behçet Yeşilbursa (Uludağ University) ended the main programme with a review of British government reactions to the military coup of 27 May 1960, based on astute reports provided by the ambassador Sir Bernard Burrows (later to join the Council of the British Institute at Ankara). Britain observed a studied neutrality in relation to the turbulent internal political process (although reportedly Burrows at a personal level found Menderes a more sympathetic figure than İnönü), but was alert to Turkish shifts and manoeuvres in foreign policy, especially with regards to Cyprus, the issue which now dominated the relationship between the two countries.

Professor William Hale tied up the workshop by offering beguiling cameos of events on the Turko-British stage: the Russian attaché Vladimir Volkov who in 1945 reported to the British Consulate in Istanbul that he knew the names of three British spies working undercover for the Russian KGB (by implication Philby, Burgess and Maclean) and Kim Philby's precipitate flight to Turkey, which resulted in the Russians apprehending their own traitor but also Philby's survival as a mole in the system until 1961; and the delightful anecdote, reported in the *Daily Mail*, that, when Menderes staggered from the wrecked plane at Gatwick, he was taken by Mrs Barrett to the family's nearby farmhouse and revived with a shot of 1868 Brandy before being taken into hospital for a health check.

The workshop in Istanbul was memorable for an earth tremor recorded at 5.9 Richter, which caused only a brief pause in Professor Athanassopoulou's presentation, a magnificent dinner at a waterside restaurant and splendid organisation in two great meeting rooms provided by Koç University. A publication is in preparation as a special number of *Middle Eastern Studies*.



Dr Daniel-Joseph MacArthur-Seal (BIAA Assistant Director) and Professor Stephen Mitchell (BIAA Chair).