



Cities of London and Westminster Conservative Association and Conservative Friends of Turkey host dinner on March 9, 2009

Middle East Cultural Group of Cities of London and Westminster Conservative Association and Conservative Friends of Turkey jointly hosted a Turkish dinner on March 9th 2009.

The event attracted significant interest with more than 100 guests attending the dinner at the renowned Turkish Restaurant, Özer, in central London. Minister Counsellor of the Turkish Embassy Atilay Ersan stepped in to replace the evening's guest of honour, HE Yigit Alpogan, Turkish Ambassador to London, who had been called to Ankara at short notice.

In his opening remarks, Sir Harold Walker, Britain's former ambassador to Baghdad, said the British government did not accord enough importance to Turkey as it was too focussed on Europe and the Arab-Israeli conflict. He complained that too few courses in Turkish studies were offered in British universities adding to general ignorance of the deep esteem many in Britain felt for Turkey. He also drew attention to Turkey's importance as a NATO member and Turkey's strong bilateral ties with Israel.

Atilay Ersan told guests that because of its geographic location, Turkey pursued a realistic, consistent, balanced and multidimensional foreign policy and that Turkey's experience in several different regions allowed it to successfully deploy the role of negotiator and mediator in peaceful conflict resolution.

Ersan gave several examples of Turkey's involvement in resolving conflicts in its neighbourhood including the Ankara Forum, an initiative to bring together Turkish, Israeli and Palestinian private sectors; the indirect peace talks between Syria and Israel; a trilateral initiative between Turkey, Afghanistan and Pakistan and the Caucasus Stability Initiative. Ersan said Turkey's position as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council as of January 2009 confirmed its importance as a regional and international actor.

Ersan also underlined the extent of Turkey's existing links with the EU. The EU is Turkey's biggest trade partner and the recipient of 57% of its exports. 10 million tourists from the EU visit Turkey annually while 3.5 million Turks live in the EU. He said Turkey's accession to the EU would be the clearest indication that the EU is defined not by geography or religion but by common goals. He said Turkey's accession to the bloc would allow it to become a truly global power and the EU would benefit from peace in its broader neighbourhood.

Dr Riza Kadilar, representative of Conservative Friends of Turkey in Istanbul, in his closing remarks, emphasised the importance of strong Turkish-British relations as the world passes through difficult times.

Notes courtesy of Emel Akan, Shenaz Bunglawala and Eral Yilmaz