



SIR RODERICK SARELL'S OBSERVATIONS ON TURKEY AND THE TURKS IN THE EARLY 1970s

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Abstract

This article presents the observations of the British Ambassador to Ankara, Sir Roderick Sarell, on the characteristics of the Turks and the situation in Turkey between 1969 and 1972.

Key Words

Sir Roderick Sarell, Turkey, Britain, Turkish Foreign Policy, British Foreign Policy.

SIR RODERICK SARELL'İN GÖZÜ İLE 1970'LERİN BAŞINDA TÜRKİYE VE TÜRKLER

Özet

Bu makalede İngiltere'nin Ankara Büyükelçisi Sir Roderick Sarell'in 1969–1972 yılları arasında Türkiye'de meydana gelen olaylar ile Türkler hakkındaki gözlemlerine yer verilmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Sir Roderick Sarell, Türkiye, Britanya, Türk Dış Politikası, İngiliz Dış Politikası.



In 1969 Sarell was appointed Ambassador to Turkey, returning to the country where his father and grandfather had been born. ** In the early 1970s Turkey faced considerable political unrest and one of the most difficult episodes of this post was when four British radar technicians were killed while being held hostage by Marxist guerrillas.¹

In October 1971 the Queen, Prince Philip, and Princess Anne made their state visit to Turkey, during which Sarell travelled from Izmir to Istanbul on Britannia. Shortly afterwards, he was appointed KCVO (Knight Commander in the Royal Victorian Order—a British honour). He was able to spend some of his spare time on his interests in investigating the family's history in Turkey and on archaeology. In 1973 he retired, travelling slowly back to Britain through the countries of the Mediterranean.²

With his appointment in Turkey nearing an end, the British Ambassador to Ankara, Sir Roderick Sarell thought it time to share some of his thoughts on the discontents prospects of “this most beautiful and fascinating country”. Agreeing with the thoughts of a colleague in Ankara who said that any diplomat who thought he understood Turkish politics was misinformed, he started by emphasising the diffidence with which he was to communicate his observations.³

Well over a hundred years ago it was said of Turkey that “it is difficult to understand a nation which unites two characters and is emerging from one into the other and is yet in the transmigration. They are scarcely Asiatics and have just acquired enough of the European character to destroy many of their virtues and to remove many of their vices. It is this change which is taking place and the uncertainty of the result which renders this country really interesting.”⁴

Sarell commented that while, since those words were written, successive waves of reform had swept over the country; the essential situation had been slow to change. Each single reform left its mark upon the towns, but the widespread peasant population remained untouched as yet at that time. Mahmut II and European clothes, the constitution of Abdul Hamid II, the Young Turk revolution each had their effect. But Turkey remained oligarchic and, without the constant injections of wealth of the period of conquest, endemically insolvent. The long process of reform was jolted in further action by the loss of empire in the First

** All references to sources prefixed by FO and FCO refer to materials held at the UK National Archives, Kew, Richmond, Surrey, formerly, the Public Record Office.

¹ For a short biography of Sir Roderick F. G. Sarell see <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/1338438/Sir-Roderick-Sarell.html#continue>, (erişim tarihi 30 Nisan 2008). Compare Sir Roderick Sarell's observations on Turkey and the Turks with the observations of Sir James Bowker, the British Ambassador to Turkey, on the characteristics of the Turks and the situation in Turkey in 1950s. See Behçet Kemal Yeşilbursa, “A British View of Turkey and the Turks in the 1950s”, *Kastamonu Eğitim Dergisi*, Cilt: 8, No: 1, (Mart 2000), s. 181-186.

² Behçet Kemal Yeşilbursa, “State Visit of Her Majesty the Queen Elizabeth II to Turkey in 1971”, *Kastamonu Eğitim Dergisi*, Cilt: 17, No: 1, (Ocak 2009), s. 261-268.

³ FCO9/1626, File No: WST 25/3, Sir Roderick SARELL'S Valedictory Despatch, 27 November 1972. Also see Annual Reviews of Turkey for 1969, 1970, 1971 and 1972.

⁴ FCO9/1626, File No: WST 25/3, Sir Roderick SARELL'S Valedictory Despatch, 27 November 1972.



World War and the national resurgence of the War of Liberation. Atatürk, “the Macedonian with the vision of a modern European industrial nation State”, drove the country to his objectives with his phenomenal energy. He mobilised women in the crisis of the War of Independence against the Greeks, and he insisted on feminine emancipation, both of which earned him the adoring devotion of a generation of Turkish women. His prestige enabled him to secularise the State and to move close to Europe with the adoption of the Latin alphabet. He was a pioneer in education; and in administration he adopted the Napoleonic system of France and Italy, a written legal code and a prefectorial system to guard the country from the unpredictabilities of an inexperienced Parliamentary Government. To break the power of the European financiers to whom “the spendthrift Sultans” had mortgaged the country, Atatürk set up State banks with money subscribed by Indian Moslems with which he began to finance State enterprises.⁵

Atatürk set the course and provided a framework but, in Sarell’s words, “he failed to convince his countrymen to forsake Islam”, neither was he able or indeed did he have the time to alter the habits of mind which Sarell saw as “inimical to the proper function of European industrial society”. These contradictions grew with the passage of time. The measure of unity of the War of Independence faded but, while Atatürk’s prestige grew “almost to the proportions of an apotheosis and his policies are now accepted as an article of faith”, the implementation of the programme remained elusive. The picture from Ankara at that time frequently seemed to be one of unrelieved gloom. However, the achievements needed to be regarded.⁶

For better or worse, Turkey had been forced into a European world and the social appearance and dress in the towns in the 1970s were European. Universities of the highest standard in plan and equipment were built in Ankara and in the other main centres. The teaching faculties were of a high standard. Sarell commented that a middle class with secondary education not only of its sons but of its daughters was now sending some 150,000 students to the universities. The Turks were for some time attaining the highest standards in the arts and professions. He gave the examples of the Hacettepe medical school in Ankara, which he said was so advanced as to have been chosen for study by the Royal Commission on Medical Education; and also the Turkish Ballet, which was producing dancers of international standard. He commented that the Turkish concert pianists and violinists were equally distinguished. In industry, several considerable private empires emerged for the production of consumer goods and, in co-operation with foreign manufacturers for the production of cars, lorries and communications equipment. Great progress had been made in the provision of

⁵ FCO9/1626, File No: WST 25/3, Sir Roderick SARELL’S Valedictory Despatch, 27 November 1972.

⁶ FCO9/1626, File No: WST 25/3, Sir Roderick SARELL’S Valedictory Despatch, 27 November 1972.



economic infrastructure. Thousands of miles of asphalt highway had been built in the past 15 years. The generation of electric power rose rapidly, and with it, rural electrification. The countryside was being opened up by the provision of all-weather rural roads. Improved methods and the spread of mechanisation were increasing the yield from the land. Thanks to these developments and two years of unusually good rainfall, Turkey achieved an exportable surplus of wheat. Thanks moreover to the export of a labour force approaching 1 million men, the Turkish trade balance was brought to surplus by remittances almost equalling the total value of visible exports.⁷

In spite of the progress and the promise in these developments, Turkey suffered from a deep feeling of frustration among the educated young, matched by a feeling of dissatisfaction experienced by foreign observers and the more westernised Turks. The source, according to Sarell, was the continued process of transmigration from the oriental and Islamic society “in which the man is king” to the Western industrial democracy of Atatürk’s vision. The long tradition of Ottoman Turkey as a military and administrative oligarchy remained deep-rooted, while the position of Islam, relegated to the background by Atatürk, was becoming more conspicuous and more powerful daily. Concurrently the “almost patriarchal” respect for age which pervaded Turkish society was causing the entrenched elder generation to block, almost on principle and for reasons of personal prestige, the plans and proposals of their educated and professionally trained young men. This attitude was, in Sarell’s opinion, the more harmful because to the elder generation of Turks, as had been to the Victorian English, trade and industry were not “the proper concern of gentlemen”, having traditionally been left to the subject races of Greeks and Armenians. The reduction in the population of these peoples left a gap which was only now very slowly being filled. Economic progress was further hindered by the Turkish temperament: they were “unwilling to accept advice, disinclined to sustain what they have started or to maintain what they have built”. For all the European appearance, Turkey remained therefore “fundamentally oriental and Islamic”, accepting standards of performance normal in the East, which in the West were unacceptable. In Sarell’s words, these were “content with the bare avoidance of collapse or disaster with the implied corollary that if the worst happens it is the will of God”. He added that the Puritan reply that God helps those who help themselves is not a part of the Moslem faith as practised in the 1970s. This gloomy aspect of the situation was further darkened by the fact that tradition and temperament continued to afflict Turkey with a large, obstructive and corrupt civil

⁷ FC09/1626, File No: WST 25/3, Sir Roderick SARELL’S Valedictory Despatch, 27 November 1972.



service, which, Sarell remarked, complicated almost every area of life, commercial, industrial or private.⁸

Against this background of dissatisfaction and frustration, the rapidly growing student population was exposed to particular strains. Emerging from the old-fashioned constraints, both moral and social, of traditional provincial family and communal life into the unconstrained circumstances of the huge new universities of Ankara and the similar but older foundations of Istanbul, the students resorted to strikes and demonstrations, which found sympathy and even support among their intellectual and academic elders both within the universities and outside. Encouraged by example, and, suggested Sarell, perhaps even by funds from abroad, these developed during 1970 into increasingly militant violence which seemed to be going in the direction of anarchy. This situation, unforeseen by the Professors of Constitutional Law who evolved the extremely liberal Constitution of 1961, found the Government powerless, and the Prime Minister, inhibited by the example of Menderes, who had been hanged after, if not wholly because of, repressing student unrest.⁹

The crisis exemplified the Turkish dilemma. A civilised and successful Turkish industrialist remarked that in the West democracy had evolved slowly, and only then was it necessary to tackle industrialisation. In Turkey, however, the attempt to tackle both together and in a relatively short time was proving too difficult. In fact Turkey was attempting an even more difficult task: within the framework of the highly liberal professors' constitution with every check and balance to ensure democratic parliamentary government, the country was trying at once to emerge from a mediaeval, oriental, agricultural society into an educated, Western, industrial European State. It was hardly surprising, stated Sarell, that the liberals, frustrated by the innumerable obstructions of Turkish life, grew impatient with "the lack of progress to the Promised Land" and resorted to violence. It was no less surprising that the Turkish Army, with its political tradition and its belief in its mission as guardian of the Kemalist tradition, was to step in. It was in accordance also with the Kemalist doctrine as held then that the Army should intervene to secure not only public order, but democracy and reforms. The Memorandum of 12 March 1971 thus demanded a new "above party" Government to restore order and to carry through the reforms within the framework of parliamentary democracy. Three successive administrations struggled to comply with the Army's demands under a regime of guided democracy. Public order was largely restored at a cost of steadily growing repression accompanied by unpleasantly circumstantial accounts of torture and the virtual abolition of free speech or free discussion of political matters in the universities. The threat of anarchy in 1970 no

⁸ FCO9/1626, File No: WST 25/3, Sir Roderick SARELL'S Valedictory Despatch, 27 November 1972.

⁹ FCO9/1626, File No: WST 25/3, Sir Roderick SARELL'S Valedictory Despatch, 27 November 1972.



doubt required drastic measures, but after 18 months the Army was showing disquieting signs of losing its sense of proportion. Making the allowances that this was an inevitable swing of the pendulum, and the necessary, if temporary, price for the restoration of order; Sarell asked how much was to be hoped of the programme of reform¹⁰

The reforms proposed were needed: the excessive checks and balances of the 1961 Constitution needed to be modified, as Dr. Erim planned when Prime Minister in 1971, to give the Government the freedom of action enjoyed by Western European administration. The excessive autonomy of the universities needed to be limited. Land reform was no doubt needed, but as much to curb the reactionary influence of the *hodjas* (mullahs) supported by the landlords as for the economic welfare of the peasants. After the achievement of all this, there would nevertheless remain the problem of the Turkish administration, “overstaffed, badly paid, obstructive and corrupt”. Behind it lay the even more intractable problem of the Turkish temperament described previously. The seeds of prosperity and success seemed to be “sprouting on all sides”. The infrastructure was taking shape; the young graduates were “admirable and stimulating” people, and behind them was a rising generation of students who might be able to “break the bonds of oriental fecklessness and inefficiency”, helped perhaps by the growing army of workers returning “emancipated and with Western ideas” from their stay in Germany and elsewhere. The problem facing Turkey was how to release the many good forces developing at that time while holding in check the impatient radicals who were hoping to find in violence a short cut to “the Promised Land”. Sarell saw that for some years Turkey would be in danger and may well need to continue with the “guided democracy” of that time, modified one would hope to restore greater freedom to the Press and the universities. Even if elections were to be held as intended in October 1973, the Government would need to retain emergency powers to avoid a renewed slide to anarchy.¹¹

These stresses and strains which caused the suspension of the reality, though not the forms, of democracy had implications for Turkey’s foreign policy and for its “European Vocation”. For that time, however, just as the Turkish Government stoutly maintained the forms of a parliamentary democracy, so it remains unswerving in support of its Western orientations through NATO, CENTO and its association with the European Community. Its long experience of Russia ensured a “healthy scepticism and wariness” in the country’s attitude to the Soviet Union, which is proof against Soviet propaganda and flattery. Given that the country’s internal problems could be solved or at least kept under control, the rulers of

¹⁰ FCO9/1626, File No: WST 25/3, Sir Roderick SARELL’S Valedictory Despatch, 27 November 1972.

¹¹ FCO9/1626, File No: WST 25/3, Sir Roderick SARELL’S Valedictory Despatch, 27 November 1972.



Turkey at that time were unlikely to vary their course in foreign affairs.¹² Sarell finished his valedictory dispatch with the following comment:

I leave this country of outstanding beauty and infinite variety of interest, with its people delightful to know and impossible to do business with, with some misgivings for the future. Politicians of ideas seem powerless to implement them. Politicians who can survive must be content with little action. The result can only be further frustration for the rising generation with all this means in terms of tension and potential explosion. I find hope in the quality of the rising generation and in the fact that prosperity is at least beginning to spread through the country. These factors may well exorcise the ills that now seem to lie so heavily across the land.¹³

¹² FCO9/1626, File No: WST 25/3, Sir Roderick SARELL'S Valedictory Despatch, 27 November 1972.

¹³ FCO9/1626, File No: WST 25/3, Sir Roderick SARELL'S Valedictory Despatch, 27 November 1972.



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