

INTERVIEW WITH MEHMET ALI BIRAND*

RAPPROCHEMENT BETWEEN GREECE AND TURKEY IS IRREVOCABLE

This interview was conducted by Jean Catsiapis.

Q. : Many French politicians, on both the left and the right, have reacted negatively to the Helsinki decision to accept in principle Turkey's bid to become a member of the European Union. Are you surprised by this reaction?

R. : I am disappointed by the reaction of certain politicians. I lived in Brussels for 20 years and during that time the Europeans, especially the French, did not put forth religion as an obstacle to Turkey's candidacy. Today, culture and religion are certainly not the main objection to Turkey's entry but they are certainly the second or third argument given by those opposing Turkish membership. I think that politicians will be obliged to accept Turkey, but a Turkey that has indeed changed.

Q.: What are the real obstacles to Turkish membership?

The economy is not an obstacle, but there are thousands of others. For example, for the Scandinavians, there is the Kurdish issue and human rights. For other Europeans, there is fear of the unknown and of the massive population. Remember, there are 65 to 67 million Turks. Also Europe has been confronted with other enlargements that are difficult to juggle. Europe is changing and becoming 'two-tiered'. I mean that Turkey does not want Europe 'for its looks' but rather to change itself more and more rapidly.

Q.: One year after the "Earthquake diplomacy", do you feel that Greek-Turkish relations have improved?

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R.: We see a fundamental change in relations between the two peoples. There is a sense of relief, an incredible détente as if one suddenly discovered what seemed a long-lost cousin. On the Greek side, the 'Turkish danger' seems to be fading away; whereas on the Turkish side, a people or nation that is not entirely villainous seems to have appeared. In terms of public opinion, all of the above works well in the press. In government, matters are more complicated because the key is still Cyprus. Without a solution to the Cyprus problem, there can be no lasting peace between Greece and Turkey. Nevertheless, both parties in Cyprus want to play the game their own way until Europe reveals its position. Yet as long as Europe gives the impression to the Greek Cypriots that even without an agreement with the Turkish Cypriots, Cyprus could become a member, Clerides' inflexible attitude is understandable.

Q.: Over the summer the Turkish political line on Cyprus¹ appeared to harden. How can this attitude be explained?

R.: They are minor incidents. It is not a policy.

Q.: Do you think there will be an all-encompassing decision for the Greek-Turkish law suits or a separate decision for each case?

R.: I think an overall ruling, a package deal, is necessary. In terms of the Aegean, the Greeks must be able to say that they have won and in terms of Cyprus, the Turks must be able to say that they have retained some land. If we start trying to resolve the problems, one by one, it will take years and generate more frustration than anything else. Athens and Ankara are playing diplomatic chess right now. Each move is small, but I can say that rapprochement between Greece and Turkey is irrevocable. There will, however, be highs and lows.

Q.: When will we see this package deal?

R.: Not before 2004. That is the deadline for matters involving the Aegean Sea and the case at International Court in the Hague and also for the Cyprus issue.²

- Q.:** Don't you think that Greek popular opinion will doubt the possibility of cooperation with Turkey, a factor that will embarrass Prime Minister Simitis and Foreign Minister Papandreou?
- R.:** Of course, they will be embarrassed. I think that the Turkish side will make attempts at appeasement that will not cost much. I criticize my government for having done nothing so far. It did only one important thing, in my opinion. It pushed Denktash to go to negotiations in New York, when he had refused.³ However, this is not important to the Greeks.
- Q.:** Is Denktash an obstacle in attempts to solve the Cyprus issue?
- R.:** Without Denktash, there can be no solution. Denktash has much more prestige in the Turkish public's eyes than the Turkish government itself.

NOTES

1. On June 29, 2000, Turkish military authorities took a series of restrictive measures on the free circulation and operations of the staff at the UNFICYP, in other words, the UN in Cyprus. On July 1, the occupying army advanced its positions by 200 meters by encircling the Greek village of Strovilia. This was a flagrant violation of the *status quo* on the island.
2. The conclusions of the Presidency of the European Council in Helsinki set the year 2004 as the deadline for solutions to the border disputes and similar cases to be met by an EU candidate country.
3. From September 12-26, 2000, in New York, a fourth round of intercommunity talks were held under the auspices of the United Nations, hosted by Kofi Annan, Secretary General of the UN.