Telegram from the Foreign Secretary[[1]](#footnote-1), E. Bevin, to the British Ambassador in Ankara, M. Peterson, concerning Russo-Turkish relations, 28 July 1945 (received on 11 August)

SECRET

[…]

Sir,

THE first news of the Potsdam discussion in so far as they affect Turkey contained in Sir John Anderson’s telegram of No. 137 of the 25th July, combined with the change of Government in Great Britain[[2]](#footnote-2), make it perhaps expedient for me to attempt to review Turkey’s position in the world to-day.

2. It is exaggeration to say that in every sphere of Turkey’s activities – internal as well as external and over the whole range of commerce and industry – the domination factor at the moment is the uneasy state of Russo-Turkish relations.

3. It is not easy to say precisely how this has come about and why these relations should have deteriorated to so marked an extent since the time when, a little more than twenty years ago, a real sympathy existed between the Russia of Lenin and the Turkey of Mustafa Kemal[[3]](#footnote-3). Russian dissatisfaction with Turkey’s attitude during the war may have played a part, stimulated as it has been by incidents which it is difficult to assess to-day such as the Turkish reinforcement of their eastern frontier at the moment when the Russians had their backs to the wall of Stalingrad[[4]](#footnote-4). However this may be, most Turks have come to believe that the primary source of Soviet discontent lies in the Treaty of Alliance between Great Britain and Turkey (French participation has slipped into the background) concluded in October 1939 immediately after the mission of M. Saracoğlu[[5]](#footnote-5) (the present Prime-Minister) to Moscow which resulted in the failure of Soviet efforts to draw Turkey into a Russo-Turkish alliance and equally in the failure of M. Saracoğlu’s own proposals for a triple alliance between Great Britain, Russia and Turkey[[6]](#footnote-6).

4. The Anglo-Turkish Alliance seems to represent for Russia a derogation from the principle which she purports to assert that countries adjoining the Soviet Union must refrain from allying themselves with any third Power[[7]](#footnote-7): while there may also be in the Soviet conscience an uneasy feeling that such service as Turkey rendered to the Allies during the war and which consisted in the interposition of a buffer State between the Axis in the Balkans and the area of the Middle East is to-day capable of being transformed into a similar check on Soviet ambitions.

5. The particular demands which the Soviet Union has seen fit to make upon Turkey in connection with the proposed renewal of the Russo-Turkish Treaty of Amity denounced by the Soviet Government in March of this year fall under three heads. While it is true that in the Turko-Russian conversations, which began in Moscow on the 7th June last and which have been continued intermittently both at Moscow and Ankara since that date, no demands have been presented in writing, the Turks believe with every apparent justification that Russia has unmistakably intimated her desire for these concessions. Firstly, Russian bases in the Straits (by which term is of course meant the entire waterway connecting the Black Sea with the Ægean). Secondly, a revision of Turkey’s eastern frontier as laid down by the Russo-Turkish Treaty of 1921[[8]](#footnote-8). And thirdly, Russia is understood to insist upon a revision of the Montreux Convention of 1936 governing the passage of vessels of all kinds along this waterway, in respect of which Russia is no longer content to enjoy no greater privileges than “the Emperor of Japan”.

6. The attitude of Turkey towards these demands is, firstly, that nothing will induce her to concede to Russia military bases in the Straits. The Turkish Prime Minister has repeatedly told me that Turkey would fight rather than make these concessions which she would regard as tantamount to the surrender of her independence. M. Saracoğlu, indeed, went so far as to say in conversation on the 26th July that Turkey would fight event if Great Britain and America were to support Russian demands for such bases. I do not think that he is bluffing or that such words may be classed as mere histrionics.

7. To the demand for frontier revision Turkey’s reply is that it is put forward on false premises. The Treaty of 1921 was concluded at a time when the Soviet Union indeed was weak, but Turkey herself was certainly no stronger. The treaty was freely negotiated and contained a signal concession to the Soviet Union in the return of Batum. The districts of Kars and Ardahan were Turkish territory up to 1878 and between that time and 1921 they have not been genuinely Russian territory. The Russian attempt to base these territorial demands on the alleged needs of the Armenian people are not taken seriously in Turkey and may indeed be no more than the Russian method of replying to the alleged Pan-Turanian activities of the Turkish Government – activities which, as appears from my dispatch No. 118 of the 5th April, have been grossly exaggerated in Moscow.

8. Towards the Russian insistence on the revision of the Montreux Convention Turkey has maintained a conciliatory attitude which it may be possible to sustain even if the demand for revision is converted into one for the establishment of a totally different régime[[9]](#footnote-9).

9. A subsidiary cause of the tension existing between Russia and Turkey lies in the situation in the Balkans where the Turks believe – and, so far as I can see, with every reason – that Russia is seeking to establish a Slav *bloc* to include Romania as well as Yugoslavia and Bulgaria and to be directed towards the attainment of access to the sea at the expense of Greece and possibly of Turkey.

10. In the face of what the Turks regard as this Russian menace a remarkable unanimity has been achieved in Turkey, and the defects both of the present Turkish internal régime and of the existing administration headed by M. Saracoğlu tend to be lost sight of by all save a small group of malcontents amongst whom the better elements are unwilling to push the President [İnönü][[10]](#footnote-10) too hard so long as the Russian danger persists, while the less patriotic elements are more than suspect of being in Russian pay.

11. Indeed, were it not for the Russian danger following upon the strain which the five and a half years of war in Europe have imposed upon Turkey, criticism of the country’s internal régime would inevitably be much more vocal that it as present. The Turkish system of Government is on the face of it more a façade of democracy than a genuinely democratic organisation. Not only is there a single party, the People’s Party[[11]](#footnote-11), which itself throws off a small “official” opposition group, but the head of that party is no other that the President of the Republic himself. This latter point is regarded by genuinely patriotic reformers such as M. Rauf Orbay (who broke with Atatürk himself on the same issue) as being the negation of democratic Governments notwithstanding the analogy to the contrary which exists in the constitution of the United States.

12. So long as President Ismet Inönü shows no signs of stepping down from his dual position it seems unlikely that any genuine opposition party can formed (since no prominent Turk is anxious to place himself in direct opposition to the President) and tentative efforts on this direction, such as have been widely canvassed in Turkey during the summer and have, in fact, led to the party’s recent decision not to present official candidatures for six vacant constituencies, are likely to be of no more than propaganda value.

13. A stet of greater importance recently taken has perhaps been the permitted publication of the debates in the Grand National Assembly and of the periodic press conferences held by the Prime Minister.

14. Finally, in the domain of commerce and industry Russian influence is detrimentally evidenced through the strain imposed on Turkey’s resources by the continued maintenance of the Turkish army on a footing of mobilisation. The recent release of one class from the colours has had the effect only of reducing the percentage allotted in the budget estimates to military expenditure from 54 per cent to 46 per cent. Moreover, apart from direct expenditure on the army and to a less extent the air force, Turkish economy suffers acutely from the shortage of man-power resulting from continued mobilisation.

15. It would not perhaps be justifiable to ascribe to expenditure on defence the whole responsibility for the unsatisfactory foundations upon which Turkey’s commercial system is at present based. But it may well be the need of meeting military expenditure out of proportion to the country’s resources which has led the Turks to base their system of taxation principally upon what may be described as “indirect taxation deducted at source” with the consequent enormous and continuing rise in prices. The development of Government monopolies – exercised principally, but now wholly, by the banks – for the distribution of practically all the chief articles of importation into Turkey has yielded considerable sums for the revenue (the Minister of Monopolies boasted in a recent Assembly debate that the Sugar Monopoly had yielded no less than 60 millions Turkish liras in the space of a year), but is also responsible for the prevalence of a very high level of internal prices, which tends to create discontent and impair the stability of the Turkish State. The system by which the banks, and in particular the Sümer Bank, obtain direct and immediate control of many primary articles of importation, such as wool and, after exacting for themselves as agents of the Government a profit which in some cases reaches 200 per cent., subsequently turn the distribution over to the birliks, or Government-controlled unions. means that by the time the article has reached the consumer its price has attained an almost prohibitive level. The effect of the private trader, more particularly of he be a foreigner or a member of the non-Moslem minorities, is such as to constitute a virtual strangle-hold on Turkey’s foreign trade.

16. To sum up. So long as His Majesty’s Government continue to support Turkey, the latter country will continue to represent a valuable bulwark against Soviet penetration to the south and into the Mediterranean area. But until Turkey is relieved of the menace constituted by the present attitude of the Soviet Union towards her, Turkey cannot play the role which she otherwise would in the community of nations and, in particular, cannot hope to achieve an industrial expansion which she made one of her principal aims and which, even if realized only in part, would be of benefit throughout the Middle East area. On the reverse side of the picture the continued *malaise* in Russo-Turkish relations constitute a source of anxiety to those nations which are concerned to see the San Francisco Charter become an effective instrument of peace and security.

17. I am sending a copy of this dispatch to His Majesty’s representatives at Washington and Moscow.

I have, &c.

M. PETERSON.

[TNA, FO 371/48774]

Keywords: Turkey, inter-allied relations

1. Terms ‘Foreign Secretary’ and ‘Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs’ for the British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs are used interchangeably, in accordance with the text in the documents. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. E. Bevin replaced A. Eden as Foreign Secretary following the Labour Party’s victory in the July 1945 election. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Atatürk, Mustafa Kemal (1881 – 1938) – Turkish statesman, General, Prime-Minister (1920 – 1921), President of Turkey (1923 – 1938). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. A characteristic dispatch from the Soviet intelligence service (NKVD) dated 14 October 1942 (signed by L.P. Beria) gives some idea of Soviet anxieties in respect of Turkish actions at this time. In the dispatch, a conversation between İnönü and one of the professors from Ankara University is relayed in which the Turkish president was given the following line: ‘Turkey does not have to openly declare for Germany or England. There is only one thing we must desire – the defeat of Russia, otherwise, having won the battle, the Russian army cannot be stopped by England and Turkey will be among the first of its victims (OGB. Т. 3. Kn. 2. М., 2003. S. 367). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Saraçoğlu, Mehmet Şükrü (1887 – 1953) – Turkish statesman and politician, Prime-Minister (1942 – 1946), President of the Grand National Assembly (1948 – 1950). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Saraçoğlu’s visit took place between 26 September and 16 October 1939; for more detail see: Gasanli Dzh. SSSR – Turtsiia. S. 54–63. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Not to an insignificant degree, Peterson truly captured one of the features of the Soviet approach to the concept of “sphere of influence”. See Litvinov’s memorandum dated 15 November 1944. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The Treaty “of Friendship and Brotherhood” of 6 March 1921, signed by the Government of the Russian Soviet Federal Socialist Republic and a delegation of the Grand National Assembly of Turkey. At the time of his meeting with Sarper on 7 June, Molotov, insisting on re-examining the territorial provisions of this treaty, believing them to be unfair and having brought damage to the Soviet Union. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. In September 1945 the Foreign Office even planned a sui generis variation of a return to the Lausanne arrangements of 1923, presenting the Chiefs of Staff with proposals for a de-militarised zone around the Straits and the creation in Istanbul of an international committee to monitor the observance of the new arrangements. The Chiefs of Staff reasonably pointed out that Turkey would not accept such terms. See: Copy of a Letter from FO to COS, 05/09/1945 (in: C.O.S. (45) 567 (O)) // TNA, CAB 80/97. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. İnönü, Ismet (1884 - 1973) - Turkish General and statesman. Prime Minister of Turkey (1923- 1924), President of Turkey (1938 - 1950). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Republican People’s Party – political party in Turkey. Founded in 1923 as People’s Party (renamed in 1924) by Mustafa Kemal. In 1923 – 1950, 1961 – 1965, 1974, 1977, 1978 – 1979 ruling party in Turkey. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)