

Title: IMAN Interviews Turkish Ambassador, Dr. Merve Kavakcı (Part 1)

Participants:

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Iman Zambasri: [0:00] Hello! My name is Iman Zambasri here from the Affair Weekly and this week we'd like to share part 1 of an interview IMAN Research conducted with Her Excellency Dr. Merve Kavakcı, the Turkish Ambassador here in Malaysia. In part 1 of the interview, Dr. Kavakcı tells us about Turkey's relationship and presence in Malaysia and how both nations can learn from each other's experiences to grow. Dr. Kavakcı also speaks about how Turkey came to be able to produce 100% Turkish-made defense products, she argues that this gradual process was not independent of the process of the democratization of the mind, a term she had coined as an academic. Dr. Kavakcı claims that this process of the democratization of the mind only came into fruition with the AKP government, Turkey's ruling government, led by President Erdoğan. Finally, part 1 of the interview wraps up on the topic of the Rohingya refugees and Turkey's efforts to minimize their plight. And so without further ado, this is Dr. Merve Kavakcı interviewed by IMAN research. Stay tuned next week to listen to part 2 of the interview!

K: [01:10] *Bismillahi Rahmani Rahim.* My name is Dr. Merve Kavakcı. I am the new ambassador of the Turkish Republic in Malaysia. I'm very delighted to meet the family of IMAN, it's a great pleasure.

I: [01:38] How are you liking Malaysia so far?

K: [01:40] This is my first time in the region and in Malaysia, and so far so good. I like the weather because I spent quite a bit of time in one part of the world where it was much warmer and much more humid, and therefore I'm just fine with the weather. And so long as it's not cold, it's great. The Malaysian people have welcomed me with their warm arms, I would say so it's great. I am also very familiar with the region's food culture, shall I say, despite the fact that I have not been in Malaysia, so I love the spicy food and the sweet chicken and the sweet and the meat together and it's great. And I have to say I have a great group of people, my team are working very meticulously and earnestly to help me in my new profession, which is my first post as ambassador of Turkey in Malaysia.

I: [03:07] So one of our question is will Turkey assume a bigger presence in South East Asia and in relation to ASEAN in general?

K: [03:17] Thank you for the question. I think there is a part of the answer to this question that is independent of Turkey because the world has shrunk to a very small village right now, the global village of ours that we live in, this small planet. While the soil and the land and the territories we have are not getting smaller, the distances between them is getting smaller due to technological advancements and the mobility of people and information. With that, indeed all

nation states, all peoples, all groups, have become more efficacious and influential in the front parts of the world. And with this natural course of events, Turkey is also looking for new ways of establishing new areas of collaboration. Southeast Asia, Asia in particular, but Southeast Asia is another new area that Turkey is hoping to strengthen its relationship with.

I: [04:58] So to be more specific, for example China has an extensive Belt and Road investment across Asia, and it is funding a lot of critical infrastructure in the region. Does Turkey see itself adopting a similar role in this region or in Southeast Asian development projects?

K: [5:20] Not necessarily in a way to be replicating what other countries are doing, such as China as you have suggested, which is in the same region as Malaysia and has historical and cultural ties to the country of Malaysia, but in a way maybe a bit different as two rising stars Muslim countries of the region, in other words, Malaysia and Turkey can learn from each other's experiences in the way that we've seen Malaysia grow, thrive for several decades with economic prosperity, technological advancement, and definitely Turkey followed suit in the last decade and a half. And in their own ways, in their own region, these are two very crucial countries that are regional power hubs. And therefore, it's important for them to join hands and exchange the value accrued from their experiences. Not just in economic affairs but also cultural, social, political, and other areas.

I: [07:11] Right, you mentioned that in an economic sphere, how has trade between Turkey and Malaysia developed after the establishment of the Malaysia-Turkey free trade agreement? What are the key export items?

K: [07:32] I would say that the Turkey and Malaysia friendship, historical and more so cultural, religious friendship as two muslim countries in their own way had come into fruition in the establishment of D-8, many years ago under developing eight countries. And that friendship came into a new stage, a bit late I have to admit, in the process of the free trade agreement of 2015. And of course of the ratification process of this. Right now we are at the stage of rolling up the sleeves and getting to the hard work kind of moment. We have USD 200 million import for Turkey to Malaysia, while Malaysian exports to Turkey are at the amount of over USD 2 billion. Now, here, as an ambassador, my goal is to enhance the economic trade relationship on one hand, but on the other hand, to work towards alleviating the discrepancy this gap, between the two numbers and encourage more Turkish business investors to invest into the Malaysian economy. At the moment, some of the areas that we are working in mostly is in the defence industry. And the commodities like textile and milk, and so forth. That is as far as good and services are concerned. Food is one area, and then defense is a big sort of item on there. Since our last sort of working together, in the last few years, Turkey has made some tremendous, substantial strides in the defence industry. Namely, creating capabilities and capacity building in producing its own defence mechanism, hundred percent Turkish made. Without any longer to depend on foreign countries. And these are tested in productions that is battle proven. Already used, tested, and proved to be working in our very recent Operation Olive Branch that we carried out in Syria. And now what we are suggesting to our Malaysian counterpart is to join hands for joint ventures and not only share the know-how, or how these services could work,

but how actually we can together build our own defence mechanisms, so neither Malaysia nor Turkey will have to depend on other countries on a small screw, or part of a machine, or a weapon.

I: [12:34] So regarding your defence mechanisms that you had mentioned as 100% Turkish made. How did Turkey get to that point? And what can Malaysia learn from Turkey?

K: [12:47] I think the answer is quite interesting. We have a Turkish saying - "a bad neighbour would foist you, or would coerce you, or would engender you, or would cause you to buy a home. This is a Turkish proverb or saying which explains the crux of this matter - that the fact that the producers of defence mechanisms in the world, because they put conditionalities to the purchasing of these armaments and weaponries and or when they sell you a good of theirs that they produce, they do not give you one small piece of that machine, or they sell you the machine, for an arm and a leg, and then do not teach you know-hows or the way through which these machines have to operate themselves. You become very dependent on foreign services. Turkey decided that Turkish people are good enough, are smart enough, are capable enough to put their heads together and build their own weaponry, their own UAVs, unmanned aerial vehicles. Now we are at a stage that we produced our own unmanned ground vehicle that we had exhibited at your DSA last week. I think the motivation came from "yes we can motto" if you will, and indeed Turkish can.

[recording breaks]

I: [15:05] Okay, sorry so where were we? Oh yes, I was asking how long did it take Turkey to get to that point after deciding, or after having this shift in mindset in terms of uh...

K: [15:18] I think it's a gradual process, and this process is not independent of the process of democratization of the minds. As an academic, my coining of the term goes back to early 2000s when I was a professor at George Washington University. And one can be surprised at how I'm putting democratization of the minds process and the concept of democracy in conjunction with the production of defense mechanisms, but let me explain by suggesting that democratization of a country has two prongs. One is to establish the values of democracy through institutions of democracy building, which means that you institutionalize democracy through creating the rule of law, transparency, accountability, mass political participation, the rights to scores and all of those with an accompaniment of the economic process generally which has to have the liberal approach to it. And also it has another prong, where people themselves have to change their mindsets. Democratization of the minds means the people can realize the power within themselves that they themselves are the rulers of their own political machinery, which is at the outset put out there for their own consumption and for their own disposal to serve them, to bring goods and services. Within that process, the people have to come up with their own value system to pump, beef up the confidence in themselves. That's why I refer to it as "yes, we can", to believing in yourself that you can make a difference, one person at a time, one city at a time, one building at a time, you can change yourself and your surrounding. Now, this is a gradual process that came into its very fruition with the AKP government, the current

government in power right now. Erdoğan's, President Erdoğan's perspective was first introduced to the national scene through his Prime Ministry, then his Presidency. With that, people saw in him their own selves. President Erdoğan's is an embodiment of the Turkish nation. A man, a young man who represents the Anatolia, not necessarily the center of the Turkish, but the peripheral of the Turkish, who came to be a political actor, grew from there, became a prime minister, then a president. With that, he reflected his vision to his people as well and argued that we do not necessarily have to look in own direction to the Western allies in European Union, but the world's changing and therefore, Turkey needs to look all around, three hundred and sixty degrees rather than looking in the only one direction. Look for alternative ways for establishing collaborations and cooperation at various levels at various levels. One does not have to be up to par with another one, but you need to be versatile and multilateral, if you will. With this, when you're pressed down by a certain partner of yours in the defense industry, that who wants to sell you by gouging you, giving you a very high price on an ex-machine, you need to have alternatives. The fact now that Turkey had no alternatives, but only look up to the Western democracies as role model, as its only role model, incapacitated and therefore limited the Turkish sort of resources. That pushed the Turkish people to look for alternative was to establishing new collaborations. When you're in search of alternatives, then your eyes can see better. You have a different view. With that you look all around, you see other countries that you can collaborate with. And with that, you not only look outside, you look within the power invested in you. And with that, we move on. So in a way the political machinery and the leadership of the political machinery started seeing eye to eye with the people of Turkey. Until one can suggest that until then, the political machinery had its own vision and direction while the private industries and the people, small and medium scale entrepreneurs, or the very upper scale entrepreneurs, they had another vision. Now people can see eye to eye and during the DSA two weeks ago, the Turkish contributions to the DSA made it very solidified what the Turkish can really produce and what Turkey and Malaysia can produce if they joined hands and in we've seen that in all of those machines that were exhibited there.

I: [23:12] Okay, so shifting gears a little bit, you mentioned the EU. What is Turkey's view on the EU banning palm oil imports from Southeast Asia?

K: [23:28] Turkey is closely watching the developments. On one hand, you have the element of environmentalism item on the agenda. On the other hand, you have a people that with its own will produces its own palm oil and then is the world's greatest palm oil producer and exporter to the rest of the world. It would be sanguine and parochial to think that this is only a matter of protecting the environment. And therefore at this point Turkey is closely observing and trying to grasp the new developments and the discourse about the palm oil conflict in the region and is interested in building an opinion about this. This is the stage we are in right now.

I: [25:09] Again, into a different topic altogether, Turkey has played an initial key role in drawing international attention to the plight of Rohingya refugees. Does the Turkish embassy here in Malaysia plan to play a role in helping Rohingya refugees here?

K: [25:28] Mobility of people, the plight of the displaced all around the world is a matter that deserves global attention. As Turkey, we are very proud that we have been one of the trailblazers in raising issues concerning the plight of the displaced people, particularly the Syrians. We have over three million guests, as we call them, in our country, hosting them with civility and with warm and kind reception. While trying to help create an environment for them in their own lands, cleansed of terrorist factions so that they can go back to their homelands. As you mentioned, Rohingya Muslims who had been inflicted with the genocidal treatment by Myanmar officials is another group of people that we drew attention to several years ago. Long before the world decided to make a note of this great grave situation in Myanmar. In Cox Bazaar, of course Turkey with the reception of the Bangladesh government, is one major country who is already pushing its limits to the extent that whatever must be done to ameliorate the plight of the Rohingyas who have passed over to Bangladesh, the standards of their living on the best possible way. Turkish Republic very recently offered to build infrastructure for permanent residential areas for Rohingya Muslims within the Bangladesh borders, if these people will be granted citizenship rights. And even with that Turkey cannot wait to help further its collaboration and its aid towards the Muslims there. Rohingya Muslims within Malaysia, is indeed under the patronage and overhaul of the Malaysian sovereignties. As a country who had dealt with a chronic crisis of Syrian refugees with very unfathomable realities of human aggression, as an example, say your shores being swept not by fish, but dead corpse of children, we as the Turkish people look forward to sharing any experience that we might have to widen the vision of any country who is dealing with the people of displaced nations. Rohingya Muslims within the borders of Malaysia are another group as such.

I: [30:21] So from what I gather from what you're saying is are there currently any efforts from the Turkish embassy to engage with local NGOs in this matter or is the Turkish embassy looking into those sorts of avenues or..?

K: [30:41] As the representative of Turkish Republic here, our embassy interested in all of the issues that are present, not just the refugee issues, not only non-governmental matters, but all matters in sharing our experiences.