Highlights from the “Turkey Decoded with Ambassador Ann Dismorr” Programs

THE WORLD IS WATCHING: Turkey’s Long Journey of Joining the EU.

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Ann DISMORR, the Swedish Ambassador to Turkey from 2001 to 2005, introduced her book, titled TURKEY DECODED in a series of programs that took place in New York during the last week of February 2009. Two of these events were organized by the LIGHT MILLENNIUM in collaboration with the Consulate General of SWEDEN in New York, and COLUMBIA University Middle Eastern and Asian Languages and Cultures, Middle East Institute, and YALE University Council on Middle East Studies.

Ann Dismorr, who is one of the two daughters of a top civil servant father, was first interested in other cultures at age seven when she made a friend with a Spanish girl in her school. As a result of Dismorr's curiosity in other cultures, she completed her university education in Saudi Arabia.

Besides the Middle East and the Islamic World, Dismorr’s main fields of expertise include human rights. When she was asked in an interview about how she became interested in human rights, she answered that she had been interested in the Israeli and Palestinian conflict when she was very young and so she chose to concentrate on this field.

Ambassador Dismorr has worked actively on the Middle East peace process and has served as an ambassador in Lebanon before Turkey. These experiences have made her well versed on the region and Islam. Currently, she is the Ambassador/Head of the International Department of the Swedish Parliament since 2006, and working actively to enhance the understanding and dialogue with the Muslim world. Dismorr has written Turkey Decoded following her return to Sweden in the year she took a break from work. Her purpose behind her writing this book was that she wanted to provide people understanding of Turkey by giving an account of the country beginning from its foundation to the present time (Turkey Decoded was published in England in 2008). In this way she also had a chance of sharing her own reflections and thoughts about her life and experiences in Turkey, emphasizing that Turkey and Islam is already a part of Europe.

The first program featuring Ambassador Ann Dismorr's book, took place on February 23, 2009, was accomplished by the collaboration of YALE University, Council on Middle Eastern Studies; the LIGHT MILLENNIUM; and the Consulate General of SWEDEN in New York.

Ambassador Dismorr’s presentation at Yale was opened by an introduction speech made by another ambassador and visiting professor Sallama Shaker, who was the first woman Counselor to the Egyptian Embassy in Turkey and at the Egyptian Embassy in Washington D.C. Shaker also moderated the Q&A session.
Ambassador Dismorr said in her speech that when she was appointed to Turkey, there were many speculations—especially ambassadors from the other EU countries—regarding her position as a woman diplomat, having Tayyip Erdogan as the Prime Minister whose party is pro-Islam and conservative. There were speculations amongst her colleagues in Sweden wondering if she would be treated according to Islamic traditions, such as “not shaking the hand of a woman” or she would be treated equally with her male colleagues. However, Dismorr noted, Prime Minister Erdogan was proved wrong of these speculations by assuring equal diplomatic communication with her and two other woman ambassadors amongst the 100 ambassadors who were in Ankara during that time period.

Amb. Dismorr, in her presentations both at Yale and Columbia, said that Turkey has become European since the time it has officially started the membership negotiation process. At the end of this process, when Turkey completes the requirements of the Copenhagen criteria, if EU still blocks Turkey’s membership with one reason or another, this will be a serious test for Europe and the lost of credibility of the EU within the EU and in the world..

The LIGHT MILLENNIUM organization, together with the COLUMBIA University, Middle Eastern and Asian Languages and Cultures, Middle East Institute and the Consulate General of SWEDEN in New York held a second program on February 25, 2009. The AMERICAN TURKISH SOCIETY gave a reception as a part of their program called "Meet the Ambassadors" in honor of Ambassador Ann DISMORR and guests at the venue of the program. This unique collaboration between The American Turkish Society and the Light Millennium brought a much more diverse audience to the program.

Prof. Etem Erol made the welcoming remarks at Columbia University. Then Prof. Ahmet T. Kuru made a speech titled, “Turkey in World Politics: from Domestic Crises to Global Initiatives.” Ambassador Ulf Hjertonsson, the Consul General of Sweden in New York, introducing Dismorr explained how the idea for this event had evolved: “There is a beginning to everything. When I attended a very impressive presentation of Prof. Talat Halman’s on Yunus Emre at the end of last October in this very room, I met Bircan Unver. The effect of that program, and having an ambassador of ours who wrote a book on Turkey, and through our continuing dialogues on Ambassador Dismorr and her book led us here.” He also said that in the conference room called Dag Hammarskjold Lounge, giving his speech on front of Dag Hammarskjold’s portrait, and while pointing the portrait, now, Dag Hammarskjold is smiling and watching of Ann Dismorr and the attendees and he hopes very constructive results from the program.

In her presentation, Ambassador Dismorr summarized that the main progress Turkey has made in the field of human rights was the removal of the “death penalty” and also the important steps taken toward Kurdish people’s gaining their cultural rights, such as the abolition of the prohibition on Kurdish language, and starting a Kurdish TV by the state television among many others. Further, Amb. Dismorr emphasized that Turkey needs to improve conditions for “women rights”, “freedom of expression” and change the Constitution that the Erdogan government had started working on its draft that process was put aside.

Dismorr described herself as “fortunate” because she has witnessed Turkey’s rapid reforms regarding the taboos of the past during her service between 2001 and 2005. She said Turkey has put its name under many far-reaching EU reforms and even Europe was surprised to see these.

Within the 12 chapters of her book Turkey Decoded, Dismorr mentioned that the most challenging chapter to write was titled “Turkish Identity” which took the most time.

Some of the common questions from both programs in Yale and Columbia University were:

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“Is it possible to decode Turkey in such a short time as 4 years?”
-Ambassador Dismorr: “I have visited frequently all parts of Turkey including villages, and continue to visit Turkey annually 3 to 4 times to follow developments and changes. Turkey is a very complex country, but that is my attempt.”

Dismorr, in her conclusion, regarding the last chapter of *Turkey Decoded*, titled “The Beginning of A Post-Kemalist Era?”, indicated that the process is in its very beginning yet. There was some discontent for her statement about the “Post-Kemalist Era” within the audience of the programs, which was also posed to her as a question: "How do you define post-Kemalist era?" Ambassador Dismorr’s criteria is based on the last two election results. AKP in 2001 has won with the 37% majority of the vote, which is higher than any political party in EU, and in 2007, AKP has become much more powerful by gaining 47% percentage of the votes. Dismorr also indicated that as a Islamic rooted center party, AKP holds the three major and core political powers in Turkey such as Presidential, Prime Ministry and Parliament.

Particularly during the Columbia program, questions were mainly in relation to the internal political tension and polarization in Turkey. Ambassador Dismorr carefully and eloquently avoided getting into a discussion on internal conflicts of Turkey; instead she evaluated Turkey’s importance, potential place, and role within the European Union from a very positive and supportive perspective. Further, she underlined the blossoming civil society organizations in Turkey, in particular in relation to gender and women issues, as well as in reference to ongoing internal conflicts between the elite secularist party and supporters, between minorities and governmental power. She clearly indicated that Turkey’s full membership to *European Union* will be an umbrella to protect minorities, vulnerable communities, individual rights, and the freedom of expression.

Overall, in various programs in New York and also one in Connecticut, Ambassador Dismorr made a leading effort in promoting Turkey’s membership to the EU as a high-profile European diplomat. She mentioned that five percent of Sweden’s population is Muslim and there are 20 million Muslims all around Europe. She answered the question of “Is EU a Christian club?” saying that there is already a Muslim community in the EU.

Ambassador Dismorr, as her conclusion in both programs, underlined that Turkey as a Muslim country, with a 72 million population whose 60% percent is under age 30, is one of the most rapid developing, modern, and secular countries. Once it becomes a member of the European Union, Turkey also will be representing 1.2 billion of Muslim population in the world within the EU. “This is a very exciting process, and the world is watching,” she said.

Amongst the 155 people who attended the program at Columbia University were Ozhan Uzumcuoglu from the Turkish Mission and his wife, Consul Ayse Uzer from NY Turkish Consulate, Murat Kopru, Chairman of The American Turkish Society, Lawrence M. Kaye, Vice Chairman of The American Turkish Society and Selen Ucak, Executive Director of The American Turkish Society. The guests were from many different backgrounds and nationalities, amongst them academicians from Columbia University, New York University, and other universities, as well as participants from international institutions such as World Bank.

Even though it was announced that Prof. Peter Awn, Dean of General Studies and Director of MEI at Columbia University, who had accepted to participate but he was unfortunately unable to attend.

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Producers of the Program: Bircan Unver, the Light Millennium; Martina Hogberg, the Consulate General of Sweden; for the Yale University program with Molly Moran, and Columbia University, with Prof. Etem Erol.

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