

Interview of H.E. Ambassador of the Republic Iraq to Greece, Shorsh Said to Alexandra Fotaki for in.gr

The Iraqi Ambassador to Greece, Mr. Shorsh Said, refers to the strong ties between Greece and Iraq and the further deepening of relations between the two countries, during his interview to in.gr, a few days after the visit of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Nikos Dendias and the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Kostas Fragogiannis, to Baghdad. A visit that highlighted the interest for Greek investments in the reconstruction plan of Iraq, but also the interest of Baghdad for benefiting from the Greek know-how in the field of renewable energy sources, as well as in the field of restoration of archaeological sites. The Iraqi ambassador also referred to the current situation in the Eastern Mediterranean, due to the Turkish provocations, underlining the serious problems and dangers that arise and emphasizing the need for dialogue and de-escalation. He also reminds us of the chronic problems of Turkey - Iraq, hinting about the unconfirmed role of Ankara concerning the influx of ISIS jihadists into Iraq ...

- Recently, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Nikos Dendias, and the Deputy Minister for Economic Diplomacy, Mr. Kostas Fragogiannis, visited Iraq. What was discussed regarding bilateral relations and what about the prospect of investments?

- Greece and Iraq have strong ties. Our goal is to deepen and expand bilateral relations even more in all fields, politics, diplomacy, economy, but also culture with a focus on archaeology- related issues. Three Memorandums of Understanding were signed during this visit. One concerned the political consultations between the two countries, the second was about the cooperation of the Greek diplomatic academy with Iraq and the third, and extremely important, concerns the encouragement of investments between the two countries. There were plans for signing more memorandums, relating to Health, Agricultural policy, Transportation. However, the acceleration of the visit did not allow enough time for their preparation.

The trade relations of Greece and Iraq are also of great importance. Iraq is the biggest trading partner of Greece, amongst the Arab countries, with trade exchange of 4.5 billion euros annually. We expect this trade volume to increase even more after the visit, not only concerning energy but also on other levels.

The visit to Iraq further strengthened our relations. In addition to bilateral cooperation, Greece and Iraq cooperate and support each other in all international organizations.

In all our meetings, we also thanked Greece for its treatment and support provided to the Iraqis living in the country, despite the financial difficulties. It should be noted that the number of immigrants from Iraq to Greece has decreased after the improvement of security in the country and the victory over the Islamic State.

- You referred to energy. What are the current agreements between Greece and Iraq and what about the reconstruction projects in Iraq?

Greece is the fourth or fifth country in the world to buy oil from Iraq. During this visit of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Nikos Dendias, the issue of renewable energy sources was discussed in the meetings he had with both the President and the Prime Minister of Iraq. Given that Greece has the know-how, the RES prospects were thoroughly discussed, as the geography of Greece is similar to that of Iraq and the experience it has gained can be also applied in our country.

Issues relating to maritime transport and more specifically issues relating to shipbuilding and port construction, as well as other projects in the framework of cooperation for the reconstruction of Iraq were also discussed. The construction of cities, infrastructure plans, to name a few.

Greece and Iraq are also two countries with great civilization and among the issues discussed was the archiving of all Iraqi antiquities, a project for which we also would like to benefit from the Greek experience. The Islamic State destroyed the largest museum in Mosul, and this is another field in which the Greek know-how is important to us.

- How do you see the relations of Greece with the Arab world and what role can Greece play from now on?

The current government places particular importance to the Arab world and the Middle East in general. And we see that the visits of Greek officials to Egypt, the UAE and other Arab countries take place on a weekly or monthly basis. And we encourage these relations because they are very important for both Greece

and the EU. Greece can play a big, important role for the Arab countries in both the EU and the UN. Given that Greece maintains good relations with both Israel and the Palestinians, this can also help to resolve the issues. We are monitoring the situation and we witness that Greece is an active member of the UN.

- Are you concerned about the situation in the Eastern Mediterranean and the movements of Turkey? Armenia also accuses Ankara of sending jihadists to Nagorno-Karabakh. What is your opinion?

We are extremely concerned about the developments in the region. It is an area with many problems that cannot stand anymore. And this raises our concern even more.

We have been through decades of differences with Turkey. Turkey has occupied areas of Iraq, from which it refuses to leave. It bombs Iraq every day. It destroys thousands of acres of agricultural land, making farmers to abandon them and then have no other means to live, because this land is what they make a living of. Many soldiers and civilians have been killed in these bombings. Turkey has set up 37 checkpoints inside Iraq.

Our government has shown great patience and self-restraint towards Turkey in order to avoid a military conflict. Because we know that if war breaks out it will not be easy to stop. So we try to resolve our differences with Ankara through dialogue. The Iraqi constitution states that Iraq shall not intervene in any neighbouring country but Iraq also cannot allow any country to violate its sovereignty.

The excuse that Turkey has consistently used for its attacks on Iraq is the existence of the PKK in the region, but ignores to mention that it is by its own 2013 agreement that the PKK is in those areas, a Turkey-PKK peace agreement which provided that the members of the organization would be transferred to Iraq. We, as the government of Iraq, were against the agreement, as this was an internal matter of Turkey. It is even stranger to us that Turkey is using this very excuse for its bombing of Iraq. We believe that Turkey's internal problems should be resolved within Turkey, and not being exported. Turkey is among the two countries with the largest trade volume with Iraq. And if something happens, it will not only affect Iraq, but also Turkey and its economy. Turkey is a big country, a NATO member, an EU candidate country, and that is why it should try to reduce and not increase the problems.

When we fought against the Islamic State, we were concerned about the origins of the jihadists as to how they entered Iraq. During prison interrogations, ISIS members from Tunisia, Chechnya, Algeria and France all said they came through Turkey. What I do not know for sure is whether the Turkish government was aware of that or if they came in as tourists or any other way, without the knowledge of the Turkish authorities. I cannot say that in certainty.

The Nagorno-Karabakh issue is an old problem between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Every time there was a war, diplomacy was given a chance to stop it. That is why the EU, Russia and Turkey can push for a solution on this, so that it does not become bigger.

We are also monitoring Turkey's movements in the Eastern Mediterranean and in fact with great concern. We hope that Turkey, Greece and Cyprus will resolve their differences through diplomacy, in accordance with international and maritime laws. We see that the EU is working with a positive approach to resolve these issues. The problems in the region are indeed very big and we must try to resolve them.