

Widening Influence



HE Hatun Demirel

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Despite the close relationship it enjoys with Bahrain, Turkey keeps a rather low profile in the Kingdom. That's set to change if Ambassador Hatun Demirel has her way.

Turkey is a natural bridge of civilisations and cultures in a manner similar to Bahrain. Turkish Ambassador to Bahrain, Hatun Demirel was pleasantly surprised by the multicultural atmosphere here and the way locals have embraced foreign nationals.

"Our relationship with Bahrain goes back a long way and we share similar customs, values and traditions. I intend to further develop this cooperation in other spheres," she says.

Diplomatic relations between the two partners were established in 1973 and the Embassy opened here in 1990.

Bahrain has a 2,000-strong Turkish community, the majority of who are engaged in the hotel and restaurant business. Furthermore, nine Turkish banks operate in the wholesale banking sector in Bahrain with a turnover of billions of dollars.

Bilateral trade between Turkey and Bahrain has grown from US\$243.5 million in 2010 to US\$371 million in 2013. Turkish banks have continued to operate smoothly in Bahrain throughout the economic downturn, she points out.

Given the presence of the Turkish community here, Ambassador Demirel believes the time has come for Turkey to improve its visibility in the Kingdom.

"Many Bahrainis are eager to learn the Turkish language. My goal is to establish a Turkish institute of language and culture in Bahrain that will promote our heritage in the Kingdom," she says.

She plans to establish an annual Turkish Week in Bahrain, showcasing the best of her country's culture, cuisine, entertainment and business propositions.

On the business front, a few Turkish companies have already capitalised on the Bahrain-US FTA by setting up units here. Textile company Orta Anadolu manufactures denim fabric in Bahrain for export to the US and Turkey. Another Turkish furniture company and a dairy manufacturer from Turkey are currently exploring the investment prospects in Bahrain.

New ventures are on the cards in June when the second Joint GCC-Turkish Business Forum will take place in Bahrain, where businessmen from both countries will discuss joint ventures in sectors such as aquaculture, industry, education and energy, as well as oil and gas. The event is hosted by the Bahrain Chamber of Commerce and Industry (BCCI) in conjunction with the the Turkish Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges and the Federation of GCC Chambers.

Promoting tourism in Turkey is a priority for Ambassador Demirel.

"I believe in people-to-people contact and, once that connection is established, all other cooperation will follow. A private Turkish airline will soon start weekly flights from Bahrain, further improving the air connectivity between the two countries," she says.

Turkey offers quality university education in wide range of disciplines taught in English language in a multicultural environment. Three experts from two Turkish universities are currently in Bahrain to participate at an exhibition for education and training.

In her earlier stint in the region, Ambassador Demirel took an Arabic language course at a Lebanese university and plans to improve her language skills further during her tenure here.