

FIRST FEMALE AMBASSADOR IN TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY: FİLİZ DİNÇMEN

PRIMEIRA MULHER EMBAIXADORA NA POLÍTICA EXTERNA TURCA: FİLİZ DİNÇMEN

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Abstract

Atatürk emphasized the equal advancement of women and men in all fields in the newly founded Republic of Turkey, stating that “if knowledge and science are necessary for our society, both men and women must acquire them equally.” Following his vision, Turkish women have made significant progress in science, knowledge, and various professional domains. Within this framework, Filiz Dinçmen became the first female ambassador of the Republic of Turkey in 1982, forty-four years after Atatürk’s death. Born in Zonguldak in 1939, Dinçmen graduated from Ankara Girls’ High School and began her higher education at the Faculty of Political Sciences, Ankara University, in 1956. Between 1961 and 1965, she served as the third and second clerk in the United Nations Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In August 1965, she was appointed as the second and later first secretary at the Turkish Mission to the United Nations in New York. From 1968 to 1970, she worked at the Turkish Embassy in Tehran. After gaining substantial experience in foreign policy, Dinçmen’s appointment as Turkey’s first female ambassador embodied Atatürk’s ideals. This study aims to highlight Filiz Dinçmen as a role model for Turkish women, emphasizing her representation of Turkey through her diplomatic achievements and identity.

Keywords: Ambassador. Turkish Woman. Atatürk. Diplomacy.

Resumo

Atatürk enfatizou a igualdade de oportunidades entre homens e mulheres em todas as áreas na recém-fundada República da Turquia, afirmando que “se o conhecimento e a ciência são necessários para a nossa sociedade, tanto homens quanto mulheres devem adquiri-los igualmente”. Seguindo sua visão, as mulheres turcas fizeram progressos significativos na ciência, no conhecimento e em diversas áreas profissionais. Nesse contexto, Filiz Dinçmen tornou-se a primeira embaixadora da República da Turquia em 1982, quarenta e quatro anos após a morte de Atatürk. Nascida em Zonguldak em 1939, Dinçmen formou-se no Liceu Feminino de Ancara e iniciou seus estudos superiores na Faculdade de Ciências Políticas da Universidade de Ancara, em 1956. Entre 1961 e 1965, atuou como terceira e segunda secretária no Departamento das Nações Unidas do Ministério das Relações Exteriores. Em agosto de 1965, foi nomeada segunda e, posteriormente, primeira secretária da Missão Turca junto às Nações Unidas em Nova York. De 1968 a 1970, trabalhou na Embaixada da Turquia em Teerã. Após adquirir experiência significativa em política externa, a nomeação de Filiz Dinçmen como a primeira embaixadora da Turquia personificou os ideais de Atatürk. Este estudo visa destacar Filiz Dinçmen como um modelo para as mulheres turcas, enfatizando sua representação da Turquia por meio de suas conquistas diplomáticas e sua identidade.

Palavras-chave: Embaixadora. Mulher turca. Atatürk. Diplomacia.



1 INTRODUCTION

During one of his country tours, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk made the following significant statement about Turkish women: “During the war, Turkish women made great contributions to the country; like everyone else, they suffered. Today, they must be free, educated, and establish schools. They must hold an equal position with men in the country. They have this right” (Caporal, 1982:180).

When examining the position of women in Turkey, one perspective focuses on the public sphere by considering the legal, political, and institutional reforms of the Republican era. Compared to the pre-Republican period and other Middle Eastern societies, these reforms were truly remarkable in their impact on the increasing public participation of women. The transition from the religious Sharia law to civil law in 1926; from polygamy to monogamy; from unequal legal rights in divorce, property, and child custody to equal legal treatment; and from political exclusion to full suffrage in 1930 (local elections) and 1935 (general elections) constituted crucial reforms. These changes formally ended the gender-based legal discrimination institutionalized in previous systems (Kağıtçıbaşı, 1990:103).

For Atatürk, there was no doubt that women’s rights represented one of the most essential dimensions of modernization. He frequently emphasized that the modernization and development of a nation could not be achieved unless men and women progressed together, stating: “Social life and a nation consist of two sexes—men and women. Is it possible for a community to advance when one half is ignored? Can a society rise to the skies while the other half remains chained to the ground? Progress must be made jointly and in friendship by both sexes. Only in this way can the revolution succeed” (Atatürk’s Speeches and Statements, 2006:219).

Atatürk’s advocacy for women’s rights was based on two main objectives: first, to make women full and equal citizens actively participating in public life; and second, to free them from the traditional communal dependencies surrounding them, thus enabling their individualization. Since the 1924 Constitution, every citizen has been recognized as a single and equal individual before the law. This was a profound achievement for women who had previously existed only through their relationship to a community or a man. The most significant advancement in the individualization of Turkish women was realized through the Civil Code (Ayata & Ergün, 1998:15).

Atatürk expressed his vision for Turkish women as follows: “The true field of success for women is to be adorned with light, wisdom, and genuine virtue. I am among those who have no doubt and complete confidence that our esteemed women will not remain behind European women but will surpass them in many respects through enlightenment and knowledge” (Atatürk’s Speeches and Statements, 2006:153–154). In this context, Filiz Dinçmen, the first female ambassador in the history of the Republic, has become a role model for both Anatolian and European women alike.

2 THE LIFE OF FİLİZ DİNÇMEN

Ambassador **Filiz Dinçmen** was born in **Zonguldak in 1939**. Her father, **Ruhi Alkor**, was a mining engineer and a member of the generation involved in the transfer of coal enterprises from foreign ownership to the **Turkish Coal Enterprises (TKİ)** during the 1930s. Her mother, **Mrs. Işık**, was a homemaker. Dinçmen spent her childhood in the mining basin of Zonguldak and its surrounding areas. She attended **primary school** in Kulu, near the lodgings belonging to the mining company. Dinçmen’s memories of her childhood were filled with rather distressing recollections. Recalling those years, she stated:

“I remember those years as a nightmare. Some evenings, while my father was at home, the phone would ring. There had been a collapse in the mine, and workers were trapped. My father would immediately get up and leave. We would wait anxiously, wondering when and how he would return.”

Her father’s chronic lung problems, resulting from his exposure to mining conditions, further contributed to these negative childhood impressions. After completing **secondary school in Zonguldak**, the family moved to **Ankara**. Filiz Dinçmen successfully graduated from **Ankara Girls’ High School** and, of her own volition, entered the **Faculty of Political Sciences (Mülkiye)** in **1956** (Bülten, 2012:18).

3 FİLİZ DİNÇMEN’S YEARS AT MÜLKIYE

Filiz Dinçmen explained her decision to study at the **Faculty of Political Sciences (Mülkiye)** at Ankara University in the following words: “It was a very conscious choice. I had already made my decision during middle school. I would graduate from the

Department of International Relations at the Faculty of Political Sciences and then enter the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Of course, for someone my age, these were quite novel ideas and were perceived as adventurous. People around me tried to dissuade me from this decision, but I studied exactly what I wanted and succeeded.”(Hürriyet, 2001: 3).

Dinçmen described the value of being a **Mülkiye graduate** as follows: “At that time, it was as if Mülkiye was one of the true pillars of the state. Those who studied at Mülkiye would take on important duties in the state, protect the Republic, and serve the nation. Of course, times are changing, but being a Mülkiye graduate still remains a significant advantage.”

Expressing her gratitude to her alma mater, she also offered the following advice to students studying there: “Hard work is the foundation of everything. Learning foreign languages is crucial. They must know Turkey, its problems, and its history very well, and also keep a close watch on the outside world.” (Bülten, 2012: 18).

Among her professors at Mülkiye, Dinçmen stated that she could never forget **Prof. Yavuz Abadan, Prof. Ahmet Şükrü Esmer, Prof. Saha Meray, Prof. Fahir Armaoğlu,** and **Prof. Nermin Abadan Unat.** In addition to graduating with high distinction, Dinçmen’s effort to learn **English and French** on her own—despite being a graduate of a Maarif (public) high school—reflected her exceptional diligence. However, even more than her industriousness, Dinçmen was recognized for her **intellectual character** during her university years. In the famous “Kazgan” yearbook of Mülkiye, published in the year of her graduation, page seventeen was dedicated to her, referring to her as the “**intellectual girl.**” The writings about her often emphasized her “utmost seriousness,” her “intellectual maturity beyond her biological age,” and the “stability of her emotional life” ([http:1](http://1)).

4 FİLİZ DİNÇMEN’S FIRST AMBASSADORSHIP

After serving in various positions at the **Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Filiz Dinçmen** received her first overseas posting in **New York**, where she worked together with her husband, **Mr. Üstün**, who was also a diplomat in the same ministry. Consequently, their assignments were generally coordinated so that they could serve in the same or nearby countries. After New York, she was appointed to **Tehran**, while she later served in **Brussels** and her husband in **Luxembourg**. Although such arrangements

posed challenges for the Ministry, efforts were made to ensure that diplomatic spouses could serve close to each other whenever possible.

Their paths eventually diverged when **Filiz Dinçmen** was appointed ambassador. Reflecting on this period, she stated: “Being colleagues with my husband was a great advantage. He was my greatest supporter. There were times when I felt overwhelmed and considered quitting. He said, ‘Absolutely not. This may be a man’s world, but you must continue. If one of us must leave, it will be me.’ (Hürriyet, 2001: 5).

Dinçmen participated in the **Turkish delegation** to the **United Nations General Assembly** in New York, chaired by **İlter Türkmen**, and between **1961 and 1965**, she served as **third and second secretary** in the UN Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In **August 1965**, she was appointed **second secretary** and later **first secretary** at the **Permanent Mission of Turkey to the United Nations in New York**. The valuable experience she gained there contributed to her later success at the **Turkish Consulate in Tehran (1968–1970)**, paving the way for her historic appointment as **Turkey’s first female ambassador** (BCA, F:30-18-1-2, K:407, G:172, S:10).

Dinçmen described her path to becoming the first female ambassador in **1982** as follows: “After graduating from university, I joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. My husband was my classmate at university. My first posting was at the Turkish Permanent Mission to the UN in New York, where we got married. Later, we were assigned to Tehran, and then to Ankara, to the Department of Economic Affairs. Following this, I served as Permanent Representative to the European Economic Community (EEC, now the European Union) in Brussels. After returning from Brussels, I worked at various departments in the Ministry for six years. In 1982, I was appointed as Turkey’s first female ambassador to The Hague. At the beginning, I faced certain difficulties because I was a woman, but later everyone was supportive, for which I remain grateful.” (Bülten, 2012: 19).

Although she was the **first female ambassador** in the history of the Republic, Dinçmen did not exaggerate the significance of this achievement. Turkish women, she emphasized, had already demonstrated their capabilities in literature, music, science, and other fields throughout the Republican era. The Republic experienced the honor of appointing its first female ambassador in its **59th year**. Modest and professional in nature, Dinçmen viewed her appointment as a natural development rather than an extraordinary one: “Naturally, if it hadn’t been me, someone else would have been appointed. Since

women have become diplomats, what could be more natural than for them to become ambassadors as well? And they will continue to do so.” (Bülten, 2012: 19).

Representing Turkey abroad as the **first female ambassador**, Filiz Dinçmen described this distinction as both **an honor and a great responsibility**. Having shown the courage to become the “first woman” in Turkish diplomacy, she stated that she had never experienced discrimination or serious difficulties due to her gender. She emphasized that the challenges she faced were the same as those encountered by all diplomats, given the complexity of Turkey’s foreign policy issues. Representing Turkey abroad, she noted, was never easy. Nonetheless, Dinçmen added: “On the contrary, I found that if women possess the same abilities as their male colleagues, they can even have certain advantages. Women tend to be more conciliatory, persuasive, and effective. I benefited from this.” (Hürriyet, 2001: 4).

5 FİLİZ DİNÇMEN’S TENURE AS AMBASSADOR

During a period when Turkish diplomats were frequently targeted by assassinations, Filiz Dinçmen was appointed as Ambassador to The Hague. Consequently, she carried out her duties under an intense security protocol. Due to her husband’s simultaneous appointment to Qatar, the couple could rarely meet for nearly two years, although her husband had been her greatest supporter throughout her career. When asked by a journalist, “Are you concerned about the emerging threat of Armenian terrorism?”, she replied, “No, I am not,” and continued: “Of course, I am not attempting to appear as a cheap hero; I will take every necessary security measure. However, these precautions will not prevent me from fulfilling all the responsibilities required by my position. I am determined to perform my duties in the best possible way for the interests of the country I represent. I do not know whether I will succeed, but you can be sure that I will do my utmost. Every profession entails risks, and one can never foresee when or where danger might appear.” (Hürriyet, 2001: 4).

When her term in the Netherlands ended in 1984, Dinçmen was assigned directly to Strasbourg without returning to Turkey. Her duties there extended beyond bilateral relations, as she also had to engage diplomatically with representatives of the European Community. During the military administration in Turkey, the presidency of the Council of Europe, which was due to Turkey, had been voluntarily relinquished. After the

elections, Prime Minister Turgut Özal's government requested to reclaim this presidency, yet the process proved challenging and led to a difficult period. Once Turkey reassumed the presidency, Ambassador Dinçmen chaired the Committee of Ministers for six months (*BCA, F:30-18-1-2, K:514, G:251 S:6, August 8, 1984*).

In a newspaper interview, Dinçmen remarked: "Turkey suffers from an image problem abroad; unfortunately, it is not a well-known country." She further emphasized that female ambassadors contributed positively to this image, stating, "As a woman, I realized that I represented the modern face of Turkey." (*Hürriyet, 2001: 4*).

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, in reference to Turkish women, once declared: "The true field of success must be adorned with enlightenment, knowledge, and genuine virtue. I have no doubt that our esteemed women will not lag behind their European counterparts; on the contrary, they will surpass them in many respects, equipped with light and wisdom." (*Atatürk's Speeches and Statements, 2006: 153–154*). In this context, Filiz Dinçmen, as the **first female ambassador in the history of the Republic**, became an exemplary figure both for Anatolian women and for women in Europe.

6 AN INTERESTING ANECDOTE FROM FİLİZ DİNÇMEN'S EXPERIENCE AS A FEMALE AMBASSADOR

When asked by a journalist, "Since the phrase 'Mr. Ambassador and his wife' is commonly used, have you ever encountered any misunderstandings related to this expression?", Filiz Dinçmen recounted an amusing yet telling incident from her diplomatic career: "My husband and I once attended a reception hosted by the Queen of the Netherlands, and the attendants at the entrance assumed that my husband was the ambassador. Similar incidents occurred frequently. During our Republic Day reception in The Hague, everyone who shook my hand turned to the Undersecretary beside me and asked, 'Where is your new Ambassador?' That same evening, we attended another reception at our Consulate General in Rotterdam. While conversing with one of the Consuls General, he persistently inquired about my husband—when he would arrive in the Netherlands, and what his duties would be. I replied that he was currently stationed in Ankara and that I hoped he would come soon. Some time later, the Consul General returned to me, visibly embarrassed, and apologized, explaining that he had not realized I was the Ambassador; he had assumed my husband held the position."

(*Bülten, 2012: 18*). This anecdote illustrates not only the gender-based assumptions prevalent in diplomatic circles at the time but also the challenges faced by pioneering women like Filiz Dinçmen in redefining traditional perceptions of leadership and representation within the field of diplomacy.

7 WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND FİLİZ DİNÇMEN

Turkey's first female ambassador shared her views on women's rights in the country, stating that she found the **legal framework for women's rights in Turkey** “**very good,**” yet she believed that these rights were not effectively implemented in practice. She also regarded some issues as **shared problems** between men and women, though certain disparities, such as the higher rate of female unemployment, she considered **particularly concerning**. According to Dinçmen, women's challenges are closely linked to the **overall education problem in Turkey**, and improvements in educational levels would contribute to resolving these issues. She emphasized that “there is still much to be done,” highlighting the need for continued progress in education and social development.

Despite being a woman in a predominantly male profession, Dinçmen noted that she had **not experienced any discrimination or obstacles** due to her gender. However, she did not fully endorse the Western **Women's Liberation movement**, stating: “I am a measured and balanced person; I do not approve of extremes. There are aspects of the women's rights movement that I do not support.”

Reflecting on her role in representing Turkey abroad, Dinçmen remarked: “As a woman representing my country internationally, my greatest achievement is the Republic established by Atatürk in this region. Fulfilling the objectives that Atatürk envisioned for Turkish women not only makes me proud but also honors me.” (*Hürriyet, 2001:5*).

8 FİLİZ DİNÇMEN'S OTHER ROLES AT THE MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Filiz Dinçmen was authorized to represent Turkey in matters concerning **cooperation with the Federal Republic of Germany on combating drug trafficking**, including agreements related to the provision of equipment to security agencies. As one

of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' most prominent diplomats in foreign relations, she was entrusted with such negotiations and agreements on behalf of Turkey (BCA, F:30-18-1-2, K.428, G.321, S.8).

Additionally, it was decided that Dinçmen would lead the Turkish delegation to the **European Ministers' Conference on Gender Equality** held in Strasbourg within the framework of the **Council of Europe** (BCA, F:30-18-1-2, K:551, G:453, S.5, January 19, 1986). Following her tenure at the **Permanent Representation of Turkey to the Council of Europe in Strasbourg**, she became the **first female Undersecretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1988**. Being separated from her husband, her greatest supporter, made her four years in Strasbourg particularly challenging (BCA, F:30-18-1-2, K:514, G:251, S.6, August 8, 1984).

After serving as Ambassador in The Hague, Dinçmen was appointed as **Undersecretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs**. She later served as the **spokesperson for the Ministry in 1991**, followed by ambassadorships in **Austria (Vienna, 1993–1997)** and **Malta (1998–2001)**. Between **2001 and 2004**, she was appointed as Ambassador to the **Vatican**, becoming the first Muslim female ambassador in the heart of the Catholic world. She concluded her diplomatic career upon retirement (BCA, F:30-11-1-0, K:654, G:26, S.11, June 12, 1989; Bülten, 2012:18).

Despite retiring from active diplomacy, Dinçmen served as **Chief Advisor to the Speaker of the Grand National Assembly of Turkey, Hikmet Çetin, from 1997 to 2001**, and subsequently as a **member of the Public Officials Ethics Board from 2004 to 2017**. Reflecting on her career at the Ministry, she stated: "Diplomacy was a profession I loved very much. In the 21 years I served, being married did present some challenges. However, even after seeing these difficulties, if I had the chance to start over, I would choose diplomacy again, despite all its challenges and risks." (*Hürriyet*, 2001:5).

9 CONCLUSION

In Turkey, following the **abolition of the Sultanate in 1922** and continuing through the **Atatürk Reforms until 1934**, women's participation in both social and cultural life was significantly enhanced. Efforts were made to ensure that women enjoyed **equal rights with men** within the family, in the workforce, in education, and in politics. Atatürk's words, spoken even before the proclamation of the Republic, reflected his

vision for Turkey: “The failure of our social society stems from the neglect shown toward our women. To live means to be active. Therefore, if one part of a social society functions while another does not, that society is paralyzed.”

Through his **unceasing energy, initiative, freedom of thought, and sense of justice**, Atatürk emerged as the leader of Turkish society, organizing and directing the needs and aspirations of his people. He devoted considerable effort to ensuring **women’s participation in political life**. As he stated: “No woman in the world can claim that she has worked harder than the Anatolian woman, who contributed tirelessly to the liberation and victory of our nation. The life-sustaining resources of our army, formed by men, were managed by our women. They plowed the fields, sowed the seeds, carried supplies to the frontlines in rain and snow, with their children on their laps. They were always those noble, selfless, and divine Anatolian women. Therefore, let us always remember these women with gratitude and respect, honoring them forever.” (*Vakit Gazetesi, March 30, 1923:1*).

As demonstrated above, **Filiz Dinçmen**, Turkey’s first female ambassador, carried out her work in line with Atatürk’s ideals and the path envisioned for Turkish women. Successful Turkish women like Dinçmen have become **role models for future generations**, embodying the enlightened face of Turkey. Born as a daughter of Anatolia, Filiz Dinçmen earned **significant recognition and respect both nationally and internationally**, thanks to the values instilled by Atatürk and the Republic.

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Authors’ Contribution

All authors contributed equally to the development of this article.

Data availability

All datasets relevant to this study’s findings are fully available within the article.

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