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Subcommittee on European Affairs

Where Is Turkey Headed?

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Thank you Mr. Chairman, Senator Johnson, and all the distinguished Senators here today, for the opportunity to testify about Turkey – where it is headed – as well as US-Turkish relations and the situation in the wider Middle East around Turkey. It is an honor to be here.

Let me start with three basic observations, and then I will expand on some specific issues in more depth.

First, Turkey is of enormous strategic importance, for several reasons. Turkey has the ability to enfranchise Islam within a vibrant democratic system. In so doing, it has the ability to prosper economically and politically, delivering for its own people and serving as an inspiration to others. It is a major emerging economy. Given its critical geographic position at the intersection of Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, it has the potential to play a meaningful and positive role in addressing issues in its neighborhood, including Syria, Iraq, Iran, the Caucasus, and more. And, of course, the United States is committed to the defense of Turkey as a NATO Ally, and Turkey has contributed to shared efforts in the Balkans, Afghanistan, and elsewhere.

Second, Turkey is therefore a potentially invaluable strategic partner for the United States in addressing regional challenges. Unfortunately, this partnership has been largely unrealized, not least of all because the U.S. does not at the moment have clear goals and strategies for what it would like to achieve – in Iraq, in Syria, in the Caucasus, in Central Asia, and in the Eastern Mediterranean and North Africa generally. If we knew what we wanted to achieve and were prepared to invest serious effort in getting it, Turkey could be an essential ally in doing so. As it stands, Turkey feels that the U.S. is not sufficiently engaged on key issues, such as Syria, which are of critical interest to Turkey.

Third, Turkey is facing serious challenges within its democracy – challenges that are deeply troubling. If they are not addressed squarely through Turkey's own democratic institutions, all of the positive potential I have just described could become a negative, adding fuel to the fire of a Middle East region already in crisis, and further stressing an already stressed Europe.

Taken together, these challenges are related to a lingering question of whether Turkey still sees itself as a member of the transatlantic community with a foot in the broader Middle East, or a “post-Ottoman,” non-Atlanticist, power. From a U.S. perspective, the former is far more desirable.

All this argues for a much more proactive United States policy with respect to Turkey:

- On the one hand, to work with Turkey strategically to address challenges in the region, which are of great concern to Turkey and should be of great concern to the United States as well; and
- On the other hand, to be clear, candid, and public about our deep commitment to democratic values and institutions, and our concern that Turkey should reverse its drift away from these values, both for its own stability, as well as for its ability to play a constructive role in the region.

Some might say that these policies are in conflict – How can one work with Turkey and offer criticism at the same time? I believe the opposite is true. Our ability to be taken seriously, and for our concerns to be viewed as constructive support from a friend and Ally, depends on the degree to which we indeed treat Turkey as a strategic Ally, demonstrate our own reliability, and tackle challenges together.

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Domestic Successes and Challenges

So “Where is Turkey Headed?” Let me start with some context.

After decades of a strong military role in politics, enshrined in the law governing the military and enforced through a number of coups, democratically elected civilian rule has become embedded.

In the early 2000’s, through its efforts to escape from financial crisis and integrate with the European Union (though that is now largely a side issue), Turkey introduced a series of key reforms and established robust trading relationships that have led to vastly improved national prosperity and a growing global economic role.

Through its role in governing Turkey successfully for many years, the Justice and Development Party (the AK Party) had demonstrated the potential for a party with Islamic roots to exercise power responsibly and tolerantly within a democratic system.

This growing Turkish strength has helped give Turkey the confidence to address a number of regional issues. For example, despite the history of PKK terrorism, the current Turkish government has said it is open to a peace process for the PKK. It has developed a constructive relationship with the Kurdish Regional Government of Iraq, and Turkish businesses play a leading role in that region’s economic development. Turkey had forged a

strong partnership with Israel which – while interrupted because of the loss of life on the ill-fated direct aid shipments to Palestinian territory – may gradually be rebuilt.

In the past 10 years, Turkey has emerged as a major growing economy and a respected actor in key regions: the Middle East, Southeast Europe, the Caucasus, Central Asia, Iraq, and North Africa.

At the same time, two major domestic trends have begun to emerge in parallel with these positive accomplishments.

First, under AK Party leadership, there has been a growing effort to push Islam into public life in ways that are distressing to the more secular segments of Turkey's population – everything from the government's attitudes toward women to restricting sales of alcohol to proposing construction of a massive Mosque on Camlica Hill and another at Taksim square.

Second, as a governing style, we have repeatedly seen heavy-handed tactics applied by the government – for example, in its own rhetoric, in its extraordinary pressure on the media, in the use of tax authorities to pressure businesses, including media owners, and in extended detentions without trial of senior military officers based on allegations of coup-plotting, or failure to block coup-plotters. The Prime Minister's interest in increasing the powers of the President, and then running for President himself, only exacerbate the concerns felt more widely. This all has a Putin-esque ring to it.

In this context, the recent protests that sprang up over the government's plan to uproot trees and build an edifice at Gezi Park reflected far more deep-rooted public concern than just over the park itself. The government-dictated plan – and then the harsh government crackdown on peaceful protests – reinforced in large segments of the population their worst fears about creeping authoritarianism under Prime Minister Erdogan's leadership. The initial rejection of protester complaints, and call for mass demonstrations to support the government, stoked fears of demagoguery and a "tyranny of the majority."

In recent weeks, the situation has cooled somewhat. But the protests and the government crackdown highlight the fact that a new risk to stability in Turkey that has opened up.

The AK Party's legitimacy comes not from its expression of Islam in public life, but from its obtaining power and then governing through democratic means. As fears of over-reach have grown, the government urgently needs to reassure the public by reinforcing its commitment to using democratic means and instruments to govern. It needs to show greater respect for opposition and for those who have different political views, rather than simply attempting to overwhelm and defeat them.

Critical to a Wider Region – Egypt, Syria, and the broader Middle East

The democratic performance of the AK Party is vital not only to Turkey's future and that party's continued leadership of Turkey. It is also vital in a wider regional context.

We have seen in Egypt how a Muslim Brotherhood government over-reached in imposing its will on the population by non-democratic means, only to be overthrown in an increasingly troubling military coup. This has caused the Muslim Brotherhood to take more extreme measures, and has given rise to growing violence and political instability in Egypt, with the military now responsible for dozens upon dozens of deaths. There needs to be a democratic middle ground between Islamist and military dictatorships.

The very notion of Turkey as a model or inspiration for the region rose from the need to identify such a middle ground. Now, if the most successful case of a governing party with Islamic roots, the AK Party, were also to succumb to overreach in imposing its will on the entire population through undemocratic means, it would give fuel to the argument that political Islam itself is fundamentally undemocratic.

This would be a tragedy for millions of Muslims throughout the broader Middle East, who deserve democratically elected governments that are generally reflective of society's religious values, while at the same time are democratic in the way they govern, ensuring that individual rights, fairness, justice, tolerance and pluralism are protected.

Syria is even more critical. The war in Syria has left over 100,000 people dead, and created over 1.6 million refugees, and over 4 million internally displaced persons. Outside forces have intervened, including Iran, Hezbollah, Russia, al Qaeda, and other Sunni extremists. The Assad regime has made clear it intends to fight its way back to control of the country, likely producing millions more refugees and tens of thousands of further deaths. Attacks have already spilled across the border into Turkey on a number of occasions. The conflict has also stoked increased violence in Iraq, has threatened stability in Jordan, and is placing enormous pressure on Lebanon, where one in six adults is now a Syrian refugee.

In this environment, the lack of engagement by responsible members of the international community, including the United States, has enabled radical elements to increase their influence among the Syrian rebels, caused Syrian Kurds, including some who are anti-Turkish, to consider establishing an autonomous zone (perhaps partially modeled on the Kurdish region in Iraq), and created conditions where the further escalation of the conflict is likely. All of this can jeopardize Turkish security interests and possibly drag Turkey directly in the conflict.

A Turkey that is democratically stable, prosperous and closely aligning its policies with the United States and Europe can best weather these challenges. But a Turkey that is internally divided, while perceiving itself to be isolated and under threat from abroad, could end up getting dragged into the conflict in Syria as the least bad of a series of undesirable choices.

How Turkey handles its internal democratic struggles can have a major impact on the way the crises in the broader region play out. Turkey can be a capable regional player and a force for solutions if it is producing solutions at home. But a distracted, less stable Turkey divided along religious and democratic lines will be less effective abroad and could even reinforce the predilections of warring parties. Indeed, such a Turkey would be in danger of drifting from its two-generations old Atlanticist orientation to something quite different.

US Leadership Required

U.S. leadership is absolutely critical – in seeking to stop the killing in Syria, in seeking to prevent the continued expansion of that conflict throughout the region, in promoting the creation of a middle ground between military and Islamist dictators in Egypt and the Middle East more broadly, and in encouraging a strong Turkey, as a strategic Ally, to remain faithful to its own remarkable accomplishments as a democracy and an emerging global economy.

Turkey's own orientation – as a NATO Ally, as a European nation, and as a vital part of a transatlantic community – is at stake. Does Turkey remain part of this transatlantic community, or does it seek to go it alone as a power broker in a broader Middle East region, unhinged from Western political structures?

It is tempting to think that the United States can let others handle these challenges, while we tackle our own financial and economic challenges at home. It is tempting to steer clear of foreign conflicts and bring our soldiers home. The reality, however, is that when the United States does not lead, no one else can – and instead, other nefarious forces fill the vacuum we leave in our wake.

The crises in Syria and Egypt and the deteriorating stability in Iraq were not caused by the United States; but lack of U.S. strategic engagement has arguably created conditions that have enabled them to become much worse.

Turkey's future trajectory still looks positive, but the pressures both internally and externally are mounting. A more active U.S. role in addressing challenges in the region together with Turkey as a strategic ally – while urging it to live up to its democratic traditions – would help make sure that these challenges do not grow to such an extent that Turkey itself is at risk.

Mr. Chairman, members of the Subcommittee, that concludes my statement. Thank you for the opportunity to testify at this hearing.

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