

Helsinki Commission Holds Briefing on Turkish Elections

[LIST OF PANEL MEMBERS](#)

HASTINGS:

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. I have a tradition of trying to start our meetings on time, and I can assure you my colleague, Congressman Wexler, will be along very shortly.

Good morning again to you, and thank you for your interest in this morning's briefing on the recent parliamentary elections in Turkey. Obviously, when Congressman Wexler arrives, I will allow any statement that he wishes to make to be made at that time. I'd like to welcome our panel of speakers: Dr. Soner Cagaptay. Did I do pretty good?

CAGAPTAY:

Pretty good.

(LAUGHTER)

HASTINGS:

I told him if he hadn't told me how to say it, I was going to mess it up real bad. Dr. Cagaptay is the director of the Turkish Research Council at the Washington Institute. And we welcome Mr. Ilan Berman, the vice president for policy at the American Foreign Policy Council.

Before we begin this morning, I'd like to express my disappointment at the State Department's refusal to participate at today's briefing. An invitation was extended to them in an effort to get the administration's view on the elections, and they declined the offer. The excuse given to us, despite much evidence to the contrary, was that the State Department does not participate in public briefings.

Regardless, we have an excellent panel, and I'm certain this will be an enlightening briefing. As I already mentioned, over the next few moments we're going to examine Turkey's parliamentary elections of this past Sunday and what it means for the future of U.S.-Turkey relations.

I was pleased to see that Turkey held successful elections which were decreed as free, fair and transparent. With 80 percent of Turkey's 42 million eligible voters turning out to the polls on Sunday, I would say that's a successful election, and as an American citizen, I'm quite a bit envious that we don't have that kind of turnout in our country.

According to the OSCE's election assessment mission, the electoral process in Turkey was characterized by pluralism and a high level of public confidence underscored by the transparent, professional and efficient performance of the election administration.

I've had the good fortune of working with several Turkish parliamentarians in election monitoring, and I can tell you that when they go about the world, they perform excellently; therefore, I'm sure that their influence was felt in this election.

Even though Turkey held successful elections, one cannot forget some of the reasons for these elections being held in the first place. On Sunday I was reading an interesting article in the Washington Post that many of you may have read entitled, and I quote, "Islamic Attire Dominates Debate Before Turkish Vote," end of quote, where a very poignant statement was made in the opening of the article which said, "It's the head scarf, stupid."

The article goes on to say -- I would quarrel with the author; it's always the economy, stupid, but anyway -- that "if it weren't for a three-foot square piece of fabric, sometimes black and stark -- more often fancy or lacy or rosy pink or flowery -- Turkey's 42 million voters wouldn't be going to the polls." That's what the article says.

This argument, I believe, is going to be a continuing challenge for Turkey as the Justice and Development Party works to find a peaceful balance between the Islamic and secular establishment.

I'd also note the rising tensions between Turkey and the Kurds in northern Iraq where currently significant amounts of troops are amassed along the southeastern border. This is a very tenuous situation and could be potentially a problem for U.S.-Turkish relations and stability in that region. It's my great hope, and I believe it will allow, that calmer heads will prevail and that the tensions will ease.

Finally, Prime Minister Erdogan has accomplished a great deal for Turkey's democracy. The first time I went to Turkey, Prime Minister Erdogan was the mayor of Istanbul, and he did some rather remarkable things during that tenure. He has pursued a pro-business agenda, which can be seen in Turkey's thriving economy, as well as continuing to push for Turkey's membership into the European Union.

The prime minister came from Germany at 4:00 in the morning for a meeting with me when I was last there, and he had been in Germany to receive a prize and at the very same time had been told what Turkey's ascension to the EU's possibilities were.

What I said to him then is what I say to you now, and that is tomorrow is today on that subject for me, and that entry into the European Union should be expedited. And I've also told many of my European colleagues and my American counterparts the same thing.

I believe that these are all positive steps in a correct and right direction, and I look forward to continuing a dialogue with our Turkish partners in an effort to strengthen this historic partnership that we've shared over the past 50 years.

I'm going to turn the floor over to my distinguished colleague and partner from Florida. Congressman Wexler's and my districts abut each other in the area that we represent, and we also are great friends of Turkey. And when we are not in our districts sometimes we are in Turkey. I've been there nine times. I think Robert has been there 99 times, but not quite as many.

Ladies and gentlemen, Robert Wexler.

WEXLER:

Thank you very much, especially to Chairman Hastings.

I just want to offer what I think is the obvious observation that there is no one in this Congress, no one in the United States government -- on the elected side, at least -- that has spent more time and effort and devotion to engaging Turkey from the point of view of enhancing American-Turkish relations. And there is no one who is more expert on these matters than Chairman Hastings, and I thank him very much for permitting me the opportunity of speaking this morning.

Chairman Hastings and others, I want to join you, along with many in the American public, in expressing our heartfelt congratulations to the Turkish people for conducting a model election last Sunday. It was evident to observers of the election that the Turkish electorate unequivocally expressed its support for strengthening Turkey's democracy and for continuing down a path toward full membership of the European Union.

I especially want to congratulate Prime Minister Erdogan, Deputy Prime Minister Gul, and the Justice and Development Party, who increased their vote total from I believe what was 34 percent in the 2002 parliamentary elections to 46 percent last Sunday and will now be called upon to form a new government.

Recognition should also be given to all of the Turkish political parties who participated on Sunday, including the CHP and the MHP, who will join the AKP, along with I believe it's two dozen independently elected candidates in the Turkish Grand National Assembly.

It is clear that many Turkish voters, despite political tensions in April, by and large gravitated to the AKP's policies that have led to record economic growth, as Chairman Hastings pointed out. Passage of difficult economic and political reform measures necessary for EU membership and willingness to raise the sensitive issue of the role of Islam in Turkey is part of a public dialogue.

Whether one agrees or disagrees with the current government's policies, it is apparent that they have represented the will of a great many Turkish citizens -- at times to the chagrin of some American policy-makers. This development has greatly diminished a debilitating political disconnect that has existed between Turkey's leaders and her population.

Chairman Hastings spoke about visits to Turkey. My first visit to Turkey, and particularly in Istanbul, was in 1999. My primary impression when visiting Turkey for the first time and meeting with a large group of young entrepreneurs -- young men and women who were educated, patriotic Turkish citizens who wanted very much to be a part of an explosive economy, that very much wanted to take Turkey's democracy to the next step, to the next level -- and the emotion and the impression that I learned was that I had never been in a country in 1999 that I felt there was such an extraordinary disconnect between the population and the government.

And it wasn't a political partisan divide. It was the fact that many patriotic Turks did not identify with their own government and with the objectives of their own government. It baffled me at the time.

But Sunday's elections, Mr. Chairman, reinforced the fact that whether one here in America may agree or disagree with Prime Minister Erdogan or with Deputy Minister Gul or with any of the individuals that are leading the government, it is clear that Prime Minister Erdogan represents a significantly large measure of the public will in Turkey.

And that needs to be respected, and I would argue even congratulated, because it is only when in a democracy the majority of people feel as if the government in fact responds to the public will that in fact democracy will flourish. I think it is an opportunity for the American-Turkish relationship to be enhanced, to grow stronger, understanding that at times there will be different positions and different views.

The only NATO country bordering Syria, Iraq and Iran, Turkey has hundreds of its troops on the ground in Lebanon, maintains a strong relationship with Israel -- an extremely important relationship -- and it is an essential component of the east-west energy corridor, providing America and Europe with a critical alternative energy supply route, other than gas and oil coming from the volatile Middle East and Russia.

Furthermore, Turkish cooperation is essential for our troops in Iraq. A substantial majority of the military assets used by American troops are flown into Turkey and then transported to Iraq. For example, 74 percent of air cargo into Iraq transits through the Incirlik Air Base.

And I would respectfully point out for all of us here in the Congress and in the American public -- whether you agree with the president's position in Iraq or whether you disagree, as I do and Chairman Hastings does -- that we need to understand that as we begin -- and I believe -- to swiftly remove our troops from Iraq in a responsible way the very pivotal role that Turkey will play to enable the most efficient and safe redeployment of our troops in Iraq.

And it's not just Iraq. Even in Afghanistan an enormous percentage of the resources, the assets, the munitions that ultimately go to our troops in Afghanistan and NATO's troops in Afghanistan travel through Turkey. This relationship and this cooperation, particularly at a time when our troops are in the field in Iraq and Afghanistan, should never be underestimated.

I'm confident that Prime Minister Erdogan's government will continue to be deeply involved in bringing stability to Afghanistan and will continue to oppose Iran's nuclear weapons program. To this end I urge Prime Minister Erdogan's government to reconsider expanding its energy relationship with Iran at a time when the United States and Europe are seeking to isolate Iran over its dangerous nuclear aspirations.

Despite the high level cooperation between the United States and Turkey, it's undeniable that relations have been strained at times. Most alarmingly, a recent Pew poll indicates that only 9 percent of Turks have a favorable opinion of the United States. Incredibly, that is down from 12 percent in last year's Pew poll. That same Pew poll suggests that 77 percent of Turks see the United States as a potential military threat to their country.

I don't doubt the findings in the poll; I'm sure they're accurate. But I know that every time I visit Turkey, there even is a disconnect between the poll numbers and when you meet individual Turks. And when they ask you where you're from and you say the United States, and oftentimes in limited English, they'll say, "Good, good. United States. Good."

Well, sometimes I think -- and Chairman Hastings, I think you have the same impression -- we can learn more from cab drivers in a country than you can from any polls, good as they may be. And every time I step into a cab or step into a cafe or just to get a cup of coffee in Turkey, it's almost the same reaction. "Where are you from?" "The United States." And there's always -- at least in my experience -- a positive initial reaction on a people-to-people level.

What I think these polls are showing -- and I don't doubt, again, their accuracy -- is a disconnect between the Turkish people and what they perceive to be the political and governmental goals of the United States. That's something that should never be underestimated in its importance, but I think it needs to be put into perspective.

Mr. Chairman, the greatest challenge facing the United States and Turkey is the chaos ensuing in Iraq and the ongoing violence perpetrated by the Kurdistan Workers Party, the PKK, which is engaged in horrific acts of violence. Since only 2004, the PKK has killed and injured more than 1,500 people in Turkey.

Given America's leading role in Iraq, there is undoubtedly a perception in Turkey that America has not done enough to remove the threat of the PKK terrorists whom we know are based in northern Iraq. And while it might be difficult for Americans to admit that, the truth of the matter is the Turkish people have a good point. They're right. The United States hasn't done enough to mitigate the threat from the PKK.

I share the people's frustration with what appears to be America's inaction at times and the pains felt by the Turkish people as a result of the PKK terror. To this end it is critical that the United States, Iraqi leaders and Iraqi Kurdish regional leaders do more to address the PKK threat.

While I strongly support the appointment of General Ralston as the PKK special coordinator by the Bush administration, and I believe he is exceptionally qualified and exceptionally committed to addressing the issue and he was kind enough to testify at the Europe subcommittee and gave a very strong presentation recently, I think it is still undeniable that while the United States largely occupies stretches of area with our military in Iraq, we have not done enough to mitigate the PKK threat.

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman, Turkey's historical elections and democratic progress presents an opportunity -- I believe, a very wonderful opportunity -- for the United States to renew its relationship with Turkey. While Turkish parliamentarians still must go through a political process to choose a new president in the coming weeks, it is incumbent on the United States to embrace our longstanding ally and create the conditions that will lead to continued dialogue and cooperation between our two countries.

And if I may say one other thing, in one of my more recent visits to Turkey, I think at times there's a discrepancy between America's global interests and what Turkey perceives to be her regional interests. And while allies can agree to disagree civilly, and that is fair and legitimate, I also think that those who are so interested in Turkey in this country should give great credibility and hope to the aspirations of Turkish regional policy.

I may not always agree with the individual direction that Turkey may be taking in her regional policy, but if you look at it from a broader perspective, a Middle East -- Iraq, Iran, Syria

-- that is more influenced by Turkey rather than Iran or rather than ultimately Saudi Arabia or rather than extreme Islamic thought and ideology, a region that is more influenced by Turkey must unconditionally be in the better interests of the United States, even though we don't absolutely agree with whatever direction Turkey may be advocating in that precise moment.

Turkey is a democratic, moderate, secular country where a majority of the citizens believe in the Muslim faith, and to the degree that that nation can enhance its relations with America, move closer to Europe and play a more prominent role in a very volatile region, by definition that is good for America. And it's also good for our closest ally there, Israel. Mr. Chairman, thank you so much for permitting me to testify.

HASTINGS:

Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Tell us how you really feel.

(LAUGHTER)

I'd like to take this opportunity to recognize -- and if she wishes, to have her make any comments -- a member of the Helsinki Commission who recently was elected vice chair of the second basket in the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's Parliamentary Assembly. I used to be the president of the Organization for Security in Europe's Parliamentary Assembly, and I always say if you can say that, you ought to be president. But please welcome to our hearing Hilda Solis.

Hilda, if you'd just stand and be recognized -- we appreciate you being here. Thank you, and I recognize it's an extremely busy day for all of us. I hope you can stay as long as you can, but we certainly understand if you must leave.

I would invite also our staffers who are standing on the wall to take these. If other persons come, then you might relieve yourselves rather than continue to stand and make yourselves tired.

Our first witness at our briefing is Dr. Soner Cagaptay. He is a senior fellow and director of the Washington Institute's Turkish Research Council.

Dr. Cagaptay has written extensively on U.S.-Turkish relations, Turkish domestic politics and Turkish nationalism, publishing in scholarly journals such as Middle East Quarterly, Middle Eastern Studies, and Nations and Nationalism. He frequently writes commentary in major international print media, including many in the America media, Voice of America and BBC as well.

He's a historian by training and wrote his doctoral dissertation at Yale University on Turkish nationalism, has taught courses at Yale and Princeton on the Middle East, Mediterranean and Eastern Europe and his spring 2003 course on modern Turkish history was the first offered by Yale in three decades.

Dr. Cagaptay is a recipient of numerous honors, grants and chairs, among them the Smith-Richardson, Mellon, Wright, and Leylan fellowships, as well as the Ertegun chair at Princeton. He also serves as chair of the Turkey Advanced Area Studies Program at the State Department Foreign Service Institute.

Dr. Cagaptay, you have the floor.

CAGAPTAY:

Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman and the commission for inviting me to appear at this very timely and important hearing on Turkey after the elections.

What I'd like to do for the sake of our discussion today in our briefing is to focus on two issues -- mainly, Turkish domestic politics after the elections and Turkish electoral relations after the elections.

In terms of Turkish domestic politics following last Sunday's elections, I share -- Congressman Wexler is not here any more -- his adulation for the Turkish democracy. After all, this is a case of a liberal secular democracy in a predominantly Muslim country, and yet we have seen another smooth transition, despite much domestic political turbulence in Turkey last May.

So it does indeed look like as yet another case of the democracies that we know around the world. And I should also add that it looks like all of these democracies -- indeed, our democracy already as well -- because the electorate seems to be split in the middle. While 47 percent of the population voted for the ruling party, 37 percent voted for opposition secular leftist nationalists. So indeed it is important for us to watch Turkish politics in the days coming ahead.

In this regard, with the country being split into two opposing political views, I think the election outcome is probably the best outcome in terms of political stability, because what we see is that the ruling party, AKP, emerged with 340 seats in the 500-member parliament.

That means they can form a stable, lasting government, and in Turkish politics, generally, single-party governments have done much better than coalition governments. We've seen examples of that in the 90s both in terms of economic performance as well as in terms of reform, so that's quite promising for Turkey.

Another reason why I think the election results promise stability is because the party, although it has emerged with 340 seats in the 550-seat parliament, does not have the majority needed to elect the next president. The first mandate, the first job of the parliament is to elect the president.

In the Turkish system, the president, who has limited powers -- the chief executive is the prime minister -- is elected in the parliament. There is a two-thirds majority that's required for electing the president, and the AKP is short of that majority, so that actually puts the AKP in the position of having to seek for a consensus candidate, a compromise candidate.

And I think the outcome is therefore the best outcome in terms of short-term political stability, because on the one hand you have a stable government and on the other hand, you have the need for this government to talk to the opposition to find the consensus candidate.

So hopefully, the two camps of the Turkish political spectrum, the AKP camp and the nationalist secular camp, will have to seek a compromise candidate, bridging the gap of Turkish politics.

Having said this, I think what we're also facing is a new Turkish government, therefore, one with a popular mandate -- a landslide popular mandate, indeed -- which opens up the avenue for a new phase in the U.S.-Turkish relationship.

So in the second part of my testimony here, I'd like to look at the likely course of the U.S.-Turkish relationship over the next year. And in this regard, the issue I'd like to focus on is the issue that I think is most important for our bilateral ties today, the issue of PKK, also known as Kurdistan Workers Party, a group that is currently carrying out attacks inside Turkey, but also from its bases in northern Iraq, an issue that now I think cannot be ignored anymore in the sense that it has become the most important factor shaping the course of U.S.-Turkish relationship.

In fact, I think the picture on the PKK is bigger than that. It's not just about U.S.-Turkish relationship. I think the PKK indeed brings not only Turkey and the U.S., but also Iraq and Iran together. And I'd like to explain that a little bit, but before that some background on what this organization is about.

The PKK emerged as a group carrying out terror attacks inside Turkey in the 1980s. This was the background of the Cold War, and it was supported by at that time the Soviet Union, which felt Turkey would face the Soviet Union at its southern flank, the south border of the Soviet Union, with anger.

And I think one of the reasons the Soviet Union supported the PKK was because this was the Cold War and Turkey not only neighbored the Soviet Union, but with the exception of Norway north of the Arctic Circle, Turkey was the only country that actually bordered the Soviet Union from NATO.

So you can imagine the importance of that country for strategic and intelligence purposes. And you can imagine how much that would anger the Soviets and what it could mean to destabilize this country.

The PKK then emerged as a group with Soviet patronage based in Syria with training camps in Lebanon, a client state of a client state -- in other words Lebanon being a client state of Syria and Syria being a client state of the Soviet Union. The attacks continued into the 90s.

After the end of communism, though, the PKK switched to a nationalist ideology and used some other opportunities to carry out attacks into Turkey from other countries in that region. It based itself at that time in Iran. Iran provided the PKK with a number of camps, and it became a haven of anti-Turkish activity.

That all made sense within the context of Iranian and Turkish regimes. If you think of them, Iran and Turkey are neighboring countries, but they are also almost diametrically opposed regimes. One is a democracy and secular; the other one is a theocracy and an authoritarian regime. And I think, therefore, Iran's efforts to use the PKK as a destabilizing factor were also important in this regard for its support for PKK.

The United States at this time, I think, saw the PKK not only as an issue of terror, but also as a way of fighting a successful public diplomacy to win Turkey's heart.

There was much American support extended to Turkey in this period against the PKK -- intelligence and what have you -- but the most important step came in the late 1990s when, according to reports, the United States helped Turkey capture the leader of PKK, Abdullah Ocalan. He was captured after a long chase across Europe after he was kicked out of Syria following Turkish pressures and sent to jail.

And this, I think, is an important event for us to look at, because it also tells us how the PKK behaves today. Ocalan's elimination did not mean the elimination of the membership of this entire group, but yet it crippled the group's ability to hurt Turkey.

The PKK is what I call an old generation of terror groups in the sense that it's very hierarchical. It's top-down, and it's leadership-based, unlike the new generation terror groups such as Al Qaida, which are horizontal, cell-based and can do autonomous stuff without necessarily having to be an organic link with the quote- unquote "leadership."

The PKK is very different. Its leadership is fundamental to the way it acts, because it is, as I said earlier, basically a Marxist- Leninist group with Maoist legacy, which means the cult of the leadership is fundamentally important.

Ocalan, therefore, was the brain of the organization, finding the PKK refuge and safe haven and guns and allies and money, and his capture meant that the brain of the organization was taken out, despite the fact that the body was still there. And the PKK, as a result of that, declared a unilateral cease-fire, pulled most of its members out of Turkey, and Turkey went into a period of quiet for the first time since the mid-1980s.

What this meant for Turkey was a dramatic improvement in its human rights record. Now that there was no more fighting and terror attacks, the country was able to discuss issues that had been considered taboo, and it started debating the issue of what to do with Kurds and their demands.

This came at the same time with the start of Turkey's EU accession process. It became a possibility in 1999 when the EU declared that Turkey would be treated as other candidate countries that submitted applications, and it became more of a reality in 2002 and 2004 when the EU started gradually accession talks with the country.

That was the chief driving factor behind the reforms of liberalization and further democratic consolidation. But the EU factor being a catalyst, I think the landmark event, the watershed event was the capture of Ocalan. It opened up political space in Turkey that had not existed before. It made the incredible amount of reforms possible.

Issues that would have been considered taboo became possible to discuss in Turkish media. In fact, as a result of that, no taboos remained in Turkish media. And finally, the much-publicized reforms under Kurds, including broadcasting in Kurdish language, became possible, as well as education in Kurdish became possible.

All of that took place within the background of the peace and quiet after the PKK's leader was captured and the organization was so crippled that it basically went inactive. That lasted until 2004.

Since 2004 we have seen the PKK resuming its old behavior, and hence, it is now posing challenges once again not only to Turkey, but also to U.S.-Turkish relationship, because the PKK is acting out of northern Iraq, which is technically under American control. So it has actually now become part of U.S.-Turkish relationship in ways that it was not.

The PKK's resort to violence has caused a massive amount of casualties, according to State Department's Country Report on Terrorism -- last year's report. Its violence caused 600 casualties last year, and not a day goes that you hear news of yet more Turks killed by this group and its terror attacks.

And as a result of that, the political atmosphere in the country looks more like the 1990s now than like the period between 1999 and 2004 when there was no violence and much was done in terms of political reform. So I think in this sense the organization's comeback has had a negative impact on Turkey's democratic liberalization and consolidation, though it has not stopped the process.

But the second impact of the PKK, before I wrap up, is to look at this regional picture that I suggested existed earlier. It's how the PKK brings Turkey, Iran, Iraq and the United States together.

Now we have all looked at how the PKK should bring Turkey and the United States together, because the PKK is active in northern Iraq. From the Turkish perspective, this is American territory and whether or not people allow this kind of activity to happen, the fact that it is taking place is making a lot of Turks very angry.

Congressman Wexler referred earlier to shades of anti-Americanism in Turkey, and I think the most significant driving factor of that anti-Americanism is exactly this issue that there are attacks being carried out from northern Iraq.

And what is more important is that in the war on terror the PKK is an important factor in the way the Turks look on the war on terror, because their view is that the Turks help the United States in the war on terror in places such as Afghanistan.

Turkey has twice held the leadership of the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan, but they don't get any kind of support or help against the PKK themselves from the United States, which is also a terror problem.

So from the Turkish perspective for many Turks that you talk to on the street -- cab drivers -- you get the view that they think there are two standards. Al Qaida is a terror problem, but the PKK is not, and they can't quite understand why that is the case, given un- forthcoming U.S. action against the PKK.

That's not where it stops, unfortunately. There is also the issue of how the PKK is in a way poisoning Turkish-Iraqi relations -- more importantly, Turkish-Iraqi-Kurdish relations. Because the group is based in northern Iraq and because it's been active in northern Iraq, attacking from that area into Turkey, this has also cut into Turkey's ability to develop better ties -- political, especially, with the Iraqi Kurds.

The two large Kurdish parties, KDP and PUK, are largely pro-Western and secular parties, so they would be Turkey's natural allies. Yet we can't see that kind of an alliance forming, because it's a fact that the PKK functions in northern Iraq (inaudible) are attacks into Turkey, and I think from the U.S. perspective, what could be an alliance of two U.S. allies is therefore not coming forth because of this thorn that is there in their relationship that needs to be taken out.

There is otherwise a thriving, booming economic relationship between Turkey and the Iraqi Kurds. Turkey's investments in northern Iraq are supposed to be in a range of \$3 billion -- that's investments, not trade. If you add trade, it's at a bigger number. And yet what is preventing a thriving economic relationship from turning into a good political relationship is the PKK issue, which has been around and been simmering for a long time.

There's a third issue, which I think is even more important, and it's how the PKK issue also brings Iran into the picture. We're much familiar with how it's poisoned Turkey's relations with Iraqi Kurds and the United States, but not necessarily this third point. I think this should be emphasized as well.

Iran, ironically, which supported the PKK and provided it with camps in the 1990s, is now the country that's fighting the PKK. And Iran's change of behavior is not because it likes Turkey suddenly or it feels sympathies for Turkey's secular democracy or it has changed its internal attitudes toward Turkey, but I think it sees that there's an opportunity for it to use the PKK as a matter of public diplomacy. And I use "public diplomacy" in quotation marks. It's not exactly public diplomacy, but it's what's being done.

Iranians have realized that, given un-forthcoming U.S. action against PKK, many Turks are very angry with the United States, and that anger remains there. They've also realized that this is an area for them where they can actually step in and carry out actions against the PKK and win the Turks' hearts. And this is exactly what they're doing.

Since 2004 -- and this is when the Iranians changed their minds; exactly when the PKK started violence again and the Iranians realized that this was an avenue for them to make inroads into Turkish public opinion -- Iranians not only stopped supporting the PKK -- in other words, they had driven out PKK camps that existed in their territory since the mid-1990s -- but they also started actively fighting PKK both in Iran and inside northern Iraq, according to media reports.

It is ironic that every time -- and this is something I've sort of made a habit of watching -- the U.S. State Department says the right things on how we are together with Turks in the fighting of the PKK and we will deliver security, promising the right things, that same day the Iranians bomb PKK camps.

So this is how you read the news in the Turkish press: front page, big headlines "Iranians Have Bombed PKK Camps" - 12th page, one column, "The U.S. has said they'll support against the PKK." And I think in this regard Iranians, to use a term, walk the walk and they make it as if the Americans are only talking the talk. And that's a huge problem.

If you look at the recent Pew Center poll that was mentioned, around 64 percent of the Turks now regard the United States as a problematic country, I think, largely because of the PKK issue. And guess the number of Iranians who have the same attitude: 6 percent.

So this, I think, is a huge wedge issue right now. It is driving not only a wedge between Turkey and the United States, but it's also bringing Turkey and Iran quite closely together.

Before I finish, Mr. Chairman, what I'd like to do is look at what ought to be done as a policy-maker. I think action against the PKK at this stage is absolutely a must. It is no more a suggestion, in the sense that now there's a new government in Turkey.

I think it is possible for any government to open a new page in their relationship, both on bilateral ties, but also for Turkish public perception, and this is the right moment, the opportune moment for the United States to take action against the PKK.

If such action cannot be taken by the United States, there are many other ways of carrying that out, including through the Iraqi Kurds, who have much to benefit from better relations with Turkey. In fact, the PKK exists in areas of responsibility of the Iraqi Kurds, so it would be ultimately their task to decide what they could do with this organization, given their resources and their policy options.

But it would not only improve their relations with Turkey, but it would also improve Turkey's relationship with the United States. And it would also stop the PKK from being a wedge issue between Turkey and Iran.

So I think at this stage the most rational policy suggestion, given how things are on the ground, is that the Iraqi Kurds should take a more active and personal interest in the PKK problem. It's not something they can avoid anymore. It is actually an issue that would bring them much closer to Turkey than anybody can imagine.

I would like to stop here with this brief expose. I know there are many issues to be discussed later on. I believe my colleague will go into some of those questions. But I think this is an opportune moment for the new phase in Turkish-U.S. relations with a new government. And I'll now submit the floor to my colleague.

HASTINGS:

Thank you very much. And before going to Mr. Berman, I would say to the media and our audience that when Mr. Berman finishes, in the tradition of the briefings, we will turn to the media for any questions that might be put, and then to the audience. And we would invite our witnesses to be responsive to them, if they will.

Ilan Berman is vice president for policy of the American Foreign Policy Council. He's an expert on regional security in the Middle East, Central Asia and the Russian Federation. He's consulted for both the United States Central Intelligence Agency and the United States Department of Defense and provided assistance on foreign policy and national security issues to a range of governmental issues.

He is a frequent guest on radio and television and lots of writings and publications. He is the author of "Tehran Rising: Iran's Challenge to the United States" and co-editor with Michael Waller of "Dismantling Tyranny: Transitioning Beyond Totalitarian Regimes."

Mr. Berman, you have the floor.

BERMAN:

Thank you very much. And let me just start by thanking you, Chairman Hastings, and thanking the members of the commission for holding this briefing and inviting both myself and my colleague, Dr. Cagaptay, to come speak before you.

This is, I think, a very important time. Without rehashing too much of what's been said before, I think this is a very important time, because the Turkish elections set the stage for what could potentially be a new conversation between Washington and Ankara on security issues, on domestic issues. It's not the end of the conversation; it's the start of one.

And I think it's worthwhile to walk through, first, some general observations about the election and also, then, the issues that are unresolved, that are upcoming.

First of all, this was arguably the most anticipated and the most controversial election in Turkish recent history. The results of that vote as a direct correlation have very serious implications, both for the future disposition of Turkish domestic politics and also for the state of the relationship between the United States and Turkey.

By any yardstick, the outcome of the election was a major victory for the Justice and Development Party, the AKP, and a serious blow to the country's secularist forces. The AKP swept to power in 2002 with 34 percent of the electoral vote. They widened that lead by 12 percent and secured 340 or 341 seats in the country's 550-seat parliament.

This growing popularity, I think, should be seen as a barometer of what's going in Turkish society as a whole. Last year's Pew Poll attitude survey found that close to half of Turks now identify themselves as primarily Muslim, and that is up from just a third of those people polled when the AKP took power in 2002. And as such, the AKP's growing popularity is a good barometer of what's going on within Turkish society as a whole.

Whether you like it or not, this is a trend that's taking place within Turkish politics. It's very hard to fight it. In fact, we shouldn't fight it. The AKP election is, therefore, a logical evolution.

The strong showing that they had in the polls, though, doesn't mean that there are no constraints to their rule. To the contrary, the significant gains by two other political factions -- the Cumhuriyet Republican People's Party and the Conservative National Movement Party, CHP and MHP, respectively -- mean that the AKP will now face greater opposition within the parliament than it did previously.

It's useful to remember that as part of Turkey's parliamentary system, there is a 10 percent threshold that parties have to reach, have to cross in order to have representation in the parliament. In 2002 during the elections, there was only one party, the CHP, that crossed that threshold along with the AKP.

Today there are at least two additional ones, and there's also a smattering of independent candidates that gained representation by circumventing that requirement and by running as independents. And the AKP will now have to deal with these added variables.

These are more variables that are in play in the internal political discourse in the parliament today than there were previously. And as such, I second Dr. Cagaptay's assertion that this is actually a formula for stability. What you want is checks and balances. And you have the more possibility counter-intuitively, of course, but you have more chance for checks and balances now with the AKP garnering more popular support than you did before in 2002.

But if the AKP was the biggest beneficiary of Sunday's poll, the biggest loser was, of course, the country's military itself. It's useful to remember that back in April the Turkish General Staff ignited a national political firestorm when it issued a not so subtle warning to the AKP that it was still willing, as it had in the past on several occasions, to intervene in the country's political process to restore secularism.

And that ignited a fierce national debate over the country's future political direction that dovetailed very nicely with the AKP's victory. And as such, the fact that the AKP chartered very substantial gains in Sunday's election -- gains that exceeded even the assumptions of the most optimistic of observers -- should be interpreted at least in part as a backlash to the military's political interference.

It was simply a not so subtle slap on the wrist to the Turkish General Staff. Essentially, business as usual is not business anymore. You can't carry out the same sort of politics that you did before.

So, as I said, this isn't the end of the discussion; this is just the beginning of a different one. And here it's useful to talk about issues that are going to be, I think, decisive both in the internal context and the external one, vis-a-vis the United States in the near term. There are a lot of them, but I'll focus on six.

The first is the question of the Turkish president. The Turkish presidency is actually not comparable to the presidency in other parliamentary democracies. The Turkish presidency is a major center of power. It has the ability to appoint cabinet officials, to draft laws and convene referendums. And as such, it is a very attractive political prize.

Back in May, Prime Minister Erdogan floated a package of constitutional reforms that attempted to seize control of that office by submitting it to a public vote to have the public directly elect the president, rather than the current process in which the parliament elects the president. That proposal was quickly vetoed by the sitting president, Ahmet Sezer, who deemed that there was no justifiable or acceptable reason for such a step.

But the issue is not settled. The proposed measures were referred to the constitutional court, and now there's a referendum scheduled for October 21st, when it is expected to pass handily.

There's an expectation that the transformation of the president's office from a parliamentary elected to a popular elected office is going to be approved, come that referendum in October.

And that creates a situation where the political contest over this office may be mooted now -- there's obviously going to be some back and forth between the AKP and the CHP and the MHP over a compromise candidate; one hopes there will be anyway -- but the political contest over this is not over.

If this referendum passes, which we think it will, there will be a renewed political contest over the position of the president between Islamist and secularist forces within the Turkish body polity.

The second issue that should be of concern is the issue of what's been called stealth Islamization. Since it took office in late 2002, the Islamist AKP has been accused by many of attempting to orchestrate a creeping coup against Turkey's established secular order.

Now, the AKP is fully aware of this controversial image, and it's trying very hard to shed it. Ahead of Sunday's poll, it took pains to enlist and then to run a number of candidates that were not religious -- demonstrably so -- as a way of muting its Islamist credentials.

And since the election, Prime Minister Erdogan has been quick to announce his commitment to preserving secularism. But as a practical matter, the track record of the last several years in which we've seen a concerted assault against secular institutions, including the military, including the judiciary, including the media, provides a fairly deep-seated impulse on the part of the AKP to erase the dividing lines between mosque and state.

Now this is, as Congressman Wexler said, an internal discussion. We certainly can have opinions about it, but it's ultimately for the Turks to decide.

But where it becomes significant for the U.S. is that the outcome of Sunday's election was it would be hard to see it as anything other than a popular endorsement of this policy. And as a result, the Islamization drive can be expected to expand and strengthen in the months and years ahead, with all sorts of implications for Turkey's role as a partner of the United States.

The third and related issue is the upsurge in anti-American and anti-Semitic sentiment that you've seen in Turkey over the last several years. In the latest global attitude survey, as Congressman Wexler said, only 9 percent of Turks polled expressed positive views of the United States.

Now, in 2002, right around the time when the AKP first took power, the number of Turks that expressed positive views of the United States was at around 43 percent. This doesn't mean that the AKP is causally involved in this decline. Obviously, the situation in Iraq has a pretty big role to play, but the AKP can be said to be complicit in it for a couple of reasons.

First of all, party officials have studiously avoided speaking out publicly in favor of either the United States or Israel, even while they conduct diplomatic and strategic contacts behind the scenes. And they also fail to curb the growing anti-American and anti-Semitic invective that emanates from the country's Islamic center, that center of the country's media over which the AKP has a fairly substantial amount of power and leverage.

So the AKP has tended to -- if the question is, as Soner said, walking the walk and talking the talk -- the AKP has walked the walk very quietly away from the scenes, but they haven't talked the talk about partnership with the United States or about partnership with Israel. They have studiously avoided the opportunity to do so.

The fourth issue is an eastward tilt that we've seen in Turkish foreign policy. Now, anybody who's been to Turkey knows that Turkish officials and politicians talk all the time about the issue

of strategic debt, about the fact that as a result of Turkey's geopolitical orientation and strategic geography, Turkey needs to look both east and west.

As a practical matter, though, the AKP has shown a clear preference for looking to the east rather than to the west. Since taking office in 2002, under the guise of what they've called a quote, unquote "independent foreign policy," Ankara has drifted towards accommodation with traditional rivals in the Middle East like Syria and Iran and at the same time has shown a considerable cooling of its ties with both Europe and the United States.

And this state of affairs should be deeply alarming for policy-makers here, because a Turkey ever more closely aligned with regimes that are hostile to the United States and to American objectives in the Middle East will not be -- indeed, it can't be -- a reliable ally in the war on terror.

So this is, I think, a very important trend to watch, because the closer Turkey becomes aligned with countries like Iran, the less likely they will be to supplement, or be willing to supplement, American efforts in the Middle East.

The fifth issue is attitudes towards Europe. And again, it's just my opinion, but I think what we're on the cusp of is a significant readjustment of Turkish attitudes towards Europe and EU accession in general.

Turkey has been seeking to join the European Community of Nations for some two decades, and particularly since 2005, when the EU opened formal accession talks. But now you can see, and it's pretty evident, that there's a deep sense of distrust with Europe among all three of the country's political power centers -- the Islamists, the secular nationalists and the military.

Publicly, the AKP has expressed all sorts of glowing praise for European membership, but on my recent trip -- I was in Turkey a couple of months ago -- I had an observer say something very interesting to me. He said that the AKP is more interested in the process, but not the end goal, which is that they're using the tools of European accession -- reconfiguration of the relationship between the military and the state or a reconfiguration between the powers of the judiciary and the state -- as a tool to increase its own power at the expense of its chief political rival, which is the Turkish military.

Secular forces and the Turkish General Staff have soured on the European Union for the same reason. They now perceive -- at least in the connotation that I've had, it's come across loud and clear -- that EU accession criteria are a poison pill of sorts by which the AKP is progressively altering the character of the Turkish state.

And that goes a long way towards explaining why in the latest Pew survey less than a third of Turks now support EU accession as an absolute goal. A lot of them support it with reservations and qualifications, but this is down from pretty high positive ratings just a decade ago.

And the sixth issue -- and this is the decisive one -- is the Kurdish issue. Turkey's current threat environment envisions a threat from three interrelated fronts. The first is the (inaudible) class Kurdish minority in the southeast of Turkey itself, of which the Kurdish Workers Party, the PKK, is the most active opponent.

The second is across the border in northern Iraq, where the Kurdish dominated regional government is said to condone anti-Turkish activities and even possibly to assist in them, although the evidence there is anecdotal.

The third and the fourth fronts are the Kurdish enclaves in neighboring Syria and Iran, respectively.

Of these, far and away the most important and the most acute at the moment is the situation in northern Iraq. So far the Turkish military has stopped short of decisive military action against PKK elements that are operating out of northern Iraq. Instead, they have created a number of temporary security zones on the Iraqi border as a way of interdicting cross border activities.

But Turkish officials make very, very clear to anybody who will listen that is a step that isn't a permanent solution, and more decisive measures are necessary. And how Turkey chooses to ultimately do this is going to have a decisive impact on Turkish-Iraqi relations and on Turkish relations with Washington.

And here I think it will be very hard to overstate the gravity of the situation for these two reasons. First of all is a credibility issue. As Soner said, the upsurge in PKK activity against the Turkish citizenry is undermining confidence in both the Turkish military and the Turkish government in providing security for the Turkish citizens.

And as all of you know, security is the cardinal duty of every government, so the idea that the Turkish military simply can't seal that border because of political considerations with the United States and anything else is, I think, a very detrimental fact that is making its way now into the Turkish media.

The second issue is what happens as a result of the fact that the Turks are constrained. International law -- if I may digress for a second, because I am a lawyer -- posits a tri-fold duty to any country. It's a duty to prevent hostile acts from within their territory from emanating outward and hurting neighbors by doing one of three things: either legislating, making essentially terrorist activity criminalized; and then enforcing those (inaudible); police action, or if you're unable to do that, by looking for international assistance.

The situation in Iraq currently doesn't meet any of those three standards. There is a lot of reason to suspect that the Kurdish regional government has a very good handle on what the PKK are doing, and they're simply not acting against them. And more than anything else, the central Iraqi government, which has the cardinal responsibility for this, isn't forcing the Kurdish regional government to act.

And the coalition has said for its part under the international law of occupation, if the Turks cross over the border, we'd then be forced to defend the Iraqis, which creates this sort of nightmare scenario of if Turkey chooses to defend itself, we may be seeing the first internal NATO war, which is I think a very important point that's often missed in the press.

The stakes on this go far beyond Iraq. The stakes on this extend to alliance cohesion within NATO itself. And because we have not moved decisively against the PKK, it's empowered other countries to do so. There's an old Russian proverb for those of you that know it (SPEAKING IN RUSSIAN), which means, roughly, "A sacred place does not remain empty for long."

And I think the same thing is happening in terms of Turkish counter-terrorism policy. Since 2004, when Turkey and Iran signed a mutual security accord in which they each pledged to combat the main terrorist threat of the other -- remember, there's a reciprocal agreement here; it's not just that the Iranians are combating the PKK, although they are; the Turks have pledged to combat the Mujahedin Khalq, which is a terrorist group under U.S. federal law, but it is the main armed opposition group to the Iranian regime. So there is a sense of one hand washes the other.

But since then, the Iranians have been walking the walk. And it's created a situation where Turkish counter-terrorism interaction with the United States is now overshadowed by the growing strategic bonds between Turkey and Iran. And they tend to manifest themselves not only on the terrorism front, but on other fronts as well, such as the recent energy deal.

So if there is an issue that will be able to change the current tenor of Turkish-U.S. relations, the issue of PKK activity in northern Iraq is it. And there are ways to actually do that. Soner mentioned moving decisively against the PKK. I think there's also an opportunity here to create, because the coalition has greater authority over northern Iraq today than it did in early May as a result of the security arrangement that they signed in late May.

There is an ability to create a security mechanism that can actually serve as a buffer that can supplement the types of activities the Turks are doing and will also mute the impulse of the Turkish military for intervention in Iraq, because the result of that would be catastrophic for the U.S.-Turkish relationship.

The problem here, though, is that the time is running out, and because this happens to be a briefing issue in the Turkish body politic, both the AKP and the Turkish military tend to understand the need for decisive action against the Kurds in northern Iraq. This tends to be an issue where the hourglass is running out, so I'll stop here. Thank you.

HASTINGS:

Thank you both very much for a very comprehensive perspective with reference to the briefing matter at hand. I'd invite any member of the media that might wish to put a question to our witnesses to do so at this time. Yes, ma'am? And would you say who you are?

(OFF-MIKE)

You're asked to use the microphone so that the -- yes, you can come over.

(UNKNOWN)

My name is Yasemin Congar, and I'm with the Turkish press with Hurriyet and CNN-Turk, and my question is to Dr. Cagaptay.

Soner, at the beginning of your remarks, you said this election outcome was in a way the best outcome in the short term that has created a stable government as it's also made it necessary for that government to seek consensus in the parliament because of the distribution of the seats. And I think you mentioned the necessity of a consensus candidate for the presidency as well.

Well, since yesterday in Turkey it looks like Foreign Minister Gul is very likely to become the next president with the maybe passing endorsement of MHP, because they also announce that they will go and sit in the parliament, even if they might be not working for him.

If Mr. Gul becomes the president, as is widely expected in Turkey now -- or let's say if he runs, as is widely expected now, how do you think the military will react to it, given what they did on April 27th when Mr. Gul was running?

And secondly, if Mr. Gul becomes the president, which is also widely expected in Turkey, how do you think that would affect the U.S.-Turkish relations, especially within the White House and the presidency?

As you well know, Mr. Sezer, the current president was never invited to the White House. There was not much of a dialogue between the White House and Cankaya during Mr. Sezer's term.

Given the fact that Mr. Gul is very well known in this town -- he was the foreign minister for many years, and he has a very good rapport with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, for example -- how would that change the bilateral dialogue? Thank you.

CAGAPTAY:

That might be a hypothetical question, so my answer is also going to be hypothetical.

First of all, I don't think it's not that President Sezer was never invited; it's that he never came. In other words he's president for the last seven years and is known to not like pomp and receptions and gala dinners, and he's someone who does not travel overseas or appear at reception sort of events. That's, I think, beside the point, but he's not someone who traveled much anyway.

Much of what they're discussing is hypothetical, because the presidential elections are not going to take place this month; they're going to take place next month. Remember that the parliament is now to elect the president, but before that it has to elect a speaker first. Before that, it has to convene, and the parliament is likely to convene on August 3rd, Monday. Is that Monday? Yes.

It will take it, then, 10 days or so at least to elect a speaker. And then it will start the presidential election process on August 13th. It has 30 days to elect a president, including a 10-day waiting period in the beginning, so the earliest round could be in late August, in which you're going to need a two-thirds quorum.

It's very likely that some opposition deputies will be in the parliament, but they're not going to vote for the candidate, so we're going to wait for the second or the third round. The way it goes is in the first round, you need two-thirds. In the second round, you need two-thirds. In the third round, you can meet the majority. And AKP has the majority, so in the third round it will elect a president, which will be sometime in early to mid-September.

So I think we're so far down the road, and I think the next month and a half of Turkish politics is going to look like a century. That's why I canceled my vacation plans. I think every

day is going to last as long as a month. It's going to be an incredibly intense period, and I think that the signs that we see today I would not consider to be mature signs. I think those are mostly trial balloons.

People are basically testing the political environment, trying to see how, A, the media, B, the business community, C, the opposition parties, D, the military, E, the European Union, F, the United States will respond to the likely candidacy of Abdullah Gul, and I think it will be a composite of these six that will determine the AKP's final posture.

So that, I think, is the furthest I can see in the century that's lying ahead of us.

HASTINGS:

All right. Next question?

OK. Yes, ma'am?

(OFF-MIKE)

Yes, if you would.

(UNKNOWN)

I'm from Cox Newspapers. My question is for either of the panelists. Both Robert Wexler and Hastings said that the elections were overall good for the United States' relationships with Turkey. Is it good because the elections were democratic, fair and balanced, or is it good because of who was elected and that would be helpful?

BERMAN:

A little of both, I think. It's certainly very good that there was very high participation, as Chairman Hastings said -- much higher than we can expect in the United States. There's an animated, involved body politic.

And it's good not because of who was elected, but because a range of views was elected, and there is an ability to have these forces fight it out in the politic sphere to a great extent -- at least in the parliamentary side -- than there was recently, because what you had from 2002 until 2007 was that even though the AKP came into power with 34 percent of the popular vote, they had a super majority in the parliament.

And so you have a very interesting place where in absolute terms their popularity increased, but in terms of the ability of other parties to check them, that's actually become more powerful now than it was before.

CAGAPTAY:

First of all, I was born and raised in Istanbul, so you're going to seem un-Turkish. I could not vote in these elections, so I have no personal stakes involved.

My take on it is that this is good, as I said earlier, because it shows that, despite much political turmoil, Turkey is a functioning liberal democracy. We had six months of incredible tensions -- demonstrations by millions of Turks against the ruling party, intervention by the supreme court, the constitutional court in the presidential election process, a warning from the military with a spate of words after that that went back and forth literally for months between the government and the opposition parties.

It's encouraging that, despite this kind of incredible uncertainty, that Turkey has once again gone through its period of elections. This is the 16th time since Turkey became a multi-party democracy when the Cold War started. And that's why I think it's a good outcome. Turks are a mature people who believe in democratic traditions and can handle any kind of political crisis.

HASTINGS:

Thank you.

Yes, sir?

And then you, ma'am.

Yes, sir?

(UNKNOWN)

I'm not a member of the media, though.

HASTINGS:

Is the lady from the media?

(OFF-MIKE)

Then let's have the gentleman come forward, if you would.

And then you, you, then you.

XULAM:

My name is Kani Xulam. I'm with the American Kurdish Information Network. Yesterday's *Indiyet* (ph), a Turkish daily, has an article by Ajet Knelkran (ph), a Turkish columnist. She quoted from the victory speech of Prime Minister Erdogan, saying that one people, one flag, on homeland and one state. And then she compared that -- she reminds her readers -- to the Nazi slogan, "Ein Stadt, ein Volk, ein Führer," and then she translated that for her readers: "One state, one people, one leader."

Germany, as we know, didn't like the Jews and took measures to take care of them. Turkey is allergic to the words "Kurd" and "Kurdistan" and equates their freedom with its own debts and unhappiness. How can you, Congressman Hastings, as an African American member of this Congress, sing the praises of Turkey, a racist state that practices the jenko laws (ph)? Thank you.

HASTINGS:

Well, you put the question to me, and what I can say to you is I've been to Turkey nine times, and I didn't experience personally as much racism in Turkey as I do in Washington, D.C. But I gather that I'm looking from an international perspective with reference to other countries.

I don't think I would be able to go anywhere if I was going to use racism as the barometer for interaction and dialogue with governments. I know very few totally tolerant, totally accepting governments. Toward that end Turkey fits into the category. If you wish that I should name a few, the last time that I was overtly discriminated against -- more than once -- was in Germany. The time previous to that was in Denmark.

So racism is everywhere, and my job is to try and carry not only to Turkey, but to Iraq and to Iran the notion that none of us have any absolute designs on how governments function, but all of us should be mindful and tolerant.

When I am there, I use my civil rights experience in speaking with my interlocutors and informing them that they should get beyond the period that I lived in my life here in America.

I cite, for example, Cyprus always is not on the table in some of these discussions, but I sat with both leaders of the Cypriot Turks and the Greek Cypriots, and I said to them. I used my personal experience. These two men grew up together, and I'm referring to Mr. Denktash and his counterpart at that time. They grew up together, and I see no reason whatsoever why they should not be able to come together.

It is very easy to take the view that we shouldn't do business with anybody because their policies are the antithesis of tolerance. Then I would gather that we ought to take off all of our Chinese clothes and get rid of all of our Russian gas and go on about our business. No society that I've ever been in or known did not have some form of racism.

I'll accept your question in the spirit that it's offered, but for people like me who recognize Turkey and recognize the Kurdish part of Iraq and the need for them to get beyond their differences and be about the business of establishing a meaningful dialogue with each other, I haven't given up hope on all of these countries all over the world, that somewhere along the lines there may be a reduction in the tensions that are produced because of alleged differences.

We are all God's children -- some god, however you look at it -- and in light of that, it would be wise for all of us to reduce the notions that we have of prejudice and intolerance toward others because of their religion, their national origin, or their race.

So I appreciate your question, but I'm very comfortable going to Turkey, but I have a hell of a hard time catching a cab sometimes in New York.

The lady over here.

And then you, sir.

CHOULDJIAN:

Elizabeth Chouldjian with Horizon Armenian Television. My question is to you, Mr. Berman.

Clearly, as Ms. (inaudible) also mentioned, we've seen democratic elections in Turkey. There's no question about that. That's a step forward and what not.

But Mr. Berman, you have painted a picture since the coming in of the AKP party that clearly as an American I'm concerned about. The Turkish government appears to be closer to Iran and Syria than it's ever been before, according to your statement.

It has not been even talking the talk when it comes to Turkish-U.S. relations and Turkish-EU relations and in fact has been manipulating the EU process in all of this in terms of human rights issues, in terms of trying to set up its own future in Turkey.

So my question, I guess, is should we as Americans not be concerned about this? How close of an ally is Turkey compared to, let's say, five years ago when the AKP party came in?

And isn't this in fact going to spell for us a much darker future in terms of U.S.-Turkish relations, given the fact that very likely, based on everything I've heard, whoever the next president party is -- likely, an AKP party supporter and following the same line as what we've been seeing in the last several years?

BERMAN:

Well, that's a fairly loaded question, but let me answer it however I can.

I think there is ample reason to be concerned about the AKP party's intentions. I think that the current political climate creates an ability to put greater checks and balances on their ability to achieve those objectives than otherwise.

I am concerned by the rising anti-Americanism, by the sort of growing proximity between the AKP party and Iran and Syria, but Turkey is going to be, for the foreseeable future, a pivotal ally in the Middle East both in terms of Iraq and sort of the broader strategic picture that we're looking at.

We need to have a number of levers that will more positively engage Turkey, whether it's on security in northern Iraq or other issues that will incentivize them to play a more constructive role in U.S. policy. The problem that we've had so far is that we simply haven't begun to talk on the U.S. policy side.

Chairman Hastings and Congressman Wexler should be commended for their continued interest in Turkey, but that interest isn't really echoed in the executive branch, as near as I can tell. And there's been very little attention paid not only by the State Department, although there are people like Deputy Assistant Secretary Matt Bryza who spends a lot of time on Turkey, but in the larger picture, we really haven't paid Turkey the attention that it deserves in terms of its role in U.S. interests.

Ever since the Turkish parliament voted down the referendum authorizing a northern front against Saddam Hussein's regime, we've had this sort of chilling tie that both sides have been working to correct, but we simply haven't been able to overcome it.

Given this political situation and the propensity of the AKP party to look elsewhere if we're not engaged, the case for engagement is greater now than it was ever before.

CHOULDJIAN:

May I ask a follow-up, sir?

HASTINGS:

I'd like for Dr. Cagaptay to give a response, and then of course, the follow-up and then what will likely be our final question will come from the young man who had his hand up.

Yes, Dr. Cagaptay?

CAGAPTAY:

It seems to me that what we're debating is in terms of the relationship and the future effort and if the United States should be worried about it. The answer to that lies in analyzing where the relationship is today.

There is much anti-Americanism in Turkey, absolutely. That's the case. But on the other hand, there is also a thriving relationship. In fact, I would say "thriving" is not the word. It's a booming relationship. There is so much cooperation going on in many areas. Iraq is the key area.

It's not known to a lot of us because much of it does not get written up in the press, but if you ever go the field -- Iraq or Turkey -- and talk to people or just watch what's happening, you're going to realize that kind of cooperation taking place in Iraq between Turkey and the United States is incredible.

And by "incredible," I mean the following. There was a vote in March 1, 2003, which failed in the Turkish parliament. That was a vote so that Turkey would open up a northern front to help the war in Iraq, and that vote failed.

The people that I talk to in the U.S. military are suggesting that Turkish support to the United States now exceeds what Turkey would have delivered according to the March 1st accord, if it had passed. In other words what Turkey is doing has gone beyond what was asked for originally.

And Congressman Wexler referred to earlier in his comments about how three-quarters of all logistics aid going to both Iraq and Afghanistan is going through Turkey, and that's the part that we can see. There's a lot that we're not able to talk about or read in the media, and I think that's part of that thriving relationship.

Afghanistan is the second front, which is not on our radar screen as much as Iraq is. I think the Turkish contribution is perhaps even bigger than Iraq, because Turkey actually has troops,

had troops in Afghanistan. It is the only country that has led the international force in Afghanistan twice, including the United States, and it's the only country that has had a permanent presence there since the beginning of the war.

The energy issue is a third area of cooperation. Turkey is now actually helping both the United States and the EU diversify from its access to dependence to Middle East oil by providing channels and outlets such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline into Azerbaijan and from there with outlets into the Caucasus for gas and energy projects.

The list can go on and on and on, so the bottom line is there is a booming relationship. Unfortunately, I don't think that the government has done a good job of explaining that relationship or standing behind it, and in the second term, now that it has a clear mandate, it can do a better job in that in terms of explaining to the Turks and standing behind this booming and thriving relationship.

The flip side of it is two years of jargon again -- why the Turks are walking the walk, but not talking the talk. The flip side of it is that here we have the PKK issue, which is where we're saying a lot, but we're not doing enough. If only we could bring the two visions together, delivering and talking at the same time, I think that we could take this relationship to the next level.

HASTINGS:

Very quickly.

CHOULDJIAN:

Of course. But following up, at the end of the day, if you look at the scenario now, isn't it the negative reaction, let's say, of Turks to the U.S. in Turkey today -- isn't it in some way enhanced by the AKP party, the fact that that they aren't talking positively about the U.S. and Turkey, the fact that they're not talking about Israel, the fact that they're not doing everything that they need to be doing within Turkey in order to bolster this relationship?

We're asking the U.S. to go to Turkey and say, "Turkey, be our friend; stand with us," and whatnot. And yet on the other side, the leadership there, which appears to be the leadership in the foreseeable future, doesn't seem to be reciprocating, and yet we're supposed to be going all these extra miles in order to befriend them in this case.

The concern is what are they supposed to be doing? In the larger scheme of things, we're seeing a country in that area that doesn't necessarily fit within U.S. interests at the moment, given the fact that they continue to go into northern Iraq, given the fact that they continue to have a blockade with a neighboring country, Armenia, and given the fact that they're having difficulties in terms of meeting even the basic tenets that the EU is setting to join the EU, which we all want to see.

So in that sense, what's the future looking at?

HASTINGS:

Well, you know, also a certain part, a bit of what you have said is not only loaded, I'll take it off of our witnesses.

The simple fact of the matter is that the EU continues to move the ball, and that needs to be dealt with. Their incrementalism allows that those that would embrace Turkey in a meaningful way are precluded from doing so.

The accession of Turkey -- let's use economic circumstances as a poor example. Turkey's gross domestic product is more than the last 10 countries that entered the EU, and yet they're precluded, and there are good economic reasons.

Turkey also an extraordinary amount of problems, and I recognize that. But in geopolitics -- now, this briefing will style globalization, and it also was styled as something to look at Ataturk's legacy.

Geopolitics will allow that there are very few in the way of permanent friends in the world, and a lot of times they're not permanent enemies either. Who would have thought that we would have a trade agreement with Vietnam? You think about it.

Or somewhere along the lines it has to be clearly understood that we live in a great big old world that is morphing into things that we are not quite ready for. I raise China again. And I might add, I have no axes to grind. I've been to China perhaps more times than any other country in the world. But the simple fact of the matter is, China is not a democracy, secular or otherwise, and yet we do an immense amount of business with China.

So I don't want us to get out of the notion that sitting there in the Bosphorus Straits looking right over into Asia, being in a position where, if you look at some of Turkey's losses, they lost, because of the Iraq intervention, an extraordinary stream of trade -- never mind all of this other kind of thinking.

I don't want us to get down this path of thinking because a country internally may be changing into whatever it is that the majority feels that we should all of a sudden don't perceive them as friends.

If you took Britain's statement, you would find that they spoke favorably of this election. Even if you look at the State Department -- and let me quote the State Department since I criticized them earlier for not attending this briefing -- "A U.S. State Department spokesman congratulated the Turkish people on holding what he said was a free and fair election."

I will point out that we have had a very good working relationship with Prime Minister Erdogan and his government and that we have faith in Turkey's secular democracy. As the former president of the parliamentary assembly and its now president emeritus, I have no greater supporters than the parliamentarians from both parties, AKP and otherwise, when I go into that particular region.

Turkey is very influential in the Balkans. Turkey has immense oil and gas matters of significant interest to those of us here. Sure, its domestic politics are going to change. There are some who would argue that there are Islamist designs. I think their social fabric is going to change.

But the last time I looked, the social fabric of the United States sure did change when we got more concerned about whether Lindsay Lohan got drunk or Anna Nicole's baby was born than we have the issues that we're briefing you today.

Thank you, ma'am.

You, sir?

(UNKNOWN)

Mr. Chairman? My question is for Chairman Hastings. It's a two-part question. It won't be too long.

The first part is: As Turkey is recognized as a democracy -- some have stated as a liberal secular democracy or whatnot; it is, however, still a democracy -- how important is the democracy in Turkey for us here in the United States?

And part two, knowing that, my understanding of secularism is the difference between government and the military. Should the military -- and I think it's probably I wouldn't say more important, but it is an issue that has not been presented here today, other than the PKK situation - if there is a situation where the military might intervene with the anti-democratic situation that is current, should the U.S. be involved?

HASTINGS:

When the military took action in previous times in Turkey's history, the United States didn't get involved. Sovereigns all have internal disputes, and Turkey is entitled to theirs, just like we're entitled to ours.

The ultimate question that you asked is one that's very easy to answer, particularly as the chair of the Helsinki Commission. Sixteen elections later, Turkey still stands, and to date, aside from the intermittent violence that seems to stem from those who have centuries of agendas

That said, this commission has as a part of its inherent mission, not only as it pertains to Turkey, but in the entire OSCE sphere, and I might add America's premise, to advance democracy anywhere and everywhere in the world. We are not successful in each instance in that regard, but Turkey's democracy is particularly important.

Now, if the military were to take action, I'm certain that that would give extraordinary heartburn. Both our witnesses have addressed this subject, and it is something that must be attended.

I think ultimately what we are crying out for and what this briefing, if nothing else, has produced from the stellar witnesses that put forward rather comprehensively what their views are about how to best go about handling matters as they arise in Turkey is first to have mutual respect, clearly define America's strategic interests, work cooperatively within the framework of dialogue, and enhance our diplomatic relations, not only with Turkey, but with other areas of the world.

If there is anybody here who thinks that the Iraq problem can be solved without Turkey being at the table, then I have a bridge in Brooklyn that I'll see you.

Thank you, ladies and gentlemen. The briefing is concluded.

[Whereupon the hearing ended at 11:32 a.m.]

CQ Transcriptions, July 26, 2007

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[The hearing was held at 10:00 a.m. in Room 2226 House

Office Building, Washington, D.C., Rep. Alcee Hastings, moderating.]

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