

Turkey after July 2007 Elections: Domestic Politics and International Relations

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Articles & Testimony

On July 26, 2007, Soner Cagaptay testified before the U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (the Helsinki Commission). The following is a transcript of his remarks.

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 international relations after the elections.

In terms of Turkish domestic politics following last Sunday's elections, I share Congressman Wexler's 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 550-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 1990s 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 at is the issue that I think is most important for our bilateral ties today, the issue of the 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 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 the U.S.-Turkish relationship. I think the PKK indeed brings not only Turkey and the United States, 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 1990s.

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 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 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 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-Qaeda, 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 ceasefire, 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 gradually started 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, 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 the 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 relations 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 by that you do not 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.

We have 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 the PKK is an important factor in the way that Turks look at the war on terror, because their view is that 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 it doesn't get any kind of support or help against the PKK 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-Qaeda is a terror problem, but the PKK is not, and they can't quite understand why that is the case, given unforthcoming 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 -- especially political ties -- 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 in areas controlled by the KPD and the PUK from where it carries out attacks into Turkey, and 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 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 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.

Ironically, Iran, 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. It sees that there is 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 unforthcoming 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 fighting 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." In this regard Iranians walk the walk and they make it look 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 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 policymaker. 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 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. ❖

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