

An Address by the Turkish Prime Minister (full transcript)

Sep 28, 1999



Brief Analysis

On September 28, 1999, Bulent Ecevit, prime minister of the Republic of Turkey, addressed The Washington Institute's Special Policy Forum. Following is the full text of his speech, as delivered. [Read a summary \(templateC05.php?CID=1290\)](#) of his remarks during the question-and-answer session that followed his speech.

Executive director, Mr. Robert Satloff, I thank you very much for your compliments. Ladies and gentlemen, it's a great pleasure and honor for me to address this meeting of The Washington Institute for Near East [Policy]. When he last visited Ankara, came to Ankara and visited me, I promised my friend Makovsky that, on the first occasion to come back to Washington, I will be visiting this very august society. I'm glad that I have been able to keep that promise.

After the bipolar world ended and the Soviet Union dissipated, many political circles, or political observers, students in North European countries, thought that Turkey's security value for the Western countries had been considerably diminished. But as a world power, the United States saw the facts earlier than most European countries, and realized that, on the contrary, after the ending of the bipolar world, the geopolitical importance of Turkey would have been augmented very much because, with the ending of the Soviet Union, the merger of Europe and Asia had gained pace and Turkey played a key role, a pivotal role in this merger of the two big continents. So a deeper dialogue and solidarity than ever was forged between the United States and Turkey in the recent one or two decades.

Before I continue, I would like to express my gratitude, in the name of the Turkish people, to the American people for the solidarity expected, and the solidarity that has been shown, with the victims of the heavy disaster in Turkey. And we particularly felt grateful to the President for numerous calls that he made for aid to the victims of the earthquake horror. This earthquake has been the biggest calamity that we in Turkey have witnessed, and thus far, according to the official figures, over 15,000 people are dead. This number, I am afraid, may increase with the removal of further rubble. And nearly 25,000 wounded people are still under treatment in hospitals. In order to accommodate provisionally those citizens which have become homeless because of the earthquake, we have provided them with over 100,000 tents and 121 tent cities, but this is not enough. And the rainy season is approaching. It would be very risky to keep the people in those tents throughout the winter months, so before the winter sets in, we have to provide more durable and more healthy accommodations to tens of thousands of people in Turkey. This is a huge task, of course. We are studying where we can, where in the world we can find so many bungalows, huts, prefabricated bungalows, or developed comfortable tents. We shall, of course, be trying to bring as many of such facilities as possible to Turkey. And then, in the meantime, we will start building up new settlements, for permanent settlement, in or on lands that will be diligently studied by geologists before any new buildings are erected.

Turkey, during the last year, last one year, has been struck twice economically, first because of Southeastern Asia's economic crisis, particularly after it was reflected in Russia. It had detrimental effects on our economy, because in recent years, our trade and economic relations with Russia had been increasing, so the crisis had very -- the Russian crisis had very adverse effects on Turkey's economy.

Now, after that, the earthquake, of course, struck the economy again very heavily, because the nine provinces in

which the earthquake took place are the most heavily industrialized regions of Turkey, and therefore the economic bill of the earthquake will be rather high.

I'm glad to say that the IMF has been generous for emergency aid, the World Bank has been generous with the relief aid, and they are trying to alert other international financial organizations to contribute further to the well-being of the victims of the earthquake.

I would like to give a very short, brief overview of the regime in Turkey. I'm sure you all know about it already, but it will be just a relation and evaluation.

Turkey is, I believe, a model for Islamic countries for the sake of her democracy and modernization. Of course, some circles try to subvert this regime, but it has been solidly entrenched, and I think that its influence is becoming wider in the world.

There are, today, a greater number of Islamic countries progressing towards democracy or practicing a degree of, some degrees of democracy than a decade or two earlier.

I believe that Turkey's example has played an important role in this respect, because the Turkish experiment has proven that Islam can be compatible with modernity, with secularism, and with democracy. And apart from being compatible with these values, an Islamic country gains a great dynamism by adapting itself to secularism and democracy.

In the meantime, given the transition to multi-party democracy, republican Turkey granted larger rights and freedoms to women than in many civilized and developed democratic countries. We still had some shortcomings, but these have been corrected in recent year or two by new legislation enacted in the Parliament.

In the meantime, there is an increasing sensitivity for human rights in Turkey. Of course, the continued existence of a separatist, terrorist organization puts a brake of some degree on human rights developments or democratization developments, but still there is considerable progress in this state, and NGOs have become increasingly effective in Turkey during the recent years.

The present government -- I'm sure you are all aware, as you are interested in Turkey -- the present government is quite an industrious government, if I may say so, working very rapidly within the first three months of its tenure, that is, between a vote of confidence and the summer recess of Parliament. Sixteen very important laws were passed by the Parliament, including some constitutional amendments.

We have, as a three-party coalition government, quite a large backing in the Parliament, which has been missed for decades in Turkey, and apart from -- in spite of the fact that we have a large majority as a coalition, we still try to coalesce even with the opposition parties on important issues, because we believe that democracy, above all, is an exercise in compromise.

Among these 67 laws [overall passed by Parliament], I think I will mention a few of them, a few important ones. First of all, there has taken place a structural change in the state security courts. Until recently, there were military side-by-side with civilian judges and prosecutors in these state security courts. But we enacted a constitutional amendment a few months ago, and now these courts have become completely consistent with civilian judges or prosecutors.

We have also passed a law for prevention of organized crime; a law for freeing imprisoned writers and journalists; a repentance law for the militants in the mountains, the separatist terrorists. A law was passed also for sanctions against organizations for unlawful gains. A law was passed for liberalizing the party registration, in fact rendering it rather difficult to close political parties.

A new budget with a delay of six or seven months was prepared and passed. A banking law has been passed. A law

has been enacted for the prevention of unfair competition. A very ambitious social security reform bill has been enacted. We had to face great social oppositions, but we took the risk and it did become law.

We have undertaken changes in the tax legislation to reduce the effects of the world economic crisis on Turkish economy. A decree law was passed to facilitate and expedite relief measures for victims of natural disasters. And last, but not least, we enacted another constitutional amendment, according to which privatization has become much easier, because the existing constitution was a rather etatist one from the economic angle, and it presented difficulties in the way of privatization. We have solved this problem, and we have again, with a constitutional amendment, introduced a much liberal form of international arbitration, which we hope will be encouraging for investors from developed countries like the United States of America.

Although our economy was struck twice, heavily, during the last one year, we as a government did not deviate from the stabilization program, even during the election campaign. I mean, even under the previous [two] governments, since 1997, we didn't deviate at all from the stabilization program. We haven't followed an electoral economy, which used to be the case in previous elections in Turkey, and, as a result, we expect that IMF and the World Bank would appreciate all these efforts and success that we have implemented in Turkey in the recent two or three years.

In the meantime, Turkish economy had gained great dynamism. We believe that, with a little help, with a little support, Turkish economy will become dynamized again within a few months.

But, of course, the problems that we face are quite severe. For instance, as a result of the recent economic crisis, our export earnings to Russia dropped by 35 percent, and to Asia dropped by 43 percent.

I would like to dwell briefly on the transitional Turkish economy during the last three decades. It has been a transition from etatist to market economy, from agrarian to industrial economy, from import substitution to export driven. And, in the meantime, the share of agriculture in the gross domestic production has fallen from 26 percent to 17 percent between 1980 and 1999. The share of agricultural products in exports fell from 57 percent to 10 percent within this short period. The share of industrial exports, in the meantime, rose from 36 percent to 88 percent, and our export earnings between 1980 and 1999, 1998, has reached from \$2.9 billion to \$29.9 billion, and the gross national product per capita also increased by twice.

Coming to our economic relations with the United States, I am afraid our economic and trade relations with the United States are much below their existing potential. Our trade volume to the United States was only \$6.3 billion in 1997. It did not increase at all in 1998, and in the first half of the current year, our trade volume with the United States decreased by 29 percent, which is rather alarming. So we have to make a new leap forward in our economic and business relations with the United States; and, in the meantime, our trade deficit is growing.

So we discussed the economic problems during our meetings, particularly with President Clinton today. We asked his contribution to a decision to increase the quotas for Turkish textiles, which is very important, and I believe I got the impression that President Clinton will give the green light for a considerable increase in the quotas for textile imports. And we would very much like to see more American investments, particularly in the energy sector, after the constitutional amendment for international arbitration.

And of course, the United States is closely concerned with the problems in southeastern Turkey and, partly, eastern Turkey. We want to address the problems of these regions by economic measures, by speeding up the development of those parts of Turkey, and the United States feels the same necessity, as a friendly country.

So we invite American investors, also, to invest particularly in the less-developed regions of Turkey, which are, in fact, very promising parts of Turkey, although they are under-developed. They have been kept under-developed because of the feudal structure of that region, and that's played into the hands of separatist terrorism to an extent.

So we have suggested that an arrangement similar to the one that has recently been reached between Israel and Jordan be tried for Turkey, that's to say, the kind of Qualified Industrial Zone which is operating very successfully within those two neighboring countries, Jordan and Israel, in a place called Irbid, and the products of this region are admitted to the United States tax-free, customs-free, provided that 35 percent of the imports of their production are made in one of those two countries. Of course, this has to be studied, but we brought it before the table, and I got the impression that the administrators, including the President, have considered it something that should be studied.

Of course, our economy was hit very badly after the Gulf crisis. Before the Gulf crisis, our economic and trade relations with Iraq had flourished, and Iraq had become one of our close trade partners.

But, of course, the economic embargo imposed on Iraq after the Gulf War stopped this activity between Iraq and Turkey, and, according to modest estimates, Turkey has lost during the eight or nine years that have passed at least \$35 billion on that account. This excludes the losses that have been incurred in the Gulf region because of the increased transportation difficulties as a result of the restrictions on Iraq. So, although Turkey has cooperated very much with the United States in Iraq, in the Middle East, we have paid a very heavy price, and I got the impression that President Clinton realizes, admits that this is not fair, so I hope that our relations with Iraq could be to some degree eased, so that our losses, economic losses, will be compensated at least to some degree.

In the meantime, we have established a very close cooperation with the United States with regard to Caspian oil and gas. We are both committed to the endorsement of the Baku-Ceyhan choice. The United States, I'm glad to say, puts all its weight behind this project and, not only that, but also we both support the parallel trans-Caspian natural gas pipeline. This is our primary choice, to give our support to the Caspian natural gas pipeline.

The fact that these pipelines will pass through the territories of a staunch ally like Turkey should render it the most reliable choice for the West. There are some problems with the companies, but, with the political will of the United States, I'm sure that these difficulties can be eliminated soon, and we have reached the decision-making point. We have discussed this with President Clinton in a positive way.

Of course, there has always been close military cooperation between Turkey and the United States, and in the last ten or twenty years, our military cooperation has gone far beyond the limits of NATO, as has been exhibited in the case of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo. We were heavily involved, closely involved in the actions with regard to Herzegovina and Kosovo. And, of course, we have contributed to [Operation] Provide Comfort arrangement [U.S.-led air operation enforcing a no-fly zone in northern Iraq], and then which was later replaced by [Operation] Northern Watch. Of course, all these have brought with them military costs and economic costs.

Yet, I'm afraid although military cooperation between Turkey and the United States is greatly improved, enlarged, greatly enlarged, in the meantime, all American support, financial support to our military, has stopped by the beginning of this year. This, we believe, is a contradiction in terms, and I hope that this will be corrected before the tenure of President Clinton ends. We have now (inaudible) get no aid anymore for our military, but we buy certain things if the Congress does not prevent them by so-called FMS debts. This is also a rather unfair method, because the interest rates on the procurements made through this arrangement keep increasing. It initially started as 3 percent, and now it has reached the level of 10.8 percent, which is, of course, a rather heavy burden. We have mentioned our dissatisfaction with this situation in our talks here, and I hope that they will be well received.

Tourism has become a very promising sector of the Turkish economy. Until this year, we were able to earn about \$8 billion from tourism. But in recent year or two, as a result of unfounded negative propaganda about terrorism, the figures in tourism, the tourism sector began to deteriorate. And we are particularly dissatisfied with the number of American tourists to Turkey. The Americans among the incoming tourists are just about 5 percent, which is too little for a big and friendly country.

We hope that the friends of Turkey, as those who have been gathered here this evening, will try to promote tourism, which has become a very, as I said, a very important function or aspect of Turkish economy. Of course, Turkey has all the ingredients for a flourishing tourist country, because Turkey has both natural beauties and historic, very interesting historic sites.

As to our international relations, until a few years ago, Turkey was virtually surrounded by hostile countries. Our relations with all the neighbor countries were rather negative. But now, just the opposite situation has appeared. We have now friendly countries all over Turkish region, and this region has grown greatly after the bipolar world ended.

Now, our region extends to Central Asia on the one hand and Central Europe on the other hand. We have very close relations with the Balkan countries, with the sole exception, I would have said until a few months ago, Greece. But now even with Greece our relations seem to have started improving.

And we have very cordial relations with Georgia and Azerbaijan, with Central Asian countries, with Russian Federation, Ukraine, Moldavia, and now, hopefully, with Greece. If Armenia accepted turning back the lands that it has occupied from Azeris, at least, our relations with the Armenian Republic also could be normalized.

And then we have now much better relations with all the Middle Eastern countries. In some cases, our relations may not be on an ideal level, but they are certainly improving with Syria, with Iran, and, more recently, of course, we have established a close relationship with Israel. Our relations with all the Middle Eastern and North African countries have been improving rapidly, and in fact, we are open to the whole world.

Of course, as you know, the European Union refuses to admit Turkey, even as a candidate country. But we don't give up, because it's our legal right, based on international agreement, that we should be able to adhere to the European Union, because we are an associate member already, based on the agreement of 1964. And since 1996 our customs union agreement has been finalized, and Turkey has been taking very important steps, encouraging steps, in the way of greater respect of human rights, so we believe that it is our right, also on account of the fact that we share the same geography and share the same history as all other European Union countries for centuries.

But, of course, the (inaudible) remains closed to us in the meantime. However, the refusal of the European Union to grant membership to Turkey has played an educative role. It's made us realize that the world does not consist of Western Europe alone, that a country can become strong politically and economically by concentrating, by diversifying its international relations, all the world over, and we have been doing that with increasing success. And I'm sure that sooner or later, the European Union will knock on Turkey's door and ask her to join the ranks, join the corps, because, as I said, Turkey has been in a pivotal role in this age of the merger of European nations.

In the meantime, the Turkish economy has become very dynamic, with the pioneering of the new generation of entrepreneurs-- open to the world, to other countries-- long before the state. In fact, the private sector has become the driving force of the economy in recent years.

Before I end, I would like to say that, as you probably know, I and my friends had a meeting, long meeting with Mr. Al Gore and then President Clinton. The talks went very well. They have taken place in a very friendly atmosphere, and it opened new vistas of cooperation for us.

We, of course, touched many issues. On my way to Washington in the airplane, a journalist asked me what was going to be included in the agenda of my talks in the White House, and I said "Everything."

And, in fact, we did discuss everything today, including, of course, Cyprus, and the President agreed that there would be no going back before 1974 in Cyprus. This was a very encouraging and understanding remark.

Thank you very much for your patience. ❖

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