Turkey:

A Role Model at Turbulent Crossroads (full transcript)

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Suleyman Demirel served as the 9th President of Turkey from 1993 to 2000.

Brief Analysis

On April 27, 1999, Turkish president Suleyman Demirel addressed The Washington Institute's Special Policy Forum. Following is the full text of his opening remarks, as prepared for delivery. ***Read excerpts (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/turkey-a-role-model-at-turbulent-crossroads)*** *from his comments during the forum's question-and-answer session.*

Distinguished guests,

It is a great pleasure for me to address such a distinguished audience today at the Washington institute. I wish to thank Dr. Alan Makovsky and the institute for having organized this event and for the contributions it has been making to the furthering of relations between Turkey and the United States.

Looking back, I believe we can, as Turks and Americans, all be proud of the manner in which our bilateral relations have flourished. While our relations in the past were mostly limited to the context of effectively containing the threat of communist expansion -- in which our joint efforts have resulted in a complete success, today Turkey and the United States enjoy an enhanced partnership.

Our partnership within the NATO alliance remains strong and effective. This is best illustrated by NATO's decisive role in ending the war in Bosnia. Today, NATO is again active in the combat against tyranny and ethnic cleansing in Kosovo. Recently, we have welcomed to our alliance, 3 Countries which used to be part of the Warsaw Pact -- our former adversaries. The NATO summit in Washington was a total success in adapting the alliance to the requirements and needs of the next century and, for that matter, the next millennium.

As a result of the collapse of communism we find ourselves for the first time in seventy years at the epicentre of a new emerging political and economic reality, which is called 'Eurasia' -- the belt of countries from the Balkans to the edge of China. But from the dawn of the modern times Turkey has always been deeply involved in the life of Europe. We have a multiple cultural heritage and in some ways a multiple identity.

As individuals, identity cannot be summed up in one word. It is the same for our nation's identity. We certainly do not have, as outsiders sometimes claim, an identity crisis. Turkey and the Turks are very conscious of their identity

and heritage. Ordinary people in Turkey do not see themselves as living in a land torn between east and west. They relish variety and they see their country as a land enriched by a multiple heritage.

We regard ourselves, as we have always done, whether under the republic or in Ottoman times, as part and parcel of Europe. In fact, Turkey's European identity was formally acknowledged in the Paris conference in 1856.

Turkey is a large country of sixty-five million people. Istanbul, a city of twelve million people, is Europe's largest city. We are about the sixth largest external trading partner of the European union and since 1996 we have had a full customs union with it.

A generation ago Turkey was an overwhelmingly agricultural country. Today we are an industrial one with average economic growth of five percent a year over the last three decades. Majority of our people live in urban areas. One interesting sign of this is the existence of 20 national satellite tv channels, 300 tv channels and 1000 local private radios around the country.

This is a dynamic process. The speed of transformation raises two further issues. One is internal. When a society moves towards becoming an advanced industrial economy as fast as Turkey does, there is always a price to be paid. The social costs can be high. Institutions, laws, rules, often lag behind the level of development of the country as a whole. Many of our legal arrangements were made several generations ago for a traditional agricultural society. They basically derive from the napoleonic code.

Since then the world has moved on and so has Turkish society. Many other countries have gone through a parallel legal administrative revolution in the course of their journey into Europe, moving away from the highly prefectorial and essentially napoleonic system designed to regulate a centralized agrarian society. We are making our transition in a part of the world where democracy is relatively a recent phenomenon. Strong section of Turkish public opinion wants to put law and order, security and the integrity of the country first. The question is that can we or should we blame them? That is why although changes are being made, they do not always happen at the speed which everyone would wish.

Turkey has a multi-party democracy where democracies are thin on the ground. We are doing this in a region of great turbulence and political conflict where both industrialization and multi-party democracy are newcomers to the scene. Turkey has eight neighboring states such as Syria, Iraq, Iran, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Bulgaria and Greece. Other than Iran and countries of the Caucasus, these are all former parts of the Ottoman empire which achieved nationhood by breaking away from us. In most of these countries there are strong irredentist currents and people who dream, perhaps only half-seriously, of even taking land from Turkey.

For the last three quarters of a century, Turkey has applied what it thinks is the answer to its internal and external challenges: the creation of a post-imperial nation state, stable, with a modern European industrial democracy. We believe that we have come a long way in this endeavor. The seventy-five years of democratic republican tradition is the living proof of the compatibility of Islam, democracy and secularism.

In recent years, Turkish foreign policy has systematically tried to extend this model of secular democracy, international cooperation, and economic prosperity to the region around us. Turkey became an economic and political focal point in the region. This thinking lies behind the black sea economic cooperation, as well as behind the formidable trade figures with the Russian federation, the Balkans, the countries of the Caucasus and central Asia, as well as our joint energy projects, oil and gas pipelines and also behind our support for the Middle East peace initiative. But we recognize that our bid to full membership to the European union which is our vested right emanating from the 1963 Ankara agreement remains to be a driving force in our foreign policy along with our strong transatlantic partnership.

Turkey has many things to offer Europe.

- first, there is a genuine commonality of economic and political interest between Turkey and the EU. Turkey is an essential strategic partner of both the U.S. and Europe. Try and imagine the near east, the eastern Mediterranean, the gulf, and the Caucasus without the Turkish component in the Euro-Atlantic partnership.
- second, Turkey is genuinely part of Europe's common culture and heritage. The Ottoman empire whose 700th year we are celebrating this year, was first and foremost a European power.
- third, our economy is increasingly our main asset. Turkey is the largest economy in its wider region.
- fourth, Turkey lies at the epicenter of Eurasia. Istanbul has become the trade and finance center of this vast geography.
- fifth, Turkish society is young and dynamic. It is extremely energetic and adaptable. We are a society which has come a long way, is still moving fast, and confident about its future.

In this respect we are grateful for the support the U.S. has been given to our bid for full membership to the European union.

Distinguished guests,

The emergence of central Asian republics has heralded the advent of a new era in world affairs. Being at the heart of the geography linking these countries to the Europe, Turkey's policy objective is joining hands with our partners in North America and Europe in assisting the integration of this region to the world at large. We are poised and well prepared to meet the challenges accompanying such a role.

One of the most essential building blocks for exploiting the potential for cooperation offered by this new geography has already been put into place through the wide consensus reached on the transportation of Eurasia's rich oil and gas reserves to world markets via Turkey. In this connection, the concept of "east-west corridor" developed jointly by Turkey and the United States presents a long-term strategic perspective for this region. Having the Baku-Ceyhan oil pipeline and the trans-Caspian natural gas pipeline as its integral components, this project will help the consolidation of peace, stability and prosperity in Eurasia. Coupled with the revival of the historic silk road, this project will place Turkey at the center of the global energy and transportation map of the next century. We very much appreciate the active interest and effective support of the U.S. administration for all these projects. Through our joint efforts we are about to finalize the legal work on them. The construction will start at the beginning of next year.

On the other hand, the Middle East and the eastern Mediterranean regions are closely linked to Eurasia and also have highest priority in our foreign policy. Peace and stability in this region which are the very cradles of civilization will assume even greater importance in the future, as it will be an important point on the route that will link the Mediterranean to the Caspian basin and central Asia. This is why Turkey has been actively participating in the removal of obstacles from the path of the peace process.

In this context, Turkish observers are present to monitor the implementation of the Hebron agreement. In this vein, our appeals to ensure the full implementation without any further delay of all the relevant agreements will continue unabated.

Distinguished guests,

Speaking of the Middle East, let me refer to Turkey's relations with some of the key players of this region.

We have been building a strong partnership with Egypt and Jordan. We have also forged close ties with Israel, the only other democracy in our southern neighborhood. We hope that Turkish-israeli cooperation will provide the nucleus from which long-term regional cooperation and dialogue will spring. We also maintain close historical and cultural ties with the Palestinians. Within this framework, we are encouraging them to build viable democratic and economic institutions.

Further development of our ties with Iran based on the principles of good neighborliness and non-intervention in domestic affairs is to the benefit of our two nations. This is equally important for the consolidation of regional cooperation and stability. We wish to see the reform process initiated by the Iranian government successfully implemented.

The unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Iraq is of utmost importance for Turkey. We earnestly wish Iraq's isolation from the international community to come to an end. Yet, this can only be achieved through full compliance of Iraq with the relevant UN security council resolutions. This has been our message to Iraq all along. Furthermore, the authority vacuum in northern Iraq as a consequence of the present situation, is a constant source of security concerns for Turkey.

After many years of tense relations with Syria, we have now embarked upon a new road, hopefully which would allow the opening of a fresh chapter in our bilateral relations. However, it is imperative that Syria would honor her pledge to remove all the PKK terrorists from her territory and cease to have any contacts with them. This is the prerequisite for Syria to be able to maintain mutually beneficial relations and cooperation with Turkey.

Speaking of terrorism, we believe this is on top of the list of the threats posed to democracy, peace and freedom. Both Turkey and the United States have suffered a lot from this scourge. We highly value and appreciate the unwavering support of our American friends in our fight against the terrorist PKK organization. After the capture of its ring-leader, this terrorist organization is on its way to dissolution and eradication.

The international community has condemned terrorism on numerous occasions, and at all international fora, including the united nations, NATO, and G-8, to name just a few. According to international law all the civilized countries are under commitment to cooperate in the fight against terrorism. It is high time that words are transformed into deeds. All countries must not only denounce terrorism, but also take all the measures necessary to ensure its eradication.

I wish to seize this occasion to remind everybody, (particularly our Greek neighbors) that history has shown now, sooner or later, terrorists invariably turn against those countries who support them in one way or another. This is why international resolve and cooperation is essential in the fight against this scourge. We no longer want to hear news about innocent people killed either in terrorist raids against Turkish villages, or in bombs exploded in the vicinity of American embassies throughout the world.

Distinguished guests,

Turkey prepares to embrace the 21st century with confidence, optimism and hope. We will remain both as a regional power and a guarantor of peace, moderation, stability and prosperity in a turbulent region stretching from the Balkans to the Caucasus, central Asia and the Middle East.

Our traditional role of linking and bringing together different continents, cultures and peoples originates from the fact that our country has been one of the most important crossroads of the world. Furthermore, the emergence of new states in Eurasia has positioned Turkey at the epicenter of this new geography with formidable political, economic, social and cultural assets, as well as rich human and natural resources.

Within this framework, our democracy is our greatest asset, our most important guide towards reaching all our ideals and achieving our mission. A strong commitment to democracy is the prerequisite for all forms of national progress. It is the magic formula that cements people of different race, creed, language and religion within a single, common home in peace and harmony. Democracy is equality and inclusion. We must all protect our democracies from vicious, exclusionist phenomena such as ethno-nationalism, racism, xenophobia and intolerance. We see in many parts of the world, like in Kosovo, how authoritarian regimes not only oppress their own people, but also pose

a serious threat to peace and stability in their respective regions.

The second important factor for achieving our goals of peace, stability and prosperity, is to ensure the economic well-being of our citizens. The free market economy offers the sound grounds for taking advantage of our economic resources. The insurance of greater peace, stability, harmony and economic vibrancy at the domestic level will by itself contribute to the creation of an international environment more conducive for cooperation.

Distinguished guests,

In concluding, I wish to reiterate my conviction that, at the dawn of a new millennium, we should recognize each other's peace, prosperity and well-being as part of our collective peace, prosperity and well-being. This lies at the core of solidarity between and among nations. Those views and issues where we converge should bind us further together, while our divergence's should be considered as elements of diversity which, again, is to the common benefit of humankind.

The essential building blocks in the definition of this process are tolerance and understanding. Only when persons, groups and nations begin to look at their differences not negatively, but constructively, will we be able to move forward towards a better world.

Here I would like to conclude and invite questions. Turkey is a complex and rapidly changing society. It is a place where the stakes are high. If newspapers are anything to go by, Turkey is very poorly understood in the west. But Turkey is a democratic society and a strong one. It is becoming stronger and more prosperous with each year that passes. I believe that your questions will help you to understand the role of Turkey at turbulent crossroads.

Thank you. ❖

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