

Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, it is an honor to be invited to speak with you today about the political trends in Turkey in 2016.

2015 was a difficult year for Turkey. The Islamic State launched three attacks inside Turkey, killing more than 140 people and wounding hundreds. Journalists have been fired, detained, prosecuted and physically attacked. Economic growth has slowed sharply. The ongoing chaos in Syria, Turkey's downing of a Russian jet, Ankara's deployment of troops in Iraq without the approval of Baghdad and joining a Sunni alliance with the Saudis to counterbalance Iran have left Ankara more isolated in its neighborhood.

Most concerning of all, however, is the ongoing conflict between the Turkish state and the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). A string of clashes in the mainly Kurdish region between the PKK and Turkish security forces has left hundreds, including women and children, dead since the two-year-old cease-fire broke down in July. Areas of the Kurdish region have been intermittently subject to round-the-clock curfews since then. During state-imposed curfews, the wounded have been denied access to medical treatment, neighborhoods have had their water and electricity cut, and have been left without access to food.

For decades, Turkey's conflict with its Kurds has hindered Turkey's democratization. Neither Turkey's democratization nor the Kurdish quest for political rights have occupied an important place in U.S. policy towards Ankara and the Kurds. Turkey's democratic shortcomings have been ignored by U.S. administrations for the sake of greater geostrategic interests. In a similar fashion, Kurdish rights have been overlooked in the game of power-politics.

Today's regional context, however, ties Turkish democracy and the peaceful resolution of the Kurdish question to the U.S.'s security interests in the region. Turkey still considers the PKK—and the PKK-linked PYD in Syria—a bigger threat than ISIS. Therefore, Ankara has not played the effective role the United States has been seeking from its NATO ally in the fight against ISIS. Although Turkey has recently stepped up its efforts to counter ISIS, at times Ankara worked at direct odds with the U.S. anti-ISIS strategy by targeting Washington's most effective partner on the ground: the PYD. In October, Turkey confirmed that the country's military attacked fighters from the PYD in the northern Syrian city of Tal Abyad after the town was annexed into a Kurdish enclave.

Turkey's refusal to engage with the PYD also complicates the U.N. talks on ending Syria's nearly five-year civil war. Recently, Turkey has warned the United Nations and the United States that it will walk out of the political process if the PYD is included among the opposition to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. After a delay amid disputes on which Syrian groups should attend, U.N. envoy Staffan de Mistura decided not to invite the PYD to the meetings in Geneva. Although few expect significant progress to emerge from the talks, the exclusion of the PYD from future meetings is likely to complicate efforts to find a political solution, as they are the most powerful Kurdish faction—controlling around 10 percent of Syria.

If Turkey fails to find a peaceful resolution to its Kurdish question, Ankara will keep attacking the Kurds, rendering U.S. strategy against ISIS less effective and derailing the political process. The prospects for both the government and the Kurds to de-escalate the

conflict, however, remain slim in 2016. Therefore, it is necessary for the United States to use its leverage over both parties to push for a cease-fire and a return to the negotiating table.

### **Background on Turkey's Peace Process with its Kurds**

In 2009, Ankara began secret negotiations with the PKK, culminating in what became known as the Oslo Process. During the talks, both the Turkish security forces and the PKK scaled back their offensive operations. However, the initiative ran aground in the run-up to the Turkish general elections in June 2011. This resulted in a re-escalation of violence that increased casualties to a level not seen in more than a decade. By late 2012 it became obvious to both Ankara and the PKK that no clear winner would emerge from this new round of violence. Late in December 2012, President Erdogan announced that Turkey's national intelligence organization (M.I.T.) had been holding talks with the PKK's imprisoned leader Abdullah Ocalan in an attempt to convince the PKK to lay down arms and withdraw from Turkish soil. Unlike previous peace attempts, which were very secretive, the public was informed of this round of talks and was somewhat supportive. These negotiations also had the backing of the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP), many civil society organizations, and the mainstream Turkish media. In contrast to the previous peace attempts, Ocalan stood at the center of the negotiations with a seemingly softer approach. In meetings with pro-Kurdish party's members of parliament, the PKK cadres in Europe and Iraq also expressed their support for the peace talks. Erdogan seemed intent on pushing the negotiation process forward and had considerable political capital at his disposal, as long as the process delivered peace and quiet in the Kurdish southeast.

The broad outlines of the agreement between Ocalan and the M.I.T. included a cease-fire declaration by the PKK, the release of Turkish hostages held by the PKK and a peaceful withdrawal into northern Iraq after laying down their arms. In return, the Turkish government was expected to craft legislation to overhaul the definition of terrorism, which would pave the way for the release of hundreds of imprisoned Kurdish activists. As part of settlement talks, the PKK declared a cease-fire in March 2013 and in May began its withdrawal from Turkey toward its camps in northern Iraq. The PKK, however, halted the withdrawal to bases in northern Iraq shortly after, complaining of the government's unwillingness to carry out the agreed upon reforms. Despite intermittent clashes, the cease-fire mostly held until July 2015 when the PKK killed two Turkish policemen in retaliation for the death of more than 30 pro-Kurdish activists in a suicide bombing carried out by an affiliate of ISIS. The PKK viewed this attack as Turkish collaboration with ISIS. Seeing this as an opportunity to weaken the pro-Kurdish HDP and appeal to nationalists, the government responded with a heavy-handed military campaign in city centers and imposed curfews in the Kurdish region. Since July, more than 200 Turkish soldiers and policemen have been killed in attacks by the PKK. The army says about 500 militants have been killed since December, when curfews were imposed in seven cities. Human rights activists report more than 100 of them were civilians.

Neither party seems willing to back down. The government vows to push on with the operations until, in the president's words, the fighters are "annihilated." In an equally

determined statement, the PKK's senior leader Murat Karayilan has vowed revenge over civilian deaths caused by security forces.

There are three factors that make the parties unwilling to de-escalate the conflict in 2016. First, the government, the HDP, and the PKK have hardened constituencies. Second, due to President Erdogan's push for switching to a presidential system, the government is in a constant electoral mood, which makes resuming negotiations with the Kurds politically risky. Finally, the developments in Syria have emboldened the Kurds and heightened Turkey's fear of a Kurdish corridor stretching from Iraq to the Mediterranean.

### **Hardened Constituencies**

After the AKP failed to capture a parliamentary majority in June elections, Erdogan pursued a strategy of "controlled chaos" to appeal to Turkish nationalists and mobilize his party's own supporters. The strategy seems to have worked. The AKP captured 49 percent of the popular vote in snap elections in November.

The AKP seems to have won largely at the expense of the ultra-nationalist MHP. Interestingly, the AKP seemed to have also gained votes from the pro-Kurdish HDP. Election results indicate that resuming the fight against the PKK after June elections convinced the nationalist voters—who deserted the AKP in the last elections—that the peace process was dead. Additionally, the renewal of conflict also convinced the ruling party's own supporters that the country would be facing further chaos and instability in the absence of an AKP majority. Erdogan was able to successfully present the ruling party as the only solution to a problem that was mostly of his own making.

In an interesting twist, the AKP seems to have won some of the conservative Kurdish voters it lost to the pro-Kurdish HDP in June. The party increased its votes in Kurdish cities and regained 18 deputies from the pro-Kurdish HDP. In Diyarbakir, the unofficial capital of Turkey's Kurds, the AKP won 2 of the 11 seats to be filled, doubling its June tally. Frustrated with the breakdown of the cease-fire and disappointed by the HDP's inability to prevent the PKK from resuming violence, some of the conservative, middle class Kurds seem to have returned to the AKP fold.

As a result, the AKP has a base that prioritizes the restoration of law and order, which requires a heavy-handed military response to the PKK.

In November elections, the pro-Kurdish HDP lost the non-Kurdish votes that it captured in June elections. In the run-up to June elections, the HDP ran a campaign focused on democratization, transparency and equality. The HDP presented itself as "a party of Turkey" as opposed to an ethnic Kurdish party. The party appealed to the non-Kurdish segments of the country attracting voters from the main opposition CHP, liberals, environmentalists, women's rights organizations, and minorities. After the two-year cease-fire broke down in July, many non-Kurdish supporters of the HDP blamed the party leader Selahattin Demirtas for not taking a hard stance against the PKK. In November elections, the HDP once again became a predominantly Kurdish party focusing on the Kurdish cause. It has a hardened constituency that is not ready to give up fighting at a time when the Turkish government is imposing curfews on Kurdish cities, conducting mass arrests, and carrying out a heavy-handed military campaign.

The PKK has also been emboldened by domestic and regional developments. It has significantly expanded its diplomatic, economic, military, and political power both in Turkey and the region. The cease-fire with the Turkish state and the PKK's battles in Syria and Iraq have opened a window for the PKK to establish civil society groups and build local institutions within Turkey's Kurdish region. Relative democratization and the partial withdrawal of the Turkish security forces have opened up a democratic space for the PKK in the country's southeast. Quasi-state structures with legal and fiscal trappings, such as courts and tax collection centers, have emerged. The PKK has also stepped up recruitment of militants and has enlarged its insurgency capacity in cities via its Patriotic Revolutionary Youth Movement (YDG-H). Russian and American backing of the PYD forces in Syria has boosted the militant group's confidence and its international image. Its young fighters are more radical, confident, and less likely to cease fighting for cosmetic changes than previous generations.

### **Erdogan's Push for Presidentialism**

Creating an executive presidency has always been President Erdogan's top priority. His presidential ambition has been constrained by a skeptical opposition and public who fear that a presidential system under Erdogan would herald an increasingly authoritarian state. The public fears the new system would have neither checks and balances nor judicial independence. The AKP's electoral victory, however, has revived Erdogan's ambition. He is now preparing to take the issue to a referendum in the fall. The government does not have the necessary parliamentary support to take the proposed constitutional change to a referendum. The AKP currently has 317 seats in the parliament, 13 seats short of the minimum number of seats required.

Erdogan is confident that he can convince the people. His plan is to garner enough public support to pressure opposition parties into changing their position, which puts the government in a constant electoral mood. At a time when the government is anxious to please the public and rally support behind its presidentialism agenda, it is unlikely to de-escalate the conflict with the PKK. In fact, Erdogan might have just the opposite in mind. Since he managed to achieve his electoral victory in November by confronting the PKK, he might escalate the fight further in his pursuit of regime change in the country.

### **Developments in Syria**

Developments in Syria have heightened Turkey's fear of a PKK-linked independent Kurdish entity on its doorstep and played an important role in Ankara's wholehearted return to a security-oriented Kurdish policy.

Turkey has become increasingly uneasy about the emergence of yet another Kurdish entity on its frontier after the PKK-affiliated Syrian Kurdish groups established autonomy in northern Syria. The military and diplomatic boost that the PKK has received from the West and Russia through its effective fight against ISIS has heightened Turkey's fears. The PKK-linked PYD has effectively become the West's best hope for on the ground troops to counter ISIS. The West has worked with the PKK and Peshmerga in Iraq to halt the jihadi group's advance into the autonomous region of northern Iraq. The PYD helped thousands of Yazidis escape from the western part of the region as ISIS attacked. The PYD's success against ISIS has won the group positive reviews in Western capitals and media. Since the group started

its assault against ISIS in northern Iraq, there has been talk in Western capitals about removing the PKK from the terror list.

Adding to Turkey's concerns has been the Russian military buildup in Syria. Moscow's direct involvement in the Syrian civil war and the tension in Ankara-Moscow relations after Ankara downed a Russian jet have led to a closer cooperation between Russia and the PYD. Russian President Vladimir Putin offered to help the Kurds consolidate their territorial gains in northern Syria by linking the Kurdish held town of Kobane with Afrin. Reportedly, Russia delivered weapons to the 5,000 Kurdish fighters in Afrin in December.

Turkey is concerned that the weapons sent to the Peshmerga and the PYD might ultimately end up in the hands of the PKK at a time when Ankara is waging a war against them.

These three factors make both the government and the PKK unwilling to de-escalate the conflict. The fighting is likely to intensify in the spring when more PKK militants return to Turkey from their winter bases in the rugged mountains. Escalation of the conflict will deal a further blow to Turkey's democracy and harden ethnic identities on both sides, making it even more difficult to resume negotiations. It will also undercut U.S. efforts to counter ISIS, pursue a political solution to the conflict in Syria, and promote an inclusive government in Iraq. Without a rapid political solution to the Kurdish problem, Turkey will remain an ineffective partner in the fight against ISIS, derail future efforts to find a political solution to the Syrian conflict, and fail to play a constructive role in Iraq and the region.

To secure Turkey's full cooperation in Syria, Iraq, and the fight against ISIS, the United States must use its leverage to push both parties to return to the negotiating table. The United States has leverage over the PKK/PYD. U.S. cooperation with the PYD has been crucial for the group as it boosted the PYD diplomatically and militarily. Washington has influence over Ankara as well. After the crisis with Moscow and the ongoing chaos on its doorstep, Turkey has rediscovered its Western allies. Turkey feels threatened by Putin's actions and values its NATO membership and Western partners more than ever, which gives the United States more leverage over Ankara than it had a few months ago.

In my personal opinion, the United States could use both Ankara's current vulnerability and isolation in its immediate neighborhood, and several trust building measures to secure Ankara's cooperation. As a trust building measure, the United States could redeploy patriot missile batteries in Turkey. That would ease some of Ankara's security concerns stemming from Syria and show Ankara that the United States is committed to Turkey's security.

Washington could also eliminate another sticking point in Turkey-U.S. relations. Turkey has long opposed engaging the PYD, arguing that it is linked to the outlawed PKK and that the PYD fights alongside the Assad regime. Many AKP officials have recently cited the latter point in justifying their opposition to the PYD's involvement in the talks in Geneva. If Washington can convince the PYD to take a clearer stance against the Assad regime, it might be relatively easier for Ankara to drop its opposition to the PYD's involvement in the political process.

The PKK sees the conflict in Turkey through the lens of the developments in Syria. The U.S.-PYD cooperation in Syria, therefore, is crucial for the PKK's strategic calculations. The United States could use that leverage to pressure the PKK to de-escalate the conflict.

That in turn could give Ankara a face saving way to de-escalate its heavy-handed military operations.