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Opportunities and Challenges in the Eastern Mediterranean: Examining U.S. Interests and Regional Cooperation

Good morning Chairmans Deutch and Keating, Ranking Members WIlson and Fitzpatrick, and Members of the Subcommittees.

The Eastern Mediterranean today is at an inflection point. The ripple effects from the Russian invasion of Ukraine are one reason for this. But even before February 24, we saw significant diplomatic activity, sparked by efforts at cooperation over natural gas and, especially, aggressive Turkish foreign policy, followed by that country's more recent efforts to reset relations with a host of regional and global powers. For the United States, this moment carries both opportunities and risks.

The repercussions of the conflict in Ukraine for the Eastern Mediterranean are profound and diverse. While the Russian invasion has met with almost universal condemnation, relatively few countries have been willing to bear the costs and the risks of participation in sanctions. This stark divide can be seen in the Eastern Mediterranean, where most of the countries – with the notable exceptions of those in the EU - have avoided taking a firm stance on sanctions.

Admittedly, the lack of sanctions in North Africa or the Middle East is unlikely to have important impact on Russia; it is, however, useful for us in understanding the evolving dynamics of the region. First, it highlights the extent to which US influence has diminished since its heights in the 1990s. We are faced, whether we like it or not, with an increasingly complicated diplomatic field on which we must act. We must recognize that our foreign policy works best when we diligently coordinate with our closest allies, most especially the European Union and NATO.

In the Turkey, North Africa, and the Levant, support for Ukraine has been far more limited than it has been for EU member states like Cyprus and Greece. Syria, of course, is a Russian client, and has been fulsome in its support for Moscow, but even US allies and partners, Israel, Egypt, and Turkey have been shy about joining in sanctions. Israel, which has strong economic relations with Russia and is anxious to manage tensions in Syria, has dragged its feet. Lebanon, Egypt, and the countries of North Africa, have not joined the sanctions at all and are unlikely to do so. For them, as for much of the Global South, the crisis in Ukraine is largely seen in through the prism of economic fallout at home. A priority of US policy in the region should be working to ameliorate these economic shocks, particularly by helping to address potential grain shortages. Turkey represents a more complex case. Its position in the Ukraine crisis and, more generally, in the region, will be the focus of the bulk of my testimony.

Our relationship with Turkey and that country's role in the region has been among the most vexing and heatedly debated issues facing Washington in the past decade. It is worth considering in depth, not least because the next year and a half are likely to prove pivotal for the direction of that country for many years to come.

Turkey is, in many respects, an excellent example of the increasingly complicated diplomatic field on which the United States must operate; Ankara is neither going to be a reliable ally, nor should we think of it as a new enemy. Instead, Turkey and the US are likely to remain formal allies, occasional partners, and, more frequently than we would like, regional rivals. Neither Ankara's aggressive foreign policy initiatives of the past few years, nor its recent attempts at a foreign policy "reset" are likely to change that fundamental reality. Myriad articles have been written on the question of whether Turkey is turning East or West. From Ankara's perspective, this is a false choice; it aims to retain its ties to the West, which enjoying the benefits of foreign policy independence. It sees itself as developing into a global, rather than merely regional, power.

Turkey's policy on the Russian invasion of Ukraine is a case in point. Ankara's policy is shaped not only by the NATO alliance, but also by longstanding cooperation with Ukraine, and a complex relationship with Russia that is marked by both partnership and rivalry.

To take the most basic element of Ankara's balancing act first, Turkey is committed to the survival of an independent Ukraine. Turkey enjoys close economic relations with Ukraine. It condemned the 2014 Russian invasion and quietly advocated for Ukraine's Crimean Tatar population, which has strong ethnic, religious, and historical ties to Turkey. At the same time, like President Putin, Turkey's President Erdoğan clearly believes that the 2004 Maidan Revolution, like other "color revolutions," was Western inspired. Like Putin, he sees Ukraine's ambitions to join the West as, at least in part, the product of Western meddling. The general sense in Ankara is that, while they support Ukrainian independence, the West has exacerbated tensions between Ukraine and Russia.

At the same time, although Turkey views Russian irredentism with concern and has been willing to confront Russia on a number of fronts, it is not willing, under current circumstances, to join

in an explicitly anti-Russian campaign. The key reason for this is the Turkish economy, which is in midst of its worst crisis in at least two decades. The inflation rate is now over 50%; everyday families are suffering acutely. Because Turkey is facing elections in June, 2023, this economic crisis also represents the greatest political challenge the Erdoğan government has faced since the attempted coup of 2016. But the reality is that any Turkish government, under these circumstances, would have difficulty joining in sanctions.

Nonetheless, Ankara has made three contributions since the Russian invasion began. The first and, by far the most important has been the continued sale to Ukraine of Bayraktar drones; these, by all accounts, have had significant value on the battlefield. By highlighting that the drones are being sold through a private company, Turkey has attempted to shield itself from Russian ire. Moscow, for its part, has preferred to paper over this Turkish support for Ukraine. It is worth considering that, Russia, as much as Turkey, has engaged in a "balancing act" in their relations. Russia will attempt to keep Turkey neutral and, if it can, increase fractures between Turkey and its NATO allies.

Turkey's other contributions to Ukraine have been less significant. The closing of the Turkish Straits, under the terms of the Montreux Convention, to military ships received considerable attention, but the overall importance of this step is unclear. It is unlikely to have a significant direct effect on the conflict in the Black Sea. The Ukrainians do not have a navy to speak of and Russia's naval forces were largely put into place before the conflict began. In the medium term, the closure may create supply difficulties for Russian forces in Syria. In the event of a further escalation of tensions between Russia and NATO, it is also entirely possible that the closure of the Straits will work against our interests, undermining NATO's capacity to challenge Russia in the Black Sea.

The final contribution Turkey has made has been to attempt to broker a cessation of hostilities between Russia and Ukraine. Indeed, Turkey hosted Russian and Ukrainian delegations this week. Turkey has good relations with both Ukraine and Russia and, perhaps more importantly, for their own reasons, both Kyiv and Moscow see value in demonstrating Turkey's importance. I don't want to be too dismissive of Turkey's diplomatic overtures, but the reality is that any number of countries can play this role. Moreover, the potential success of such negotiations will have little to do with what Turkey does or doesn't do; any resolution to the current conflict will be the result of outcomes on the battlefield and choices made by Presidents Putin and Zelenskiy respectively.

At the same time, it is fair to underline the ways in which Turkey is at odds with its NATO allies. It has not closed its airspace to Russian flights. It has not joined in sanctions. Russian oligarchs, anxious to avoid sanctions elsewhere, have sailed their yachts to Turkish ports to as safe haven from confiscation. There are good reasons to believe that if the conflict and the sanctions continue for an extended period that Turkey will attempt to profit from them by sanctions-busting as it has previously done with Iran.

From its own perspective, Turkey has done a good job in managing the crisis. Turkey has, thus far, avoided antagonizing Ukraine, Russia, or its NATO allies and it has burnished its image as an independent actor. The invasion of Ukraine has handed Turkey a difficult balancing act at a moment of particular vulnerability. If the conflict drags on, or intensifies, Turkey's balancing act may prove untenable; so far, however Ankara has been able limit its risks and maximize its gains.

For the time being, we may not be able to get more from Ankara that it has already given. What I want to underline here, however, is that Turkey's response has been out of synch with NATO, a halfway point between the unified action we have seen among most of our allies and the general lack of support we have received from our Middle Eastern partners.

From the beginning of the crisis, Turkey has matched its support for Ukraine with criticism of NATO. While recent polling suggests that a firm majority of the Turkish public supports Ukraine, nearly half of Turkish citizens blame NATO for the crisis. Only a third blame Russia.

For those who follow Turkey closely, these results are not particularly surprising; they reflect longstanding distrust of Turkey's Western allies and ambitions about an independent foreign policy. Turkey's ruling AKP and MHP parties have both embraced and nurtured this distrust, but it is felt acutely within the opposition as well. Turkey's leadership believes that it is well placed to take a leading role within a new, multi-polar world and it is anxious to break free from what it sees as the hypocritical constraints imposed on it by its Western allies. This does not mean it wishes to leave NATO – it does not. But these ambitions and this sense that it has been misused by the West are core assumptions of Turkey's current elites.

Distrust of the United States is particularly acute. Some of this is the result of specific policies, the US invasion of Iraq and the SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces), but much is based in conspiracy theories and a belief that the US aims to suppress Turkey's natural development as a great power. These ideas are widely held within the current government's leadership; although the Turkish government is currently engaged in something of a charm offensive vis a vis the United States, we should be honest about the likely limited gains that can be made. Relations can be improved, but we should discard hopes of returning to close relations that we enjoyed in the 1990s and early 2000s.

The issue here goes beyond specific policy questions, like the S400s or the on-going prosecution of Halkbank for Iran sanctions-busting. Intractable as many of these may seem, these are signs of broader issues in US-Turkish relations. Some of this is structural, but much is based in fears of the West that have deep roots in Turkish nationalism and which the current leadership have fully embraced. That leadership believes that, in the final analysis, the West needs Turkey more than Turkey needs the West. It believes that the West in general, and the United States in particular, have worked to limit Turkey's growth into a great power.

More specifically, President Erdoğan has come to believe that the West is attempting to overturn him. The Gezi Protests of 2013, the attempted coup of 2016, and the current economic crisis… all are products, in his mind, of Western machinations.

In the aftermath of the attempted coup, the Turkish government detained a number of US citizens and local US consular staff. Through pressure from the US government, the US citizens have been released, but that pressure was quickly removed. Of the three local consular staffers who were arrested, Hamza Uluçay was released but remains under judicial control and a travel ban after two years in prison. Mete Cantürk remains free under judicial control pending appeals. Metin Topuz has been in prison and is serving a sentence of more than eight years. Like thousands of other purge trials in Turkey, the evidence against these men is fanciful or non-existent. What makes these cases noteworthy is that they were specifically prosecuted for work they did on behalf of the United States.

Similar dynamics are behind the prosecution of one of the most important Turkish civil society leaders, Osman Kavala, and a US citizen – and former US government official - Henri Barkey. Barkey is safely in the United States, but Kavala has been jailed on Kafkaesque charges for more than four years, despite ECHR rulings that demanded his immediate release. These prosecutions are, of course, important because of what they say about the weakness of rule of law in Turkey, but what I wish to highlight is the extent to which antagonism towards the United States and a belief in Washington's ill-will towards Turkey are now woven into the fabric of Turkey's political culture.

This basic distrust of the United States, and the West more generally, is one reason why I am dubious about the prospects that Turkey's current "reset" is anything other than a short-term correction, a consolidation of gains and a mitigation of costs in the face of a profound economic crisis. Turkey is ambitious; its leaders believe that they are at the threshold of an era where Turkey can step onto the world stage as a great power.

To some degree, these beliefs would be true of any Turkish government. The current government, however, has the unfortunate hallmarks of many authoritarian governments: President Erdoğan's leadership has become increasingly personalized and erratic and he takes unnecessary risks. As is evident in Turkey's current economic woes, the costs of this personalized and erratic leadership can be profound. It has certainly done US – Turkish relations tremendous damage.

One last consideration is that Turkey is facing elections in June, 2023. For Turkey – and for the region – a tremendous amount rides on these elections. Erdoğan is more electorally vulnerable now than at any point in his political life. It is in part for this reason that he is so anxious to diminish diplomatic tensions and thereby reassure markets.

While it is true that Turkish elections are no longer fully free, nor fair, it is also true that elections in Turkey do still matter. It is within the realm of possibility that the opposition will win, though its path to victory, and to actually taking power may well be fraught. At the same

time, it is by no means clear that President Erdoğan would accept such a defeat gracefully. Were the opposition to take over, tensions would likely continue on many fronts: no Turkish government would likely look kindly on US support for the SDF; no Turkish government is likely to fundamentally rethink its position on Cyprus. At the same time, an opposition government is likely to be less aggressive in its foreign policy adventures, more inclined to support rule of law at home, and more sympathetic to building ties with the European Union. In contrast, if President Erdoğan wins in 2023, the broad outlines of Turkey's trajectory will remain the same. The United States, of course, should respect the results of the election, to the extent that they represent the will of the Turkish people. It should also make clear to the Turkish government that a full break from electoral democracy in Turkey would result in a profound crisis in Turkey's relations with the West and work with the European Union to make sure that message is heard.

As I said at the beginning of this testimony, the Eastern Mediterranean is at an inflection point. The shifting nature of Turkey's policies, along with the regional repercussions of the Russian invasion of Ukraine highlight this. No set of policies is guaranteed to provide favorable outcomes. That said, we can help our Middle Eastern and North African partners by helping them to mitigate the economic costs of the Ukraine crisis, particularly the expected grain shortage. The Ukraine crisis has brought the EU and the United States together in ways that seemed unimaginable a few months ago. We should capitalize on this by working in tangent in the East Mediterranean. In Turkey, we should be remain alert for opportunities at cooperation, but treat overtures from Ankara carefully; Turkish charm offensives that are not accompanied by real policy changes are meaningless. For a true reset of Turkish – US relations, Turkey needs to demonstrate that it is willing to address key US concerns and that it remains committed to the basic precepts of electoral democracy.