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Dear Mr. Chairman and Subcommittee Members,

I am honored to be one of the witnesses of “Turkey; Political Trends in 2016” hearing at the Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia and Emerging Threats.

As we look back on 2015, we see that whether it is in foreign policy, economy, or military, there was no shortage of critical developments and cooperation between Turkey and the U.S. Over the last twelve months, the US and Turkey have worked together to fight ISIS, provide assistance to the 2.2 million Syrian refugees living within the country, and strengthen economic cooperation during the G20 summit. Most recently the US along with other NATO-ally countries stood behind Turkey in the downing of the Russian fighter jet that violated Turkish airspace in November, 2015.

Most of these critical developments took place at a time when Turks were witnessing an extraordinary political period in their history, which involved having two national elections in one year.

Turks went to the polls twice in one year to elect a national government, a unique occurrence in the history of the 65-year-old multi-party parliamentary system. Results of the free, fair, and peaceful second election showcased the strength of the democratic process. It is important to emphasize that the elections came at an important time in U.S. – Turkey relations. Despite their differences, the U.S. was in need of a strong and secure Turkish government that was first and foremost ready to cooperate in the campaign against ISIL/DAESH and play a critical role in Syria.

U.S. has always re-emphasized the close coordination and commitment to advance shared political, security and prosperity agendas with Turkey. It also provided constructive criticism when it was due. Following the election results, U.S. continued to raise concerns about the challenges of going through a period of domestic changes and developments. Despite advantageous election results, which ensured that there was a secure government in place to cooperate, Washington continues to urge their partners

and friends in Ankara to strive for being the model of democracy and beacon of stability and economic growth in a challenging region.

## **Turkey's Priorities in 2016 and Beyond**

### **1. National Security**

For over 30 years, Turkey has confronted violence by a militant, terrorist group known as the Kurdistan Workers Party, or "PKK." During this time period, more than 40,000 lives have been lost in Turkey. PKK attacks have once again flared up in Turkey since July 11, 2015, when the PKK announced the end of a cease-fire that had existed for two and a half years.

Some are attempting to mischaracterize recent events as Turkish hostility towards all Kurds. However, the reality is far different. Ethnic Kurdish citizens of Turkey are an integral part of the nation. Turkey also enjoys strong relations with the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq.

For example; in February, 2015, Turkey loaned \$500 million to the Kurdish Regional Government to help meet the budgetary needs of the government. In addition to monetary support, Turkey continues to provide military support to the Kurdish Peshmerga Forces.

So far, Turkey has trained and equipped over 2,300 Peshmerga forces and facilitated the transfer of the Peshmerga from northern Iraq to Syria through Turkey to fight against ISIL/DAESH.

### **PKK**

The PKK was formed in 1984 as a militant, separatist movement seeking an independent, Marxist-Leninist state. The PKK is recognized as a terrorist organization

internationally, including by the United States, Canada, Australia, the European Union, Japan, and by NATO. The U.S. designation has been in place since 1997.

Honorable Committee Members, I would like to draw your attention to PKK's recent terrorist attacks in Turkey.

- 221 Turkish security personnel and 89 civilians have been killed by the PKK
- 1,170 security personnel and 477 civilians have been wounded by the PKK
- 14 security personnel and 110 civilians have been kidnapped by the PKK

It is important to emphasize that Turkey made peaceful resolution of the PKK issue a priority. PKK's recent terrorist attacks directly target Turkey's security and unity. Upon ending the ceasefire, on August 13, 2015, the PKK announced the unlawful creation of "autonomous administrations" in four Turkish cities and has set up trenches, planted mines or other explosives near barricades, and converted houses into ammunition depots near the barricades. Since then Turkish authorities seized enough explosives, firearms, and heavy weapons to create chaos in the region.

In recent years, several Kurdish language television and radio stations have been established in Turkey, courses teaching Kurdish language and dialects have been created, and Turkish Kurds have significant representation in the Parliament and elsewhere in the government. Presently, there are more than 120 parliamentarians of Kurdish origin in Turkish parliament from various political parties. Most Turkish Kurds do not support the PKK. Nonetheless, PKK, which felt threatened by the ongoing democratic reforms, has abandoned the "solution process" by declaring on 11 July 2015 that the "cease-fire" was over. None of this potential for future progress can continue until the PKK denounces violence and lays down its arms.

## **ISIL/DAESH**

Turkey shares borders with Syria and Iraq. As a result, the threat of extremism is greater than any other country in the region. However, Turkey is determined to fight against growing extremism.

Turkey designated “DEASH” as a terrorist organization long before some other members of the international community acknowledged it as a national security threat. As a nation that has been dealing with various types of terrorist groups, Turkey continues its fight against ISIL/DAESH with determination.

As the situation in Syria got worse, ISIL/DAESH gained strength, and began to pose a direct threat to Turkey’s national security. Although Turkey continues to cooperate with other western powers to fight against ISIL/DAESH, increased presence of radical militants along Turkey’s 511-mile border with Syria constitutes a direct and serious threat to Turkey’s national security and internal stability.

It is important to underline the fact that Turkey has been the “Lone Gatekeeper” in the face of ISIL/DAESH and other extremist groups. Border security and control measures along the 511-mile border have improved significantly.

### **2. Humanitarian Assistance**

According to the UNHCR, Turkey shelters the largest number of refugees in the world. There are around 200,000 refugees from Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Somalia and others -in addition to Syrians. Total number of biometric registries of Syrians is tantamount to 2,207,936. Four out of twenty-five temporary protection centers (TPCs) in Turkey were set up to house Christians and Yazidis. (Currently, there are 13,942 Yazidis in Turkey. 5453 of those are in TPCs.)

Ten refugee camps for Kurds from Kobane as well as Arabs, Christians and Yazidis set up and run by municipalities. Total expenditure for Syrians is 7.6 billion USD /rapidly edging toward 8 billion USD. This is the largest investment made to date. Greater than the total 5.5 billion USD in 2015 budget requested for all 5 countries hosting Syrian refugees under the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan of the UN (3RP)

Total contribution received from the international community, bilaterally and multilaterally, stands only at 417 million USD. Operations conducted by the Turkish Coast Guard cost 5 million Euros per month that has to be met from national resources. Since the beginning of 2015, Turkish Coast Guard has rescued almost 55,000 migrants from sea. This number is more than the total number of rescued migrants at sea in last 5 years. Total number of migrants saved from the sea in Turkey between 2007-2015 is 78.880.

Under a November 2015 EU-Turkey 'action plan', the EU pledged to provide 3 billion Euros (\$3.2 billion) in aid for the more than 2.2 million Syrian refugees sheltering in Turkey, in exchange for Ankara reducing the flow of refugees into the EU. It also pledged to consider visa-free travel for Turks to Europe and to kick-start Turkey's EU accession negotiations. Turkey has announced it will offer Syrian refugees work permits in order to encourage fewer of them to migrate. Yet so far there has been no sign of a significant reduction of migration into Europe from Turkey.

### **3. Freedom of Expression and Media**

Freedom of expression and media constitutes an important pillar of human rights priorities for Turkey. It is a fundamental freedom guaranteed under the Constitution and relevant legislation.

Today, media in Turkey includes a diverse and wide variety of domestic and foreign print, television, radio and online news outlets. In Turkey there are currently 6,800 newspapers and journals as well as 263 TV stations and 1,058 radio stations that reach

national and local audiences. Each regularly exercises free speech without intervention from the government.

In recent years, Turkey has undertaken a series of comprehensive judicial reforms in line with both the international and the EU standards and principles for the protection and promotion of freedom of expression and media.

There is no Turkish legislation which includes any provision that would lead to imprisonment of journalists on account of their journalistic work. Everyone is equal before the law without any distinction as to their profession.

According to the Turkish Government, concerning persons referred to as “journalists in prison”, it should be underlined that contrary to what is suggested, these persons have been charged with serious crimes.

### **Academic Freedom**

Freedom of expression is safeguarded in Turkish Constitution and other relevant legislation. Yet it goes without saying that academic freedom should not be abused for political ends. Article 130 of the Turkish Constitution clearly states, and I quote: “Universities, members of the teaching staff and their assistants may freely engage in all kinds of scientific research and publication. However, this shall not include the liberty to engage in activities against the existence and independence of the State, and against the integrity and indivisibility of the nation and the country.”

It is well known that Turkey is combatting PKK terrorism which has been recognized as a terrorist organization not only by Turkey but also by the United States and the European Union.

The measures Turkey is taking in the face of the current direct and imminent terrorist threat to its security and stability are fully in line with its international obligations.

However, the declaration signed by a number of academics in Turkey on January 10th contains not a single critical mention or condemnation of the PKK's reprehensible activities targeting both security forces and civilians.

It is because of this highly biased nature of said declaration, issued at a time of extreme sensitivity due to the PKK's intensified attacks in the east and southeast Turkey that the relevant Chief Prosecutor's inferred that it went over the limits of freedom of expression and constituted a crime in terms of the relevant laws and initiated an investigation in this context.

Can you imagine a group of academicians signing a declaration here in the United States that underestimates significant national security threats, polarizes the country by altering people's perceptions of a terrorist organization such as ISIS or Al-Qaeda? What would your action be? Would you still defend their right to do so or would you do what is required by the laws?

In conclusion,

In 2016, the world will see the continuing growth of a strong, united friendship between the US and Turkey. Having experienced several ISIS bombings now, Turkey seems even more determined to put an end to ISIS related terrorism plots with the US by its side.

2016 is an important twelve months for the entire international system in solving critical issues such as the conflict in Syria, global economics, climate change, and global terrorism.

The US-Turkish collaboration will be able to spearhead the problem solving initiatives that will be needed to tackle these pivotal problems causing turmoil throughout the globe.



I would like to thank you again Chairman and Committee Members giving me an opportunity to speak at the hearing. Thank you.