

Turkey's Democracy Under Challenge

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Thank you Chairman Rohrabacher, Ranking Member Meeks, and members of the Committee for the opportunity to join you and discuss Turkey's upcoming constitutional referendum. It is an honor to testify before you both as a witness, and a former staffer on this Committee under Congressman William R. Keating.

As this Committee knows, the United States and Turkey share one of the most complex, yet significant partnerships within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). This critically important relationship has withstood both positive turning points and challenging decisions taken by both countries. In this way, the Turkish referendum on April 16 should not be viewed as a stand-alone, domestic event — rather, a critical moment in Turkey's history with wider implications for the transatlantic community and the NATO Alliance.

The referendum vote comes at a time of heightened fear, polarization, and trauma for Turks, who have endured one of the deadliest years in their recent history with a string of high-casualty terrorist attacks and a failed coup on July 15. As the country reels from the devastation of these repeated blows, Turkish citizens are increasingly affected by a forceful, post-coup crackdown against thousands in Turkey, including foreigners, well-respected journalists, businessmen, public servants, and academics.

This environment colors the 18-article constitutional package at the center of the referendum, which if passed, would transform Turkey's parliamentary political structure into a presidential system with few checks and balances. Amid allegations of improper voting procedures and physical altercations, Turkey's parliament passed this package of amendments on January 21 once Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's ruling AK-Party teamed up with members from Turkey's nationalist opposition party, the MHP.

The package includes fundamental changes to the Turkish political system that would: 1) eliminate the position of the prime minister and render the president the head of state, head of government, and head of ruling party; 2) grant presidential authority to appoint cabinet ministers and two-thirds of the country's senior judges; 3) permit the executive to pass laws by decree, dismiss parliament, and declare a state of emergency; 4) empower the current president to call early presidential and parliamentary elections, and possibly open the door to an Erdogan presidency until 2029.

Given the uncertainty over Turkey's future, the population remains split on the referendum and on President Erdogan's policies and response to the instability gripping the nation. While many ruling AK-Party supporters continue to see President Erdogan as a strong, calming force in a volatile region, others in the country view his policies as a vehicle for chaos and blame him for Turkey's declining prosperity and security.

Internationally, Turkey's partners and allies have been largely silent, despite accusations from Turkish officials charging Europeans with attempting to influence the referendum. No matter the outcome, Turkey's partners — particularly the United States — must prepare to engage with a Turkish state that is in a battle for its future. It is not only the referendum's outcome that matters, but President Erdogan's governance style and how the Turkish leadership chooses to move Turkey beyond the post-coup phase. The four key areas in which U.S.-Turkey relations will be affected by decisions made after the referendum are: transatlantic security, energy cooperation, economic prosperity, and last but not



least, democratic values.

Having the second largest military in the NATO alliance, Turkey already has a profound influence on international security matters. The use of Turkey's Incirlik Air Base, according to U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, allows for 25 percent more strikes against ISIS in Syria, and much of the United States' humanitarian aid work in Syria is based out of southeastern Turkey. Moreover, Turkey's location between Iran, Iraq, Syria, Europe, and the Caucasus puts Turkey at the center of some of the most unstable, yet critical hotspots in the world. Indeed, modern Turkey still maintains the age-old characterization of Turkey as a strategic friend in a troubled neighborhood.

Last week, Secretary Tillerson visited Turkey to “build on three mutual long-term goals: working together to defeat Daesh/ISIS; building stability in the region; and bolstering economic ties between [the] two nations.” His visit came on the heels of advanced planning stages in the campaign against ISIS in Raqqa. The final assault on Raqqa has stalled over a disagreement on which forces the United States should use to liberate and hold the ISIS stronghold. The United States would prefer to see Raqqa taken by a coalition of Arab and Kurdish Popular Protection Units (YPG), collectively known as the Syrian Defense Forces (SDF). However, because Turkey considers the YPG an extension of the banned Kurdistan Workers' Party or PKK — the latter designated as a terrorist entity by the U.S. government — they are proposing to use their own military and a mix of local, Arab partners to take back Raqqa. It is not clear, however, whether Turkey can adequately muster these forces beyond its recently-stalled Euphrates Shield operation.

Since the SDF has proven to be a reliable force on the ground in Syria, and given no viable alternative absent a major influx of U.S. troops, the United States has little choice but to back the SDF option. However, it appears to be waiting for the outcome of Turkey's referendum before making any announcement. While President Erdogan would have additional control over the Turkish military if the referendum passes, it is unclear what options Turkey has to prevent the SDF from taking Raqqa. President Erdogan's flexibility toward a U.S. decision to use SDF forces may change after the referendum, but it is difficult to predict his response. Regardless, it may be a turning point for relations and an area to closely watch.

The growing rift between Turkey and Europe is also a worrying trend in transatlantic security as it threatens to unravel a delicate balance between these two crucial partners. President Erdogan has already threatened to undo the deal that the EU and Turkey struck at the height of the refugee crisis in 2016. The agreement — while imperfect — stipulates that irregular migrants entering Greece can be returned to Turkey in exchange for expedited visa liberalization for Turks, a €3 billion assistance package, and speedy processing of refugees waiting to enter Europe from Turkey. Unfortunately, the EU has reluctantly complied with its part of the bargain, and Turkey, which already generously hosts 3 million refugees, finds its patience wavering.

The build-up to the referendum has already instigated intense diplomatic rows as some European nations blocked Turkish officials from campaigning on their territory, and Ankara reacted with accusations of Nazism and threats to reevaluate its relationship with Europe. The undoing of decorum between Europe and Turkey may result in long-term damage to Turkey's EU prospects and to NATO's common defense community, which demands consensus on decisions. If emboldened by a

victory, President Erdogan may seek to test Europe's limits even further and bring Turkey's EU candidacy to a halt, making for a very uncomfortable NATO Alliance. A loss in the referendum, fueled by conspiracies about European intervention, may be just as detrimental to the fraying Turkey-EU relationship. Regardless, NATO Allies will need to work to steady relations between these partners.

The outcome of the Turkish referendum can also impact energy cooperation with Europe for the same reasons that threaten transatlantic security. Yet, there is the added dynamic of Turkey's influence on the Cyprus reunification process and the negotiations' implications on the Eastern Mediterranean's gas reserves.

While Turkey has pledged to be a constructive force in this difficult process, a successful referendum could empower Turkish nationalists in the MHP who supported the ruling AK party and ushered the constitutional package through parliament in January. The nationalists have not staked out a position on negotiations, but their traditional views on Cyprus and the Turkish military's presence there may spoil a potential agreement and endanger this unique opportunity. It is not clear, however, if President Erdogan would follow MHP's lead after the referendum takes place. What is clear is that once the referendum is over, Turkey will have more time and attention to focus on Cyprus. If a deal is reached, reconciliation between Turkish and Greek Cypriots can finally come to fruition after decades of attempts, and Mediterranean gas can flow into the European market, helping to reduce Europe's dependence on Russian gas.

Similarly, referendum politics may affect ongoing plans between Turkey and Russia to build a second natural gas pipeline in the TurkStream project. This pipeline would bring Gazprom gas to Europe by bypassing Ukraine. A win in the referendum may help President Erdogan push the project along, despite environmental concerns at home and foreign policy implications for Ukraine.

The last two international considerations surrounding Turkey's referendum are economic prosperity and democratic ideals — which as Turkey's example shows go hand in hand. Turkey experienced growth and economic stability throughout President Erdogan's time in office, but more recently, the AK Party government's indifference toward democratic institutions, rule of law, freedom of expression, and media has undercut Turkey's lasting prosperity. Already, the Turkish Lira has experienced a sharp decline, making it the worst emerging market currency in 2017. This reflects market fears over Turkey's slowing economy and rising inflation. The business climate is greatly affected by uncertainty in Turkey, which is already experiencing capital flight and a reluctance by foreigners to invest. Turkey has the world's 17th largest economy, and any instability will have major implications for neighbors throughout the region. Post-referendum, no matter the outcome, the Turkish government must work to maintain checks and balances and help steady the climate to encourage investment and growth, once again.

Another issue that the Turkish government must pay attention to is any instance of foreign travelers or residents being caught up in the post-coup crackdown. These examples are growing and hurting economic prospects for Turkey. For example, the arrest of long-time resident of Turkey and U.S. citizen, Pastor Andrew Brunson, reverberates throughout the United States and has led to Secretary Tillerson, and previously Secretary John Kerry, to raise this case repeatedly with Turkish officials. Cases like Pastor Brunson's do not encourage a strong investment climate and do even less to help

generate tourism in Turkey.

It is difficult to foresee how a consolidation of power away from the judiciary and into the executive would improve investment potential in Turkey or enhance the democratic principles needed for an open, trade-based economy. The only way for the referendum to bring about more certainty in the Turkish economy is if checks and balances are restored and maintained under the new Turkish presidency or any political system.

Regardless of the outcome of the referendum, Turkey has always been strongest when it comes close to the ideal of a liberal democratic society such as during the earlier years of the Erdogan administration. Turkey's partners must address challenges to democratic norms head-on. Speaking out on these matters directly should not be done in a way that embarrasses Turkish officials or through one-off press statements or criticisms. Instead, the most effective means of communicating concerns is to maintain close high-level contacts between Turkey and the United States. Only direct U.S. engagement, a true partnership, and conversations about Turkey's commitment to democratic ideals can deter worse behavior, protect our own security, and bring Turkey to the table on critical international issues.

To achieve these goals, the United States and the West must also hold true to their own democratic values and principles at home. If attacks against the press, unethical behavior, or disregard for democratic institutions become commonplace among Western leaders, it will be difficult to make the case for their importance to Turkey and other countries.

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Meeks, members of this Committee, thank you for your careful attention to the future of Turkey and U.S.-Turkish relations. I look forward to your questions.

Thank you.