

Türkiye Post Election: What's Next?



MAY 7, 2024

**Briefing of the
Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe**

Washington: 2024

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The membership of the OSCE has expanded to 57 participating States, reflecting the breakup of the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia.

The OSCE Secretariat is in Vienna, Austria, where weekly meetings of the participating States' permanent representatives are held. In addition, specialized seminars and meetings are convened in various locations. Periodic consultations are held among Senior Officials, Ministers and Heads of State or Government.

Although the OSCE continues to engage in standard setting in the fields of military security, economic and environmental cooperation, and human rights and humanitarian concerns, the Organization is primarily focused on initiatives designed to prevent, manage and resolve conflict within and among the participating States. The Organization deploys numerous missions and field activities located in Southeastern and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. The website of the OSCE is: <www.osce.org>.

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The Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, also known as the Helsinki Commission, is an independent U.S. Government commission created in 1976 to monitor and encourage compliance by the participating States with their OSCE commitments, with a particular emphasis on human rights.

The Commission consists of nine members from the United States Senate, nine members from the House of Representatives, and one member each from the Departments of State, Defense and Commerce. The positions of Chair and Co-Chair rotate between the Senate and House every two years, when a new Congress convenes. A professional staff assists the Commissioners in their work.

In fulfilling its mandate, the Commission gathers and disseminates relevant information to the U.S. Congress and the public by convening hearings, issuing reports that reflect the views of Members of the Commission and/or its staff, and providing details about the activities of the Helsinki process and developments in OSCE participating States.

The Commission also contributes to the formulation and execution of U.S. policy regarding the OSCE, including through Member and staff participation on U.S. Delegations to OSCE meetings. Members of the Commission have regular contact with parliamentarians, government officials, representatives of non-governmental organizations, and private individuals from participating States. The website of the Commission is: <www.csce.gov>.

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Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe Washington, DC

The briefing was held From 2:06 p.m. to 3:24 p.m., Room 2322, Rayburn House Office Building, Bakhti Nishanov, Senior Policy Advisor, Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, presiding.

Mr. NISHANOV: Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you so much for joining us today for the Commission on Security and Cooperation's briefing on Turkey. The Commission is also known as the Helsinki Commission, and Turkey these days is also known as Türkiye. I think it is a record for using "also known as" in 15 seconds in a briefing.

However, before I go on to talk about our distinguished panel here, let us just talk about why we are doing this and why we are talking about Turkey. You know, there are so many fires in the world. You look around, you turn on the news, it is—there is a lot happening. Whether it is in the Middle East, whether it is Russia's invasion of Ukraine, whether it is something happening in China, there are a lot of things that, you know, presumably we would be paying a little bit more attention to. So why talk about Turkey?

Well, because if you look at it, Turkey is probably the most important least-discussed country in the world. It is very much part of the many things that are defining issues of our day. Again, whether you talk about the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Turkey played a role in that; whether you talk about what is unfolding in the Middle East, Turkey has a role in that; whether you talk about regional security; whether you talk about anything that is going on in that part of the world, in the OSCE region, Turkey has a role.

Of course, it is important that we understand Turkey is a NATO ally. We do not necessarily—the United States and Turkey do not necessarily see eye to eye on everything, but it is okay. This is what we do: We have conversations. We talk about these things. The goal of today's briefing—which is being recorded and which is being broadcast live right now—is to really talk about that, right; to identify those issues, talk about what is happening in Turkey, what is happening in its foreign policy, and to try to identify ways where we seemingly sometimes cannot move forward maybe we can find a way. There are many people in Capitol Hill who are genuinely interested and who really want to move the needle on this relationship, and that is the goal of today's briefing.

I just realized I did not introduce myself, but my name is Bakhti Nishanov. I work at the Helsinki Commission. I am a senior policy advisor. Among other things, I cover Turkey.

I am going to just mention that Representative Steve Cohen—Congressman Steve Cohen is—he is a ranking member of the Commission—he is going to join us. He is voting right now. Rachel Citron, his staffer, is right here. So she—basically, she is Congressman Steve Cohen for all intents and purposes. But he is going to be here in the flesh pretty soon, hopefully, and once he comes in we are going to ask him for his remarks—opening remarks.

However, we are just going to move on with our panel and then maybe—hopefully, we are going to have a good and robust Q&A session. For the Q&A session, just so you guys know, there is a mic right there. When you go up there, I do apologize; I realize it is intimidating to go up to a microphone and ask a question. But it is a small, friendly group of people, so please go up there. There is a little button. You hit the button and—so you can ask your question and it is recorded.

Therefore let me quickly introduce our panelists—and witnesses I was going to say, but you know, witnesses/panelists. We can then move on to them because they are the stars of the show.

Therefore I am going to start with Dr. Gönül Tol. She is the founding director of the Middle East Institute's Turkey Program and she is a senior fellow with the Black Sea Program. She is the author of "Erdoğan's War: A Strongman's Struggle at Home and in Syria." She has taught courses at George Washington University and at the College of International Security Affairs at the National Defense University on Turkey, Islamist movements in Western Europe, world politics, and the Middle East. So she has written extensively on Turkey-U.S. relations, Turkish domestic politics and foreign policy, and the Kurdish issue.

We also have Dr. Colonel Rich Outzen, a Ph.D. and nonresident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council in Turkey. From 2016 to 2021, he served in the U.S. Department of State as both a military and civilian advisor. He served as the U.S. defense attaché in Kabul from 2014 to 2015. He previously served as the deputy chief of staff for the training and development of the U.S. Security Coordinator in Jerusalem. He has researched and published extensively on matters of policy and strategy, with a focus on Turkey, the greater Middle East, and Central Asia.

Then we have Dr. Nicholas Danforth. He is the editor of *War on the Rocks* and the author of "The Remaking of Republican Turkey." Previously, he was a senior nonresident fellow at the—Wilson Center, a senior visiting fellow at the German Marshall Fund, and a senior policy analyst for the Bipartisan Policy Center's National Security Program. He has written widely about Turkey, U.S. foreign policy, and the Middle East.

If you do Turkey in this town, you know these folks. I mean, that is the bottom line. These are the folks who are—who help us define and navigate the foreign policy relationship with Turkey. What I really appreciate about this panel, is they bring, hopefully, a broad and sometimes maybe—you know, maybe they do not have to agree on everything, but I think that is why I thought it would be a good panel to have a diverse set of views on things—on matters at home and abroad for Turkey and for their relationship with the United States.

Therefore maybe we are going to kick it off with Dr. Tol if you want to—if you want to do your opening statement.

Ms. TOL: All right. Sure. Thank you. I would like to thank you, Bakhti, and the Helsinki Commission for putting this together.

I would like to—we were just—before we started, we were talking about the division of labor. I want to start with the domestic dynamics after the recent municipal elections. Turkey held municipal elections in late March, and it was a striking event for many reasons. If you have been following Turkey, last year Turkey held presidential elections in May and Erdoğan captured another victory.

Therefore there were three assumptions, basically, in this town that were made after the May elections, and the number one was, you know, elections do not matter in Turkey. Because 2023 was a very difficult year for President Erdoğan with double-digit inflation and there was a devastating earthquake, so the political context was ripe for an opposition victory, and yet President Erdoğan managed to win another term. So that was the main reason why many people thought that you know, elections do not really matter; Turkey has become such an authoritarian country that, you know, you cannot really change, you cannot really beat an autocrat at the ballot box. So that was assumption number one.

The second assumption was Erdoğan's supporters, no matter what happens in the country, no matter how bad the economic situation is, they are still going to stand by Erdoğan. That was assumption number two.

Assumption number three was Turkish opposition was so bad that they could never win an election.

Therefore March elections proved all of them wrong. The key takeaway from municipal elections is elections actually do matter in Turkey. Turkey is not Russia. It has become an authoritarian country, and political scientists call it a competitive authoritarian system where elections do matter although the playing field is so skewed in favor of Erdoğan—media is under his control, institutions are under his control, he uses vast state resources—and yet there is a real electoral competition. It is not fair and it is partly free, but elections are still—they can make a difference, so—and the most important takeaway is that Erdoğan is a lot more vulnerable than many of us in this town think.

For the first time, the ruling AKP came in second in elections since 2001, so that is a huge victory for the opposition. Now the opposition controls 60 percent—in the opposition-controlled municipalities, 60 percent of the country's population live at the moment. Those regions generate 70 percent of the country's GDP. So that means that the opposition now has a huge advantage over the ruling party in terms of financially and demographically.

The third takeaway is with the right candidates the opposition can actually beat Erdoğan at the ballot box.

In terms of implications, Erdoğan—President Erdoğan wanted to draft a new constitution. That is been his wish for some time now, and he mentioned that again after last year's May elections. But right now, with this election result, I do not think that is going to happen. He wanted to draft a new constitution mainly because he wanted to get rid of the 50 percent-[plus]-one requirement for—to capture the presidency. That is been a burden for him. He is been in talks with the opposition parties. I do not think that is going to happen.

The second implication is I think the elections now give the opposition—main opposition party a huge opportunity to beat Erdoğan in the next general elections, in 2028. Some of you might say, well, these were just municipal elections; how can you make generalizations about the general elections? My answer to that is Erdoğan had turned the municipal elections into a referendum on his rule. He campaigned heavily in favor of his—of his candidates. So many people, when they went to the polls on March 31st, did not just elect their local administrators and mayors; they were also voting—it was a referendum on Erdoğan's rule, too. So the election results show waning support for President Erdoğan.

Now it is up to the opposition. If they can actually prove that they can govern—something that Erdoğan—President Erdoğan has been very critical of, always said that the opposition just talks, they cannot govern, it is the party of a group of elites. So right now the opposition has a golden opportunity to shatter that image and tell the people that they can deliver. If they do that, I think in 2028 they have a strong shot at beating Erdoğan at the—at the ballot box.

My last point, I think domestic dynamics also will be shaped by Erdoğan's next steps and what will he do, right? He recently—it was a huge blow to his party. What will he do? I think he has to walk a very fine line. Why? Because why did he lose? Millions of his supporters stayed home; they did not vote, and that means they are not happy with how things have been in the country. Second, 1.5 million of his supporters voted for the opposition. Third, a big chunk of Erdoğan's supporters voted for the new Islamist party. So imagine you are Erdoğan. You have to devise a strategy to make sure you appeal to those different segments. It is going to be a very tough task.

The first thing he has to do, he has to fix the economy, and I think he understands that and he has taken steps to do that. That will mean that people will feel the effects of the new economic program, so he is not going to be very popular in the coming months as the economic problems deepen. The second thing is he has to appeal to the conservatives, to the Islamists, and for that, I think he also started taking steps such as he just halted all trade with Israel; that was a demand from the conservatives. The second step that he took recently is to introduce changes in the national curriculum in the education system and he introduced more religious content. To appeal to the third group that voted for the opposition, he is now talking about a softening in politics. But I will only believe when I see it whether he means real softening. I think we will understand if he decides to reform the country's constitution, courts, and the rule of law. I think that will send a strong signal to people who are really worried about the rule of law and human rights in the country.

Thank you.

Mr. NISHANOV: Thank you. Thank you so much.

We are going to—we are going to do the statements and then we are going to do a Q&A session. So, Rich, maybe we could—we could go to you next.

Mr. OUTZEN: Okay. Great. Thanks, Bakhti. It is great to be with you all. I am a little different in my approach. It is not that I do not care about Turkish domestic politics; I do. My wife is originally from Turkey. I still have a lot of family and friends there, so the quality of their experience and their democratic rights matter a great deal to me. But I am first and foremost a security and a geopolitical analyst, so that is kind of what I focus on. Of course, as I understand the mission of the Commission, it is to look at how these things all nest together, right—

Mr. NISHANOV: Yes. Absolutely, yes.

Mr. OUTZEN: —democracy, security, and stability.

Therefore security's an interesting animal. I have been involved with Turkish-American relations as relates to national security since 1990, and I have been involved—and that was a very young lieutenant, much younger than some of you are now, even though, I look, I only see one graybeard here, a little bit of gray anyway, so I am reminded of my age. But 1990 was my first assignment working in the U.S. Army with the Turks, and I saw the evolution of the society as well as of the military and our military-to-military relations over the course of about 30 years working in government.

Therefore one thing that often gets missed in the dialogue about Turkey—or Türkiye—in the United States, especially in Washington, is that it actually was probably worse even in the '90s and in the '80s. They had at that time—whatever the rights deficit is now, when my buddies in the Turkish military were running the show it was not a perfect democracy then, either. What they had—it was called a tutelary system where the military set the limits of left and right political activity, and occasionally engaged in very repressive practices as well. Now you can look at the history of Turkey and—as I do as a security guy, and find reasons and causes for most of those things. But the truth is it was about as far away as you can get from being a democracy in the sense of full human rights for the people, as well as electoral democracy, as any of the NATO members were.

Therefore, in my view, there is something like Maslow's hierarchy of needs that goes along with the democratization process. You have got to have security first and foremost. You have got to have prosperity. Once your people have security and prosperity, the rights come. Of course, the package works together, so you cannot really have one without having at least the others in progress.

Yet, when I look at insecurity at the state level, that is when I think that we need to first focus as an ally and in bilateral relations on shoring that up. For about 40 or 50 years, that is what we did. We had a very tight bilateral relationship, not without its hiccups; see the invasion of Cyprus and the embargo years in the late '70s. But we had over 12,000 U.S. military people and their family members stationed in Türkiye. We were developing not only their systems in terms of the ability to defend themselves and have an air force and armored corps, all those sorts of things, but also forming human contact where there was an acculturation of the Turkish military to NATO. A lot of that attenuated after the end of the Cold War. But I just think that is important context to remember, that Türkiye's still engaged in a transition from this tutelary regime and still really seeding its understanding of what Turkish democracy means.

Now, in the AKP period, there have been several shifts in foreign policy. In 2002, 2003, and even 2001 before Erdoğan was elected prime minister for the first time, there was a sort of euphoria in Washington and elsewhere thinking this was the guy that was going to end the tutelary system, and after this, we are going to have Muslim democracy like we have Christian democracy in Europe, and it is going to be a lot better. Initially, there was liberalization sort of as a major foreign policy goal, and also convergence with the West at the same time in military affairs. Türkiye, for instance, was very supportive of U.S. initiatives in Afghanistan. I was at the desk in our Office of Defense Cooperation in Ankara the night of 9/11, and we got a call from the Turkish military, supported by the government at that time, that said: We are with you, and wherever you go we have 90 guys on the tarmac ready to go tonight, and we will have 300 by the end of the week, and they did that. They came with us all the way to Afghanistan. They were in the first

countries in, along with the U.S. and U.K. They did not leave until we were actually already gone, and in some sense are not fully gone yet, although they have no military presence there. So my point is that there is always been this military strand of cooperation that is gone on, even though we have had some pretty dramatic swings in bilateral relations.

Now, my view is that the AKP went through at least three major evolutions in its approach to foreign policy, all while it was sort of gaining control of the levers of foreign policy from what had been a very military-dominated system prior to that. Just one example, the Milli Güvenlik Kurulu, the national security council, was always headed by a general, and that was gradually removed and replaced with a civilian council. They have a foreign policy and security committee now that is almost entirely. Now, they still have the general staff that is very influential and briefs Erdoğan and so forth. Still, the removal of a head who basically had veto power over Turkish strategic decisions in that position was a pretty important milestone. Also, the chief of intelligence used to be a general appointed by the Turkish general staff. The democratization of the intelligence apparatus, which has become an important part of Turkish security, was also a step in the direction of civilianization.

Now, while you had the civilianization going on, we also had things that were creating divergence in the U.S.-Turkish bilateral relationship starting, I think, with the Iraq War. To a great degree, the Turks dissented, and with the benefit of hindsight, I think correctly, from what was the prevailing strategic narrative in Washington at the time that we launched that war, which was about WMD and transformation of the Middle East through getting rid of the last autocracies there. The Turks told us: This is not going to be as easy as you think. They are not going to meet you with flowers, and you are probably going to break some things that will take a while to put back together. Frankly, they were right. So there was that.

There was—as Erdoğan and the AKP sort of consolidated control in 2008, '09, and '10—which is another topic we can talk about, how that was done—there was divergence on regional issues, specifically over the Mavi Marmara, the Shimon Peres event at Davos, and this feeling that the United States' blank check to Israel was not something that Türkiye any longer had an interest in supporting, as they had during the 1990s with what we call the trilateral strategic understanding.

Yet, it was Syria that broke—that was the straw that broke the camel's back in terms of our strategic cooperation. I will use this moment just to say another truth about Turkey and the U.S. in strategic terms, that it is always been cyclical. We have never had a golden era that was sustained. There is always been things that happened that push us to the very point of snapping, and normally have very bad security consequences for both of us. One of those was Cyprus in the '70s, and another one certainly was the Iraq War at the beginning of 2003, although we recovered from that a little bit more quickly. The Turks got pragmatic and, ultimately, changed their policy even as we got a little bit more pragmatic about our own.

However, in the case of Syria, we are still coming out of a trough in relations that was caused by an initial agreement that we thought Assad should go, followed by an utter disagreement about how that should go. When the U.S. rescoped its strategy, we have had great divergence ever since then.

Laid over that, you had huge insecurity in Turkey driven by the rivalry for power between President Erdoğan and the Gülen movement. It is probably not the time to go

into, you know, how that all occurred and what degree, you know, that human rights abuses have been involved, and all that. I will just say that there was a very real struggle—and few Turkey experts doubt this—for control of the Turkish bureaucracy, including the military, between the supporters of Fethullah Gülen and those who were willing to ride on the back of his movement, even if they were not devoted Gülenists themselves, and the remnants of the military from the old Kemalist core; and, frankly, with Erdoğan. That all erupted in 2016. It had been developing for four or five years before that, after the sort of falling out between Gülen and President Erdoğan. But the denouement of that in 2016 was the attempted coup attempt.

Therefore we had—at the same time we had major disagreements with Turkey over Syria and a number of other regional things, we had massive insecurity in Türkiye. I think this was a psychic wound on the Turkish people that has yet to be fully healed. I do not want to go on too much about that. I am happy to answer questions on that later.

However I guess, to end on a somewhat optimistic note, I did say it is cyclical. I think that what I have seen is after 10 years, or 12 years, where even fairly expert people in Washington could not agree on exactly what was going on in Washington. The Gülen phenomenon is one great example where it is very hard to get an exact consensus on what happened in July 2016. Of the U.S. policy community essentially saying: We cannot touch this. We cannot engage with these guys. We cannot trust them. They do not trust us. There is too much divergence.

Things have shifted. One of the things that shifted was, of course, the Russians ramping up their war against Ukraine in 2022. Our withdrawal from Afghanistan and the end of what had been a major cooperative project between the two of us was another. But to paraphrase Mark Twain, God created war to remind Americans about geography, and I will say geopolitics here. [LAUGHTER.] Because with all of these things happening that were injurious to our joint and common interests, there has been an opening and a convergence between our strategic interests once again.

Therefore I think that this discussion comes at an interesting time. Because we have come out of what was, in some ways, a very sterile, very negative period in bilateral relations, to a period that has some promise. I want to give—since we are working within the framework of congressional work today—I want to give real credit to members of Congress, HFAC, SFRC, and others who have been willing to listen a second time about things like the F-16 deal.

Because if my Maslow theory is right, by having a joint project, a joint cooperative project on security that is so massively important for the Turks as the F-16s—by the way, it supports U.S. defense industry and NATO's wellbeing—we create the opportunity to talk more about rights and about the quality of democracy and things like that. Because when you are not at dagger head—or, dagger points over the security issues, I think the other issues become a little bit easier to talk about and to nest.

Ambassador Jeff Flake, whom we will give honorary status as a legislator since he is a former senator also, has done fantastic work in terms of engaging on the hill and in Ankara to try to bring together some communities that had been very acrimonious for previous years. I am not going to paint too rosy a picture, because there are still big divergences of opinion over certain things. Again, I would just remind you in the 30 years, 35 years I have been watching the relationship, that is kind of always been true.

Yet when we have devoted ambassadors and members of the legislature on both sides, as well as people in the executive branch, and a cadre of understanding people who get the regional nuances, which I think you represent here as well, we find solutions. I think that in the current geopolitical environment, security relations between the two are waxing rather than waning. That this sets the stage for enhancement of the other parts of the mission of the Commission.

Mr. NISHANOV: Perfect. Thank you so much. Nick.

Mr. DANFORTH: Am I active here?

Mr. NISHANOV: Yes. Yes. You are good.

Mr. DANFORTH: Oh, perfect. I am not seeing the light here.

Thank you so much. Thank you, Bakhti. Thank you to the Commission for the opportunity to speak here. I will try to briefly make three points, which I hope can be helpful in finetuning U.S. policy towards Turkey. The first involves what the United States is actually looking for in its relationship with Turkey. The second involves how Turkish domestic politics will affect the options that the United States has available, and the third is about Turkish democracy.

On the first point, what does the United States actually want from the relationship with Turkey? The good news is I think the conversation in Washington has become more clear-eyed over the last several years. For a long time, as some of the tensions that Rich described were roiling the relationship and the community, the focus here was on who lost Turkey and how we can get it back. Increasingly it is shifted to, what do we actually need from Turkey, and how can we get that?

The old conversation often involved people arguing about the best way to restore some semblance of the traditional relationship, the good old days of the U.S.-Turkish alliance. Some people thought the best way to do that was through being more accommodating of Turkish interests, working harder to engage with Erdoğan and Turkey, and offering more carrots. The other perspective was that we would reset the relationship by being tough with Turkey, imposing more sanctions, and using more sticks. That this would bring Turkey back in line, so to speak.

Both of these approaches showed that they could be partially successful in the short term, but in the long term, neither of them succeeded in fundamentally changing Turkey's trajectory. The reason is that Turkey was never ours to lose. Turkey has its own foreign policy. If you ask people in Ankara, they will be very eager to tell you about it. There have been consistent statements from all across the Turkish government that Turkey has embarked on a new, more independent foreign policy.

Turkish policymakers believe that for much of the history of the U.S.-Turkish relationship, Ankara was too subservient to Washington and to NATO. Now they believe, in a more multipolar world, Turkey can best advance its interests by playing a more independent role, by balancing countries like the United States and Russia, as indeed they are trying to do in Ukraine. We can argue about the historical theory behind this approach. We can argue about whether it is going to be as effective as people in Ankara think. But at the end of the day, this is Turkey's foreign policy, and there is no evidence that anyone in Ankara is reconsidering it.

Therefore in this light, what people in Washington have increasingly come, and rightly come, to do is to think about not how we restore an old relationship with Turkey, but where Turkey fits into our foreign policy goals. What do we need from Turkey and

how do we get it? In this regard, the F-16 for Swedish-Turkish NATO -Swedish NATO membership arrangement was a pretty good example of how things are likely to go in the future. It was frustrating. It was touch and go. As Rich said, Congress deserves a lot of credit for finally making it work.

For all the complications, for all the strains, this is—this is probably the best case. At a healthier moment, this would not have been an issue. Turkey would have approved Sweden's NATO membership. They would have had some quibbles about it, but they would have approved it. The United States would have sold the jets to Turkey. We also would have had some quibbles, but we would have done it. Now both sides are increasingly leveraging what would have ordinarily been traditional forms of cooperation. We should expect Turkey to be doing more of this going forward. We should also be looking for ways to do this ourselves going forward. This means finding places of leverage and being prepared to use them when Turkey does the same thing.

This brings me to my second point about Turkish domestic politics because I think the domestic playing field in Turkey is going to influence what kind of leverage the United States has. Turkey has just had two very different elections in the last two years. As Gönül described, in the spring of 2023 Erdoğan won a national election for president and for parliament decisively. In the spring of 2024, the opposition won a municipal election very decisively. As Gönül said, this does indicate a positive trajectory in terms of the Turkish opposition. But it also reflects the different factors at play in both of those elections.

In that sense, I do not think the results are necessarily a contradiction, 2023 was a national election. Security and foreign policy were on the table. Erdoğan very much emphasized these things. He emphasized his nationalist credentials, his ability to protect the country, and the disloyalty of the opposition. This ultimately worked. It got Erdoğan elected in the national elections. In 2024, the elections were local.

As Gönül said, Erdoğan tried to make it about himself. He tried to bring up many of these same themes about national security. But at the end of the day, voters were also focused on local issues. They were focused on local governance. They were focused on the economy. This played into areas where there have been longstanding and, indeed, growing frustration with Erdoğan and his party's management.

Taking a step back, I do not think the results of this outcome—I do not think the outcome of these two elections is not necessarily that contradictory or surprising. I think Turkish voters behaved much the way American voters would probably behave. If you ask them if they want a better economy, they are going to say, of course. If you ask them if they are willing to sacrifice their national security, their national honor, and their national values to achieve a better economy, they are going to say no.

This understanding, I think, fits with how Erdoğan has been approaching policy in the aftermath of these two elections. He very much has prioritized the economy. He is maintained orthodox economic policies under Mehmet Simsek, to the surprise of many of us. He is also worked to improve ties with the United States, Europe, Gulf countries, and, until recently, Israel, because he thought stabilizing these relationships would also be good for the Turkish economy.

However we have seen the limits to these efforts as well. As Gönül mentioned, in response to the defection of voters who actually thought Erdoğan was being too soft on Israel, who are upset that despite his anti-Israel rhetoric trade with Israel was still going

ahead, the Turkish government cut—or, at least made a big show of cutting, all trade with Israel. Likewise, Erdoğan's planned visit to the United States. This was something that Erdoğan had been very eager for. This was something that, among other things, would have given the message that U.S.-Turkish relations were on track, would have reassured investors, and reassured the markets.

Ultimately, though, Erdoğan canceled it when he could not, it appears—other people here might know more about the details—but when it appears he could not make the protocol, could not make the optics work in a way that fit with his political needs. So, in short, the domestic situation in Turkey shows that with Turkey concerned—with Erdoğan concerned about the state of the economy, that does give the United States leverage that it should be prepared to use. But with the national security narrative, that Erdoğan has in place, with a foreign policy approach that Erdoğan is using, there are also going to be very real limits to how much leverage the United States can exercise.

My final point is about democracy. Going forward, relations between the U.S. and Turkey will almost certainly remain strained. Dealings, as with F-16 and Sweden thing, will become increasingly transactional. The views of Turkish and American voters will often be starkly at odds with each other. Despite all this, I would argue that it is important for Washington, and for this body in particular, not to lose sight of the importance of Turkish democracy, to be consistent in its rhetoric and principled in its actions.

I came to this originally as a historian. One of the things we have seen all too often throughout the history of the United States' relationship with Turkey is that when things are going well on the foreign policy level, the United States is often willing to drop its criticism of human rights, of democracy issues, in Turkey. When the relationship becomes more strained, for reasons that have nothing to do with democracy, we all of a sudden find our voice on that issue again and are eager to berate the Turkish government about its democratic failures.

This opportunism, this inconsistency is one of the many factors that have led to the strained relationship we have today. It is one of the many factors that have made people in Turkey very cynical about democratic rhetoric coming from Washington. So with this in mind, I would simply close by saying that the most recent elections in Turkey show that, whatever else, the Turkish people have not given up on democracy in Turkey. The United States should not either.

Mr. NISHANOV: Well, ladies and gentlemen, this is why we have these three folks on a panel, because they are just absolutely fantastic, and broad overview with really, I think, specific ideas about how to move forward, and how we make things work. Ultimately, at the end of the day, Turkey is a \$1 trillion economy with 80 million people right smack in the middle of two continents, and that is growing. You know, it is going to take over Germany as the most populous country in Europe. You know, it is not going anywhere, and it is only going to be present there, and we have interests that we share.

I think it is through conversations like these that we are hoping to be able to find a path—regardless of whether you fall sort of on a more optimist or more pessimist kind of camp here on a relationship, I think it is pretty obvious that the agreement is we have to find a way to work together because there are interests that we all share. Where we have not been consistent, we should be more consistent. Whether it comes to democracy, whether it comes to human rights, regardless of who is—whether we like the government or we do not like the government. Because those things are ultimately the values of the United States of America.

I am just going to kick off the first round of questions, and then in the meantime, I know—and the fine folks in the audience here, I am sure they have their own questions. I am going to—it is going to be a super easy round. So maybe I just—Nick, I really appreciate your view that relations between the United States and Turkey have become more sort of pragmatic, clear-eyed, you said. You know, it is more transactional. It is true. It makes me a little bit sad, but it is true. Do you think there is any convergence of values though between Turkey and the United States? What are the things—and, you know, we are not talking about next year, we are not talking about next month.

However, when you look at the two countries—as somebody who is lived in Turkey, who knows Turkey so well, and obviously you know, this country really well too—is there any convergence of values that, you know, we could invest in the long term? You know, instead of jumping from one—from one, you know, a situation where we do not see eye to eye, to something—trying to build something long term? That would be one.

Then, Gönül, for you, because you have written and you have done so much on this, can you talk a little bit about—and I do not want to make it more dramatic than it actually is—but the rise of Islamist parties in the local—in recent local elections. Sort of Islamist parties is one kind of, you know, a term that people tend to overuse and misunderstand. What does it mean for Turkey? What does it mean for Erdoğan? What does it mean for Turkish domestic politics? You know, you have talked about the foreign policy.

Rich, probably the easiest question for you is what does Turkey do with Israel-Palestine? With the Hamas-Israel war? As Nick and you have talked about it, you know, Turkey was on the verge of trying to improve its relationship with Israel. I mean, we are talking about potentially Israeli high-level delegation visit to Turkey, literally, you know, last fall. We went from that to now all the trade being cut off and whatnot, although, you know, it is obviously not as straightforward as the media makes it out to be. So what is the role that Turkey could play? How do you see that relationship because, you know, of your—of your experience in the Middle East?

Maybe, Nick, do you want to go first?

Mr. DANFORTH: Yes. I mean, I will try to—oh, there we go. I will, again, emphasize the point about democracy first and foremost. Whether or not it is currently being practiced as well as we would like in Turkey, whether it is currently being practiced as well as we would like in the United States, at the end of the day both countries—the people of both countries have shown longstanding, deep, profound commitment to their country's democracy. To the extent that both countries continue to improve on those democracies, it is going to make for a much stronger, much healthier relationship.

In terms of other shared values, that is increasingly difficult to identify. Increasingly difficult to make those work for us. You know, you mentioned Israel-Palestine. I think the United States, American, and Turkish people, both share, you know, a deep horror at innocent children being killed. United States foreign policy is more driven by a concern about Israeli children being killed. Turkish foreign policy is more driven by a concern about Palestinian children being killed. Again, the value is the same, but the way it is applied to this particular conflict has actually been a very striking point of divergence.

What I would say finally, you know, whether or not—well, to the extent that we share some very profound values, and often disagree about the way our respective countries apply those values in the world, one thing that I would certainly recommend, I would certainly emphasize, is that whatever happens in the relationship the United States

government look for ways to improve the relationship between the two countries at the personal level; the educational exchange, the individual exchange not be a consequence of the relationship breaking down. You know, a number of us who work in Turkey in the United States are people who grew up, you know, benefiting from, in my case, U.S. government-sponsored programs that sent me to Turkey, that enabled me to learn Turkish.

There is an entire—there are multiple generations now of people who got firsthand experience in the country and grew to love the country. May not always play out the way anyone wants in a foreign policy realm, may not always agree that we—may not always mean that we agree with everything Turkey does. But those personal relationships, that kind of education, is something that I think is ultimately going to be valuable for maintaining the relationship, for rebuilding the relationship in the long run. To the extent U.S. foreign—or, U.S. government policy can make sure those relationships and that kind of educational opportunity continue, it will be for the better.

Ms. TOL: Well, if I may say a few things about that—the relationship, and whether values play any role. Rich said something in his initial remarks. He said that when we agree on security issues, it gets easier to talk about the problems of democracy and human rights. I would like to disagree with that. If you look at the history of the two countries' relationship, and concerns over security, they always trump the concerns over democracy. Once again, we saw the same thing happening.

Therefore before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, a lot of problems between the two countries. We have seen members of Congress and people from the Biden administration criticizing Turkey's democratic shortcomings. As someone who cares deeply about democracy and human rights across the world, but particularly in Turkey, I was really encouraged by President Biden's remarks. He called Erdoğan an autocrat. He said that the United States should support pro-democracy forces.

However, here comes the invasion of Ukraine that provides an opening to Turkey. Now, we are back to square one, to the Cold War years, where although the Biden administration framed the war in Ukraine as a battle between democracy and autocracy, now he is getting closer—he is cultivating closer ties with autocratic allies. I think that really undercuts what the Biden administration is trying to do, which is restoring democracy globally, supporting democracy globally, right?

Therefore that is why, in a recent piece that I wrote, I suggested instead of framing—I understand. I am not naïve. We have to work with autocratic allies to counter Russia. But instead of calling that a war against autocracy, call it a fight for international law so that you can work with countries like Turkey, right? It is understandable why Biden and this administration, and also members of Congress, value Turkey's role because Turkey played a very critical role in the war in Ukraine. But that should not really mean that Washington will stop talking about democracy and human rights.

Because autocratization in a key country like Turkey is going to affect how Turkey behaves on the international front. There is a reason why Turkey has become a problematic Western partner starting from 2011. Because 2011 was the year when President Erdoğan consolidated his autocracy. So what happens inside Turkey's borders does not stay inside Turkey. That is why in the long term it is critical for Washington to push for democratization, to support pro-democracy forces in the country, that what—as we have seen with recent elections—are very strong, stronger than many of us think. So that is

why I would urge this administration and the Congress to keep pushing and fighting for Turkish democracy, at a time when Erdoğan is very vulnerable. So this is the right time.

Second, to your question, Bakhti, about the rise of the Islamist party, it has become—the new Islamic party became the third-largest party now. With the recent elections, it captures 6 percent. But it is still not a formidable political force. So I would not—you know, when we talk about the rise of Islamist country in Turkey, 20 years after an Islamist-rooted party came to power, you find that very troubling but in fact, it is not—it is not what you think. I think there has always been a group within—a constituency within Erdoğan supporters that are very Islamist, but also very critical of what Erdoğan has done.

Therefore in order to convey their dismay with Erdoğan, and his handling of certain social policies and policy vis-à-vis Israel, they voted for this Islamist party. It does not mean that they are going to stay there. So I do not see that as a worrying trend, because I think the overall trend in the country is there is decreasing religiosity, especially among the country's youth. So there is more support for secular values in the country. So I do not see that as a very critical political development that will have a long-term impact on the country's political trajectory.

Mr. NISANOV: Perfect. Thank you so much.

Sir.

Mr. OUTZEN: Well, just a word on my theory that when security works the other things get better. To some extent, this is an empirical difference of opinion. To some extent, this is a generational one. The generational one is as follows. If you saw Turkey in the late '70s, the '80s, and the '90s, you saw a country that was rife with brutality. Not just the military takeover in 1980, but also the disappearance and sort of quasi-governmental death squads in the '90s. You saw a country that was very poorly governed, both economically and politically, and very much less safe to live in.

What we also saw was the military-to-military context and American subsidy of Turkish defense that opened up the doors for conversations with military officers to make sure that the next generation would behave differently. What you saw, coupling that with the accession talks with the EU, was a Turkish military that was willing to cede power in the interest—gradually, in the interest of EU membership, and in the interest of getting its people to the same standards of democracy and affluence that we are seeing in the West. I saw that because I saw snapshots of the Turkish military in 1990, 2001 to 2003, 2009 to '11, and so forth. I have worked with tons of Turkish diplomats, and military, and other folks as well. There is been a generational cultural change in this. So, yes.

Oh, the other thing I will tell you—this is the empirical part of it—is that the United States has tried to force countries to democratize at its pace in this region for a long time. I was personally sent to three or four places I did not want to go to, to make sure that happened. It does not work. You cannot make a country or a society democratize at a pace that its own people do not want to. Now when there is truly an autocratic problem or a reform-oriented problem, we have ways to incentivize that. I am of the opinion that you get more with the carrot than you do with the stick, although taking into account Nick's statement that neither the carrots nor the sticks are the whole solution.

I think there is generational change going on in Turkey. I think the younger generation, even some that are wearing the headscarf and so forth, want more democracy than

what they have got right now. The generations that are coming up are not blind—they have never known a Turkey that was ruled by anybody other than AKP, so to an extent AKP owns those problems. So I see great hope for that change. I still think that this has to be nested within—you know, not telling Turkey: We are not going to kick you out of NATO, you are never going to get into the EU, you know, you are not part of us. Because I will tell you what that does encourage, is hedging behavior. That is going to drive Turkey into just regional partnerships that minimize dependence on the West out of fear of being punished. That is where my view comes from, both an empirical and a generational difference.

On the issue of Israel and Palestine, I think two things are colliding here. One is the generally pragmatic approach that this iteration of AKP foreign policy has had—and I think there have been at least three: There was this very sort of romantic, no problems with neighbors, we are going to get along with everybody, Westernizing trend, and that fell apart, whether it was because Erdoğan consolidated power or was it because of the serial disappointments of the failures of these projects of getting along with everybody, and everything that went on from 2010 through 2018/19/20.

But that yielded to a hard power unilateralist approach that was marked by Turkish operations in Syria, in Libya, in the Caucasus, and so forth. I think we are in a new period now. I think that Türkiye achieved some of its security goals with those military operations, and it is out of the hard power unilateralist mode, and it is into a more pragmatic mode.

I have a good friend at the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs who called me last week to talk about the recent visits between those two, Sisi going to Ankara, and so forth. Who would have thought that three years ago, four years ago?

Therefore there has been a real pragmatism that, as a manager of a network of alliances, provides us with some real options. This is colliding with—and as a realpolitik guy, you may disagree—what I think is the one fatal flaw of AKP foreign policy, which is that, on certain issues, it is very emotional. I think that there is an emotional attachment—this idea that the AKP, under the AKP Türkiye, is the voice of the global dispossessed, especially with regards to the Muslim world, and the idea that the West and Europe have not—they still control the levers of power, and they do not give a fair shake to the Global South or to majority Muslim communities. This is why they have this—you know, “the world is bigger than five” campaign to try to get the permanent members of the U.N. Security Council expanded.

But particularly when it comes to the Palestinians, President Erdoğan and AKP have a visceral and emotional reaction to it. Now it’s not just that they were talking about visits; I have a picture of Erdoğan and Netanyahu in September shaking hands at the Turkevi in New York. They were trying pragmatically to do that, but I think, both because of politics with the base and because these people—the AKP folks, and I talked to some of them—they really feel deeply, emotionally and viscerally, about what is happening to the Palestinians. So when you have this generally pragmatic mode and mood colliding with something that is emotional and viscerally felt, and plays with the base well, I think you get a problematic thing for a friend like the United States to try to manage.

By the way, if there was a Republican administration right now —and I swing that way politically—it would be a much greater gap created by this. I think actually the Biden administration and their approach to Gaza has been more compatible with what the

Turks and with what Erdoğan are trying to do, so in some sense, this has actually created the grounds—and you can see some of this like with the reported role that I have seen only in open source of Washington asking Ankara as a go-between to tell Tehran, do not escalate in this situation. Also, I think Turkey has been supportive of negotiations.

I do not think that is hopeless. I think in a post-Netanyahu government situation in Israel—which is going to happen sometime— [LAUGHS]—we do not know when that is—I think Ankara has placed its bets carefully enough to say, we still want to resume trade and other types of cooperation, but we cannot do it with Netanyahu.

Mr. NISHANOV: Excellent. Thank you so much. These were incredible.

Nick, please—

Mr. DANFORTH: I would like to briefly add something, picking up on what Rich said, because I do think this is a nice way of looking at Turkish foreign policy.

Erdoğan very much does want to be a champion of the Global South while remaining on good terms with the Global North, and it is a really difficult balancing act to pull off, and that—

Mr. NISHANOV: Yes, that is a—that is some great talking points on what stays in Turkey does not—what happens in Turkey does not stay in Turkey.

The other one, Nick—these are great, fantastic.

Does anyone in the audience have any questions? I have a ton of questions, but I just want to make sure that you guys have an opportunity. I know we have—yes. Paul? Please, yes, yes, please, if you do not mind—please.

Mr. OUTZEN: It does make it seem more official.

Mr. NISHANOV: There you go, yes.

Q: Well, thanks a lot, everybody. I am Paul Massaro, staff director of the Helsinki Commission.

Very interested in all of this, obviously, but in specific, the relationship between Turkey and Russia and, you know, Turkey's policy toward the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Does Turkey want Ukraine to win? Do they want some sort of frozen conflict? I mean, I—you know, it just—it seems to be a very difficult thing to understand, in particular, because, near to the beginning of the invasion, you know, Turkey was playing this incredibly pro-Ukrainian role. There were songs about Turkish drones—[LAUGHS]—among Ukrainian troops. Now it seems, you know, we hear more about the Russian oligarchs hiding out in Turkey and that sort of thing. So it does seem like things have changed, but—you know, interested in your views on that.

Mr. NISHANOV: Gönül, you want to?

Ms. TOL: Yes, sure.

Mr. NISHANOV: Then please chime in.

Ms. TOL: Yes, sure. Well, yes, Erdoğan had to pursue a very, very balanced approach, right? The initial steps that he took, yes, we saw them—many in Washington saw them very pro-Ukraine. Understandably, he immediately called it a war and closed the Straits, and now the naval balance of power in the Black Sea has changed; not because Turkey closed the Straits, but I think mainly—and Rich, correct me if I am wrong—mainly because Ukrainians did an incredible job in terms of sinking the Russian Black Sea fleet—ships from the Russian Black Sea fleet. So the naval balance of power has changed.

Yet Turkey's initial steps really were very helpful. They were seen very constructive by the Western world, and yet, we all knew that Erdoğan—there were limits to what Erdoğan could do in terms of containing Russia, right, because Russia is a very important partner—not just an energy partner, but there has been this difficult—we talked about Syria earlier, and in my book, when I talk about Syria, I talk about Syria as this place where Turkish-American strategic partnership died, where Turkish-Russian strategic partnership emerged.

Therefore Syria is a very important place and still remains very critical for what Erdoğan wants to do in Turkey as well. So that is why he really needs to work with Russia in Syria, and there are so many steps that he can take—he is trying very hard not to alienate Russia. So that is why it requires a very, very balanced approach.

Yet, on the other hand, what we have seen in the Black Sea suggests that Erdoğan always talks about his—that he is seeking strategic autonomy from NATO, right? But in the Black Sea, he saw the limits to that strategic autonomy because he realized that a revisionist Russia posed a great national security threat. So right now Erdoğan is very happy that Russia is not the dominant naval power in the Black Sea anymore, and he wants to keep it that way. That requires relying more on NATO, and that is what Turkey has been doing. That is a big change from Turkey's decades-old Black Sea policy, which was always to keep NATO out, we want to make sure that regional powers call the shots in the Black Sea. But especially since the '22 invasion of Ukraine, Erdoğan is relying on NATO more and more. So that tells me that he sees Russia as more of a threat, and that really pushes him to work more closely with the Western allies.

Mr. NISHANOV: Thank you.

Mr. OUTZEN: Do you want to take it next, Nick, or—

Mr. DANFORTH: Go ahead, if you—

Mr. OUTZEN: Well, I am just going to say the Turks have been very unambiguous about being pro-Ukrainian sovereignty over all of their territory, including Crimea. They have made no bones about the fact that they want to see Ukraine in NATO, ultimately. They have had not just drones, but since shortly after the—I think it was late 2015 when they signed the first military agreement with Ukraine at a time that nobody in Europe would, including the United States—no lethal aid, no nothing because we thought it was escalatory. They had a commando training agreement, they started providing small arms and training Ukrainians in Türkiye. It escalated with the drones, but not just the drones; with Kirpi armored vehicles—I have done some writing on this—and the defense industrial fusion projects like aircraft motors from Motor Sich, the Ukrainian company. These are long-term projects, so Türkiye, unlike the United States and Europe, do not have this great, sort of Damocles politically hanging over whether it is going to be there, and what you guys have probably lived with a lot.

Therefore I think that is a fundamental fact; that the greatest single disaster for Türkiye would be the fall of Ukraine and the end of Ukrainian sovereignty because then it would be a Russia, like in the Black Sea, and they would have a real deterrence problem on their hand.

The second biggest disaster that could befall Türkiye in the Black Sea would be an outright Russian collapse. Why? Because if you are Türkiye, you have lived through the Western countries trying to manage Iraq and trying to manage Syria, and frankly, it has not worked out all that well.

Therefore I think the last thing that they would want to see is the massive intrusion of NATO forces and/or NATO ships, naval presence, that sort of thing, in the Black Sea. They are okay with the littoral states, with Romania, Bulgaria, and Türkiye sort of running NATO operations. Now they do not want American ships, British ships, or anything like that.

Therefore they want to—by the way, they have a bunch of gas they want to develop up there, as well. [LAUGHS.] What they really want is for this war to end with Ukraine intact and Russia still doing trade with them, and I think that is kind of where their heart is. However, make no mistake, in private as well as in public, they say the worst thing that would happen would be an absolute Ukrainian collapse, so they do not want that.

Mr. DANFORTH: Yes, I would say as far as what the ideal outcome for Turkey would be, it would be a situation in which the active fighting has stopped, Western sanctions on Russia have been lifted, the Ukraine and Russia have reached some kind of peace arrangement negotiated, overseen by Turkey in a very high-profile manner that creates a situation in which Russia and the West are still deeply at odds with each other, there is still that multipolarity there that Turkey can benefit from, but Russia is also left weakened so that in the individual areas where Turkey and Turkish forces have gone head-to-head with Russia—like Syria, like Libya, like Nagorno-Karabakh—Turkey is in a stronger position not to, you know, wage war with Russia with some goal of weakening Russia in the long term, but simply to engage with Russia from a position of greater local military strength, which they will still try to use to ultimately stay on good terms with Russia. The goal is still to maintain strong economic relationships with Russia. The goal is still ultimately to work with Russia to reduce Western influence in Turkey and Russia's region, but to do that from a situation where NATO has kept Russia weak enough that Turkey can play both sides more effectively.

Mr. NISHANOV: Perfect. Thank you so much.

Anyone? Please. Yes, please. Yes, we will like you standing up there. That is—makes for a good image.

Q: Thank you all very much. Oh, is this on?

Mr. NISHANOV: You should hit the button.

Q: Thank you all very much. My name is Nick Camargo. I am an intern at the Middle East Policy Council. This has been a very interesting discussion.

My question was—I think it was you who mentioned Nagorno-Karabakh in the last question before, and we have seen a lot of discussion on the Armenians about their deep dissatisfaction with the CSTO, with Russia leaving them out to dry. During the 2020 war discussion about some sort of Armenia-Turkey opening relations, opening the borders, there has been a lot of talk about it, and feel free, any of you, to answer this: Would such a diplomatic opening be possible with Erdoğan still depending in parliament on the MHP—the far-right, ultranationalist party—for votes in parliament as part of his coalition? Would he be willing to, in any scenario, end his coalition alliance with them to pursue a groundbreaking normalization with Armenia, which, as far as I am aware, the MHP staunchly opposes? Thank you.

Mr. NISHANOV: Thank you for the question.

Nick, do you want to take it? Anyone—please chime in.

Mr. DANFORTH: Sure. Since the Azeri victory in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, we have been hearing talk that Erdoğan wanted to capitalize on this and use this as an opportunity to make peace with Armenia. It would be a great diplomatic victory for him. It would improve trade ties between Turkey and Armenia. It would position Turkey to be some kind of protector of Armenia, particularly after Russia was no longer capable of fulfilling that role. This was something that was talked about as a project that the United States should support.

The issue is that it has not happened, and I think part of the problem is both the Azeri dynamic and the domestic political dynamic in Turkey. Turkey thinks somehow that Azerbaijan is going to keep putting more and more pressure on Armenia, and that is going to force Armenia to make peace with Turkey on—you know, rapprochement with Turkey on Turkey's terms. Yet, as this dynamic has continued, so far what we have seen is Azerbaijan simply putting more and more pressure—military, and diplomatic—on Armenia. Again, at some point, I think the hope is that Armenia will then have to turn and accept Turkey's terms in order to get Turkey to call off Azeri pressure on Armenia. I just do not—you know, we have been waiting for this dynamic to work out. We have seen increasing Azeri aggression as we have waited for this dynamic to finally work out. It is not clear at what point Erdoğan has the political interest to, you know, actually say, to impose some kind of agreement on Azerbaijan. Again, so far it seems like it is Azerbaijan driving in the driver's seat, Azerbaijan increasingly pushing in more and more on Armenia, and Turkey simply waiting until whatever moment Azerbaijan is willing to reach an agreement that is satisfactory.

Ms. TOL: Yes, I completely agree with Nick. I think more than MHP, it is the Aliyev factor here because the MHP leader, Devlet Bahçeli, can be convinced, but I think it is—whatever happens, it is going to happen on Aliyev's terms.

Mr. OUTZEN: I saw a headline flash across today—this may be one that we have seen before also—saying that the Armenians say that a peace deal by November is possible. Both capitals—Baku and Yerevan—have talked about that.

I think the MHP would be very happy if a deal goes through if the Zangazur trade route—or corridor as it is sometimes referred to—if that—because, I mean, for the MHP, the Turkic world is hugely important—and if the peace deal includes not only normalization economically between Türkiye and Azerbaijan, on the one hand, and Armenia, but also the use—which Armenia—sorry, the Azerbaijanis and the Turks think was implicit in the peace deals after the most recent rounds of fighting—or at least the 2020 fighting—that there would be a trade route opened that trucks coming from Azerbaijan could use—Azerbaijan proper could go to Nakhchivan and on to Türkiye. This becomes basically a trans-Turkic trade route that will connect Central Asian trade all the way through to Anatolia, which the Iranians are very anxious not to see, and there are others who would not want to see it. But frankly, if the deal was sweet enough for both sides, it would lead to economic growth, both for the Armenians and for the Azerbaijanis.

Therefore I think if there is some sort of agreement on that, MHP would very gladly support a normalization deal.

Mr. NISHANOV: Excellent. Thank you.

Please.

Q: Thank you all for being here. It has been really informational.

Would you think that the educational implementation of the “blue homeland” and the conversion of historic sites such as the Chora museum to a mosque was a way for Erdoğan to gain back the lost popularity with the nationalist and Islamic bases? Just kind of within the AKP realm, do you think there is anyone else that maybe we should keep an eye on for the next, I guess, upcoming national elections? Thanks.

STAFF: Could we get your name and affiliation?

Q: Oh, my name is Tom. I am in Representative Lance Gooden’s office, and I am just a fellow. Thank you.

Mr. NISHANOV: Thank you.

Gönül, do you want to take that?

Ms. TOL: Yes, sure. The short answer is yes, and Erdoğan has been doing that for some time now. Since 2019, he has taken several steps. He withdrew the country from the Istanbul Convention, for example. That is a convention that was designed to fight violence against women, and he also took several other steps to appeal to his conservative Islamist base.

Yet I think the problem is—and we will see more of that. Again, he recently made changes in the country’s—national curriculum to introduce more religious content, so he is trying to appeal to and draw back those Islamist voters who went to this new Islamist party in the recent March elections. So that is, I think—I am expecting to see more steps like that from Erdoğan, but the question is—I think there is a bigger question here, and that is he really—even the Islamists—I mean, I think the post-October 7 context made the Israeli-Palestinian issue a core issue for this constituency.

Yet if you look at the polls, still economic problems are the number one problem for that constituency, as well, so Erdoğan carrying out more conservative reforms, I think, is not going to fix this problem. He understands that, so he can take some symbolic steps, but at the end of the day, that Islamist constituency—I think the fact that this new Islamist party captured 6 percent and it became the third largest party does not mean that whole constituency’s main concerns are about—that they have an Islamist agenda.

Like the rest of—other segments of the country, they worry about the country’s institutions, they worry about the rule of law, they worry about economic problems. So he might take those steps as symbolic gestures, but I think deep down he understands that he needs to address the country’s economic problems first.

Mr. OUTZEN: Just one quick comment on that—over the past 20 years of Erdoğan being in power, questions like this—why does he do what he did?—come up a lot, and there are five types of answers that are deployed. Sometimes it is the ego of the leader and/or isolation from other sources of advice. One—another is just normative, bad person, anti-U.S., anti-Western, pro-Putin, all that sort of thing. A third, which is normally pretty good, is for domestic political reasons, and that would be, I think, implied by the question. The most convincing one that normally gets left out is geopolitics, and I think in the case of the “blue homeland,” you have to look at the prompting action, in my view, which was the exclusion of Türkiye from the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum and the promulgation of energy plans that essentially bypassed Türkiye.

As a geopolitical proposition, Türkiye sees itself as the center of energy networks going from the Middle East to Europe, and through Russia, through Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, all this sort of thing—that is part of what it thinks is its value proposition strategically. So when it is getting flanked out—by the way, I think this had a lot to do

with why they got involved with Libya, as well, was this idea that there is a race for gas exploration and transport, and Türkiye was being left out.

Therefore I think the geopolitical reasoning was predominant with regards to the “blue homeland,” but I would never exclude the domestic political audiences either.

Mr. NISHANOV: Excellent. Any other questions?

Mr. DANFORTH: Just a quick weigh-in on that?

Mr. NISHANOV: Yes, please, please.

Mr. DANFORTH: There has always been this tension between Erdoğan’s fundamental pragmatism and his often provocative, inflammatory rhetoric. As Rich said, it is often difficult, sitting in D.C., to know what to make of the contrast and how all of that relates to Turkey’s actual geopolitical interests.

What I think the problem is in a lot of cases—and you get people, particularly people from the Turkish government, who are always eager to reassure you that, you know, whatever inflammatory thing Erdoğan may be saying, whatever rhetoric the Turkish government is using, it does not really matter because it is just rhetoric; it is not ultimately shaping Turkish foreign policy.

The problem is that it is not as neat and tidy a division, and I think the “blue homeland” is an excellent example of that. You know, yes, it is good that right now Erdoğan is just putting this in textbooks instead of trying to put it into action by conducting energy exploration in contested waters, in going head-to-head with the Greek navy—definitely an improvement over several years ago.

The problem is that if you put that in textbooks, you have a generation of Turkish children who are going to grow up seeing that “Mavi Vatan” map as their understanding of what their maritime rights should be, and then if in pursuit of Turkish geopolitical interests you actually have to sit down and negotiate some kind of deal with Greece, you are all of a sudden going to have a wildly disparate understanding of what an acceptable agreement should be amongst the Turkish public that is going to make it much more difficult to actually reach some kind of reasonable solution going forward.

Israel is another excellent example. I mean, look, Erdoğan used very forward language in describing the Gaza conflict. At a certain point, his constituents said, all right, you are talking the talk. Why are not you walking the walk? That is the kind of difficulty that this rhetoric creates.

Mr. NISHANOV: That is fantastic. Anyone else? Any other questions? If not, I am going to do one final round, and then I think we are going to wrap up because this has been incredible, super informative, and I think like I said, many, many takeaways from this.

I do not know who wants to take this one, but can someone speak to the Turkey-EU—I mean, is this—I mean, is this even worth talking about? I mean, should we even bother with this thing, right, that has been going on since 1989, and just so many other countries got in. Is this something that Turkey should just give up? Is there some sort of a policy to this? Or is this still a real leverage to get people, you know, to actually—because it did—in the past was used as leverage, and Turkey really believed in this and did go forward with some reforms.

Can we talk about it for a second, and tie it to that, refugees? I mean, Turkey is still home to the largest population of refugees in the world. It has been—it does come with a lot of challenges. It did not do everything perfectly, but how do we—those two things are—you know, maybe potentially are connected; maybe they are not. But can we

talk about it? I do not know who wants to take it, but Gönül, if you want, and then Rich and—

Ms. TOL: Yes. No, they are—they are very much connected, and I am afraid they are—they have become the same thing. So when we—from the European countries' point of view when they talk about Turkey, what they see is this country that will keep the refugees out of Europe. That is what they see in Turkey nowadays.

There was a time, I think, in the 1990s and early 2000s, when both governments and also Turkish people believed in Turkey's EU prospects, and that was a time when the European Union had invested in Turkey's democracy and human rights. So that became one of the main drivers of Turkey's reform process. So those were the years when the EU played a constructive role in Turkey.

Now Erdoğan—and that was not entirely Turkey's fault, by the way—he gave up on the idea of Turkey becoming an EU member. I think that was mostly because of countries like Germany and France that started talking about a privileged partnership instead of full membership. So that created a huge nationalist backlash in Turkey, and that really—and other things happened along the way which made Erdoğan believe that embracing Turkey's EU membership was not going to be good for his efforts to consolidate power.

Therefore instead, Erdoğan took Turkey's EU membership and used that to consolidate his autocracy. In 2015, the European Union signed this refugee deal with Turkey, and the EU, too—I mean, Erdoğan used that for his own pragmatic reasons, and from 2015 onwards, the EU also used Turkey for its own pragmatic reasons. Now it has become a very transactional relationship, and the EU is not the EU that once drove Turkey's democratization anymore. It greatly helped Erdoğan consolidate his autocracy, and now, with this refugee deal, it is helping him strengthen that autocracy, I think.

Mr. NISHANOV: Thank you.

Mr. OUTZEN: Just one comment—I agree with everything that Gönül said. I think EU-Turkey relations have, maybe since the beginning, been what I would characterize as a pious fiction, though, which is to say that both sides say it because there is value in both sides saying it, but neither side really believes it.

I think most Europeans do not really want Turkey in; it is just too big—80 million people with free labor and free movement, cultural differences are big, and so I think Europe has no appetite for it.

Then frankly, I think if most Turks really thought about Brussels, you know, dictating the height of minarets in Central Anatolia, they really do not want that either, so—but there was therapeutic value, and there is also value—ideational value and, yes, I mean, it drove reforms for a generation in Turkey.

Therefore I think they should still both pretend.

Mr. NISHANOV: Yes, perfect.

Mr. DANFORTH: Nothing to add to that. [LAUGHTER.]

Mr. NISHANOV: Listen, this has been tremendous. There was a recent article, I think, in *The Economist* about how Turkey is now the second largest exporter of shows—TV shows—so I guess the last question is what is your recommendation for Netflix TV shows, Turkish TV shows? Any good one you have seen recently? No.

Rich? I knew I could count on you on this.

Mr. OUTZEN: Well, so I mean—

Ms. TOL: He is secretly watching Turkish television. [LAUGHTER.]

Mr. OUTZEN: Well, I—no, I am in a mixed Turkish-American household, so I am going to just go with my wife's choices on this one—

Mr. NISHANOV: There you go. There you go.

Mr. OUTZEN: —because for me, I like "Ertuğrul" and all the old Ottoman sultans and the historical ones. But "Kulüp," which is "The Club."

Mr. NISHANOV: Oh, okay. Yes, yes, it has been—

Mr. OUTZEN: It is about 1950s—

Ms. TOL: Oh, that is great, yes. Yes.

Mr. OUTZEN: —cosmopolitan, and it is—yes. So this one is —I think shows some of the very unique socio-cultural makeup of Istanbul, especially in the '50s, and a pretty critical era in terms of where Turkish post-World War II society was headed, and it is very entertaining.

Mr. NISHANOV: Excellent. I mean, if there is one takeaway from this whole thing—I mean, forget about everything else—but this is the takeaway, right? [LAUGHTER.] This is the main reason why we did this.

I do not know if you guys have anything, but—

Ms. TOL: No, "The Club" is great, and there was this other one, "Ethos." Do you remember, that—

Mr. OUTZEN: I did not see that one.

Ms. TOL: —really talked about—

Mr. DANFORTH: Was that—[INAUDIBLE]?

Ms. TOL: No, this—yes, it really talked about these ideological identity wars in the country. It really captured that, so I thought that was fascinating.

Mr. NISHANOV: There you go. There you go, folks. Nick? Nick?

Mr. DANFORTH: No, that was all—

Mr. NISHANOV: Oh, maybe you have a good podcast recommendation because Nick hosts a podcast.

Mr. DANFORTH: I will, yes, if—well—

Mr. OUTZEN: Shameless plug. [LAUGHTER.]

Mr. NISHANOV: Yes, yes. It is okay, it is—

Mr. DANFORTH: Shameless plug: If you do not want Netflix content but want Ottoman history podcast content, I would recommend the Ottoman History podcast. It is not just Ottoman history; it is the modern Middle East. It is contemporary Turkey. Leading Ottoman history podcast on the internet; highly recommend it.

Mr. NISHANOV: Boom. There you go, folks. This is—and that is a wrap.

Thank you so much to our panelists. We are going to continue these conversations about Turkey. It is super important to be ignored, so hopefully next time we are going to do it maybe in a hearing context, and thank you so much.

Ms. TOL: Thank you. [APPLAUSE.]

Mr. OUTZEN: That was fun, guys.

Ms. TOL: Thank you.

[Whereupon, at 3:24 p.m., the briefing ended.]

