

Testimony to The Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (The Helsinki Commission) Hearing on “At What Cost? The Human Toll of Turkey’s Policy at Home and Abroad”

Thursday, October 31, 2019
10:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.
Rayburn House Office Building
Room 2200

Talip Kucukcan
Professor of Sociology
Marmara University, Istanbul, Turkey
Tkucukcan@gmail.com

In this hearing, we will be debating domestic and foreign policy developments concerning Turkey that deserves a closer look as a US ally for decades and as member of the NATO, OSCE and the Council of Europe. However, a healthy debate should be grounded on rationally described political context that would lead us to understand the specific cases without becoming hostage to ideological bias, prejudice, misinformation and demonization of others. Therefore, I would like to start with few observations on the current regional and global context that would help us to better understand Turkey’s policies at home and abroad.

Modern nation states and democracies have been increasingly facing new challenges in recent years such as rising populism, far-right extremism, religious radicalism, ethnic separatism, sectarian conflicts, collective violence and terrorism that are all detrimental to the rule of law, human rights and democratic institutions. Moreover, retreat from multilateralism, erosion of rule based international order and support provided to the authoritarian political regimes have also damaging impact on functioning of democratic institutions. Today the whole World is witnessing rising ethnic, religious and sectarian conflicts, growing anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, hate speech, terrorist violence, and displacement of people. Responses to such developments differ from one country to another depending on their political culture and history as well as their geo-political positions and national security concerns. When faced with existential threats surrounded by armed groups, terrorist organizations and failed or failing states, all states feel obliged to protect interests of their citizens and defend their borders more actively. This is in fact a constitutional obligation of all states towards their own citizens. Protection of lives of citizens and defending borders of the country are the preconditions for

the national security and independence of the country without which establishment of the rule of law and consolidation of democratic institutions are not simply possible.

This is the context which we should all take into consideration when debating Turkey or any other country that is located especially in a volatile, un-stable and conflict-ridden region. Otherwise we would run the risk of not seeing the full picture but only a small portion of it that would lead all of us to strategic blindness about our partners, friends and allies.

Turkey's Foreign Policy

Let us first address Turkey's policy abroad, especially in Syria. Turkey's Operation Peace Spring, that was launched following President Trump's consent, has created a heated debate and exchange of strong views. Turkey's operation in North East Syria started on 9 October 2019 and paused 8 days later following talks with the US (18 October 2019) and Russia (22 October 2019). However, debates either supporting or condemning the operation have been continuing up to this day and it is likely that such reflections will continue for a long time because of potential consequences of the operation. Debates on Turkey's operation have indeed centred around *a)* the objectives of Turkey, *b)* the future of Syria and Syrians under temporary protection living in Turkey, *c)* Turkey-US relations and the regional order and *d)* counterterrorism operations against Daesh and the PKK linked PYD/YPG terrorist organization that have been posing a national security threat to Turkey.

Turkey repeatedly stated that the Operation Peace Spring draws on international law for self-defence and will be limited to: *First*, creating a safe-zone for voluntary resettlement of Syrian refugees in their own country; *second* removal of armed groups linked to PKK (which the US, NATO, the European Union recognize as terrorist organization) from the immediate borderline of Turkey and *third*, contributing to preservation of territorial integrity of Syria as the disintegration of this country would follow emergence of new armed non-state actors, a greater number of displaced people and broader human suffering and security threats that would threaten the whole Middle East. Despite such clear cut statements, Turkey faces accusations that Syrians will be forced to return to operation zone and a demographic engineering will take place. The evidence on the ground suggests that these claims are founded on false presumptions because there have been no demographic shifts following previous operations, namely The Euphrates Shield in 2016 and Olive Branch in 2018. Following these two operations only 340 000 Syrians, out of 3.6 million, have voluntarily returned to Cerablus, al- Bab and Dabiq

liberated from the Deash terrorist organization which lost 3000 members during Turkey's operation, and to Afrin region following Olive Branch Operation against PKK linked groups. As these two previous cases testify, Turkey did not force Syrian refugees to return Cerablus and Afrin. They returned on their own will once relatively stable environment was established which serve as a good model for North East Syria where Turkey is trying to establish a safe zone for voluntary return. It is not going to be an easy decision for Syrians because what the future holds is still uncertain. Despite the heavy burden that Turkey has been shouldering in the last 9 years in hosting millions of displaced persons, Turkey have repeatedly assured Syrian refugees and international community that none will be forced to return until a reasonable level of security and stability are established.

Turkey is also accused of intending a demographic engineering in places where operations took place in Syria. There has been no meaningful demographic change in Cerablus and Afrin regions, nor any ethnic cleansing took place. Some critics of Turkey falsely claim that Turkey will pursue a policy of ethnic cleansing following the Peace Spring Operation to cast doubt on Turkey's policy and de-legitimize its actions. Both the US and Russia confirmed that armed groups linked to PKK have withdrawn from the designated region, which means that Turkey will only monitor the implementation of the agreements with its allies rather than actively continue the military operation. Given the reality on the ground today, claims that Turkey aimed at ethnic cleansing was nothing more than a smear campaign against a country that opened its borders to 5 million refugees regardless of their ethnic, religious and sectarian identity. The current state of affairs on the ground also testify that Turkey's operation was not against the Kurds in Syria as some intentionally tried to portray but to PKK linked terrorist groups. No country on earth will turn a blind eye to the emergence of an armed group on its immediate borders that would constitute an existential threat. As the US will never allow Daesh terrorists to carve a land along its border, Turkey will also behave like the US when it comes to PKK linked PYD/YPG terrorists along the Syrian borders. In the eyes of Turkish authorities and Turkish public, PYD/YPG cannot be legitimized simply because they are claimed to have fought against Deash.

Refugees who are forced to flee from Syria to Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon have the right to return to their homeland. International community and leading powers such as the US have moral, ethical and humanitarian responsibility to facilitate the safe return of Syrians back home. Turkey has been doing more than its own share and should be supported by US and other allies

if we all genuinely believe that Syrians also do deserve dignified life under a legitimate political regime that would respect the rule of law, human rights and freedoms.

Those who are critical of Turkey's last operation claimed demographic transition in the region without any credible evidence from the ground. In fact, a certain degree of demographic change is taking place in Turkey to which no government can remain indifferent. Let us see how presence of large number of Syrians is changing demographic characteristics of some cities in Turkey. In Kilis for example, Syrian population is almost half of the city's population today. In Hatay, 447 000 Syrians live, that amounts to 27.8 percent of the total population. There is a similar picture in Şanlıurfa where 22.8 percent of the city's population is now Syrian. In Adana, Mersin and Osmaniye where 10 to 11 percent of the population is also from Syria. Changing social structures in those cities should remind us works of the Chicago School of Sociology in 1960s in the US to manage cultural, ethnic and sectarian diversity and identity fluctuations. The high volume of Syrian refugees and thus their impact and pressure on infrastructure such as transportation, housing, employment, health and education services in several cities lead to legitimate concerns for Turkey which therefore seeks facilitating voluntary return of Syrians once safe zones are established. In any case, Turkey is open to co-operation on resolving the refugee crisis through humanitarian diplomacy and willing to look at favourably at projects that would improve the quality of their lives both in Turkey and beyond. In fact, Turkey's migration deal with the European Union took place on such humanitarian grounds.

Turkey's Policy at Home

Turkey's domestic political developments and evolution of its democratic institutions should be discussed against a background of single party period lasting from 1923 to 1950 and military interventions since 1960s which took place almost every ten years. Turkey's democracy can be described as an "interrupted democracy" which has been gradually evolving despite interventions by the military, that has been supported by certain sections of the academia, bureaucracy, political elite, media and business circles who desired to preserve the homogenizing single party ideology and authoritarian secularism. Military coups left a lasting influence on Turkey's democratic culture and paralysed functioning of democratic institutions such as the Parliament and the judiciary. There was direct or indirect military interventions in 1960, 1971, 1982, 1997 and 2007. Interventions and interruption in Turkish democracy took different forms. The ruling Justice and Development Party which came to power through fair

and transparent elections in 2002, for example, faced court case for closure in 2008 on the claim the party violated the principle of separation of religion and state in Turkey. The JDP survived by a margin of only one vote used against the closure (6 to 5) in the Constitutional Court ruling.

The last attempt to overthrow the democratically elected government in Turkey took place on July the 15th 2016, led by members of the Fethullah Gulen Movement / Gulenist Network whose followers have infiltrated into many public institutions such as the military, judiciary and the law enforcement. The Gulenist Network which presented itself as a moderate Islamic movement to win hearts and minds of people in Turkey and abroad was caught on site when they launched a coup attempt on July 15th 2016. There are many testimonies and court evidence that many leading figures in the coup attempt had close links with the Gulenist Network that Turkey branded as a terrorist organization. People from all walks of life and across political and ideological divide have strongly resisted the violent onslaught and defended democratic institutions, elected government and their freedoms. In fact, the President Erdoğan played a leading role by calling upon all Turkish citizens to rise up against the coup attempt. Resistance to the coup attempt in the face of unlimited violence by heavy arms, tanks and warplanes targeting civilians was a historical turning point in Turkey's turbulent political history. People defended democracy while the Grand National Assembly of Turkey, Presidential Compound, law makers and civilians were literally bombed in the country. Back then, I was also a law maker and the Parliament building that has been the bastion of representative democracy has also been targeted.

Can anyone participating in this Hearing imagine that this very building we are in and the White House are being attacked with helicopters and fighter jets by some members of US military force? I guess the answer obviously is "no". However, this exactly what has happened in Turkey on July 15th 2016. 250 people lost their lives and more than 2000 people were wounded during the coup attempt. It is against this background that the state of emergency was declared in the country and then trials have started after the collection of testimonies, witness statements and cross-examinations. It is in this context that Turkey is requesting from the US to repatriate Fethullah Gulen to Turkey who is believed to be mastermind behind the coup attempt.

The trials of those who directly took part in the coup attempt or of those who supported them were and are open to international observers. The court decisions can be challenged in higher courts. Those who are convicted by lower courts can apply to the Constitutional Court and also go up to the European Court of Human Rights. Turkey is strongly criticized because of the measures it has taken against the coup plotters and court procedures that took longer time than

expected. As pointed out earlier, coups and interventions in democracy had a disruptive effect on the functioning of democratic institutions. July the 15th coup attempt despite its failure had a similar impact because more than 3000 judges and prosecutors were discharged from their duties because of their link to the Gulenist network. Until their positions were filled, Turkish justice system worked not as effectively as expected which naturally caused certain level of discontent and grievance. Being aware of these disruptions, the Government has launched a judicial reform package recently to consolidate the rule of law in Turkey in close co-operation with the Council of Europe.

Turkish democracy has come a long way in the positive direction despite frequent interventions that have disrupted healthy growth of democratic institutions and prevented consolidation of rule of law over the years. However, as a country bridging East and the West, Asia and Europe, Islam and democracy, religion and secularism Turkey had many achievements recently as well as challenges ahead. An important mile-stone in Turkey's democratic life has been questioning the single party ideology concerning diversity, pluralism and representative democracy. There are at least to major developments as taboo breakers in the recent history of modern Turkey especially since 2002.

First, Turkey has normalized secularism and state-religion relations by lifting restrictions on freedom of religion. Turkey has a Muslim majority society but a number restrictions and limits were placed upon freedom of religion in the name of secularism. One striking example was the ban on wearing veil that prevented thousands of female students from having a university education and from getting jobs at public institutions. In the last 10 to 15 years such restrictions were lifted. Moreover, claims and concerns of un-Orthodox-Muslims (Alawites/Alevis) were also addressed for the first time by governments in recent years. Although there have been no immediate solutions found to resolving century old issues, at least a culture of mutual understanding and a process confidence building between state and its citizens have emerged.

Turkey will no longer turn a blind eye to claims of its citizens on the basis of their religious and sectarian identities. Although small in numbers, Turkey has also centuries-old non-Muslim minorities (Greek-Orthodox, Armenian-Orthodox, Jewish Communities) in the country and they have healthy relations with the State. A significant development in this regard has been return of properties of non-Muslim minority foundations back to them since 2011 which were confiscated in the 1960s. Democratization of Turkey, stimulated by Turkey's application to

become a full member of the EU, has continued in Turkey creating an environment of reciprocal good will, confidence and mutual respect to a further extent. The Akdamar Church (the Armenian Cathedral of the Holy Cross), a 1,100-year-old place of worship on Akdamar Island on Lake Van in eastern Anatolia was restored by the Turkish Government where a worship service was held in 2010 upon the request of the Armenian Orthodox community in Turkey. Today, Turkey continues to celebrate religious diversity and to invest more political energy and finance to preserve multicultural and multi religious heritage of the country. In 2015, Grand Synagogue of Edirne, that is Europe's third-largest Synagogue, was opened after restoration by the Turkish Government. Earlier this year, President Erdoğan participated the reopening ceremony of a 120-year-old Bulgarian Church also known as St. Stephen Church in Istanbul on January 7th following seven years of a restoration work. Not last but least, on August 3rd the President Erdoğan laid the foundation stone for the first new church in Turkey to be built since it became a modern republic in 1923. Construction of Syriac Orthodox Mor Efreem Church in Istanbul will be completed in two years. Turkey's policy towards its non-Muslim minorities is a testimony to its commitment to religious diversity and freedom of religion in the country. However, controversy regarding the status of the Theological School of Halki, (The Halki Seminary) founded on 1 October 1844, closed down in 1971 continues to this day.

Second taboo breaking development in modern Turkey was ending the denial of ethnic and cultural identities by a new and inclusive political discourse under JDP Governments. For the first time, since 1923, a genuine acknowledgment was expressed by the political leadership that there have been restrictions on cultural expressions of Kurdish identity in the country. A number of steps were taken to address this issue starting with lifting restrictions on Kurdish language and music and establishing a Kurdish language TV station while fighting the PKK terror organization since the early 1980s. Turkey's political leaders has decided to explore new avenues to find a lasting solution to the ongoing conflict that claimed 40 000 lives, costing billions of dollars. The period between 2013 and 2015 reflected the spirit of new policy of Turkey which provided an environment where the PKK would give up its weapons. However, after 2015 elections, the PKK has turned to violence again and missed an opportunity to end the conflict. Turkey, as one would expect, responded strongly to the PKK violence since then. Turkey's policy to crack down on terrorist groups or those who support, glorify and legitimize its actions continues today. Turkey sees such a policy as a counterterrorism not as a violation of freedom of opinion or expression.

A final note on the future of Turkey-US relations as long-time allies and strategic partners:

The decision by the US House of Representatives to pass Armenian Genocide Bill to recognize Armenian claims, will have detrimental effect on Turkey-US relations because Turkey considers this decision as politicization of history. Second, any attempt to introduce sanctions on Turkey and Turkish officials for fighting against what Turkey considers a terrorist organization will defy the spirit of strategic partnership and have counterproductive responses.