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UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
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Director - Program on European Societies in Transition

Hearing on

The State of Democratization and Human Rights in Turkmenistan

Before the

United States Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe

Testimony by Wayne Merry

The Atlantic Council of the United States

(speaking in a personal capacity)

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Mr. Chairman,

Among the states which emerged from the collapse of the Soviet empire the worst governments, by and large, are in the region of Central Asia and the Caucasus. The worst of the worst is Turkmenistan.

The region is characterized by what in post-colonial Africa is called the "Big Man" type of government: regimes built around a single authoritarian figure plus his family and cronies. The consequences of this type of rule are evident throughout much of the Third World. Turkmenistan has the most virulent and destructive form of "Big Man" governance, megalomania.

While authoritarian and megalomaniac regimes may look similar, they are qualitatively very different. If you think back to the Uganda of Idi Amin, the Zaire of Mobutu, the North Korea of Kim Il-sung, and the Romania of Ceausescu you will understand what I mean. In today's

world the regime of Saparmurat Niyazov has few peers, perhaps only those of Qaddafi, Saddam Husayn and Kim Chong-il -- with the important distinction that the United States maintains normal and even cordial relations with Niyazov and still deludes itself about his regime's potential for reform.

The evidence available here today about Turkmenistan's failures in human rights, civil liberties, and democratization needs no repetition. Let me just cite evidence to support my accusation of megalomania.

First is Niyazov's self-assumption of the name "Turkmenbashi", meaning "Father" or "Head of the Turkmen". But, you may ask, did not Mustapha Kemal in Turkey assume the name "Ataturk" or "Father of the Turk"? There is a huge difference. Kemal became Ataturk only two years before his death and after two decades of achievement in both the military and political spheres comparable with those of George Washington, who was called Father of His Country by many in his final years. It is something else for a political figure to anoint himself at the outset of his reign, to join the ranks of the self-styled "supremos", "generalissimos", and "maximum leaders". The appropriate comparison for Niyazov is with the unlamented Jean Bedel Bokassa, self-proclaimed first Emperor of the brief Central African Empire -- if you keep that comparison in mind, much about contemporary Turkmenistan will be clear.

Mr. Chairman, megalomania is a hunger never satisfied. Once Niyazov took on his pompous honorific, no amount of public adoration could suffice. His face and figure -- in silk and wool, on paper and marble, in bronze and steel -- adorn every corner of his impoverished land; his name is now attached to cities, industries, and even a fragrance; he is worshiped in the press as "an angel sent to Earth" and "a child born from a special glance of God." And, as you know, Niyazov has awarded himself supreme political power for life.

Niyazov's style of rule is no joke, and his vanities come at a heavy price for his country. Four years ago, Niyazov retroactively declared himself the founder of all newspapers and other periodicals in Turkmenistan. As a dutiful son, he also declared his mother the founder of all broadcast media in the country. Although vanity certainly played its part in these measures, the more basic motive was the exercise of total control over speech and the press. What now passes for media in Turkmenistan behaves in a manner that would embarrass the most shameless of Hollywood publicity agents.

I submit to you copies of a typical Ashgabad daily front page. Please note in particular the poem contained in the masthead (conveniently, both in Turkmen and English). This "hymn" is not only a required fixture of publications in Turkmenistan, it is recited by every schoolchild, from the very youngest, each morning as an obligatory state oath.

Allow me to read the text aloud:

"Turkmenistan, my beloved motherland, my beloved motherland!
You are always with me in my thoughts and in my heart.
For the slightest evil against you let my hand be lost.
For the slightest slander about you let my tongue be lost.

At the moment of my betrayal to my motherland, to her sacred banner,
To Saparmurat Turkmenbashy let my breath stop."

Not quite the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag, you will agree. But, for every child, every student, indeed every citizen of Turkmenistan, every day, the very notion of opposition to Niyazov -- however slight -- is unambiguously associated with images of mutilation and death. Is it any wonder that overt manifestations of political independence in Turkmenistan have been so few and the consequences to those who speak out so grave?

Mr. Chairman, what can and should the United States do about such a ghastly regime and leader?

First, we must face facts, and the State Department's recent human rights report on Turkmenistan does not. State persists in the view that Niyazov is a strong-willed ruler like Tito rather than an unbridled despot like Ceausescu, that he is a Central Asian equivalent of Robert Mugabe rather than a latter-day Bokassa. Such men go from bad to worse, not from bad to better. Our ability to influence such a regime toward genuine democracy, civil liberties, and accountable government is nil. This is not cynicism; it is realism.

Second, in addition to retention of absolute power Niyazov values the gratification of his ego. We should not give it. The reception of Niyazov at the White House in 1998 was a scandal and a mistake, as was the presidential embrace at the Helsinki summit last November. No good has resulted for the hard-pressed Turkmen people from these gestures, while Niyazov was confirmed in his arrogance by the public approbation of the world's superpower. We Americans sometimes forget how much our gestures mean to the tyrants of the world. We should not forget.

Third, let's be sensible about Turkmenistan's natural gas. True, the country sits atop huge reserves of gas, but it will be years (and perhaps decades) before its potential will make a significant difference in the world's energy supply. In addition, while oil is a commodity traded by tankers in a global market, natural gas distribution is largely limited to pipelines and hence sold in regional markets. The major customers for Turkmen gas will be Turkey, Russia, Ukraine, and countries in southern Asia. These markets can well look after themselves. The United States has no overriding economic interest in Turkmenistan; it is no Saudi Arabia for us. In any case, let us recall the consequences of our support for an autocratic government in Iran in pursuit of perceived economic interests.

Next, the United States should terminate all but unambiguously humanitarian official assistance programs in Turkmenistan and especially stop defense and military contacts. However well-intended these contacts, they are ill-conceived, serve no tangible American interest, and will be abused by the Niyazov regime. It is fantasy to imagine we are developing democratic civil-military relations in Turkmenistan or obtaining influence. The Pentagon may object that I, personally, once played a role in creating these programs. Quite true, but I recognize the mistake and the need to correct it. In addition, we should take steps to suspend Turkmenistan's participation in the Partnership for Peace. PfP is supposed to be based on shared values and purposes. While a number of PfP members scarcely qualify for the

Partnership, Turkmenistan absolutely does not. If the European Union can chastise Austria over Joerg Haidar, surely the Partnership for Peace should draw the line at Saparmurat Niyazov.

Finally, this Commission should seriously consider whether Turkmenistan has any business in the OSCE. Niyazov's regime flagrantly violates its Helsinki commitments. Unlike some participating States in the region where one can at least hope that an OSCE presence may slowly change things for the better, Turkmenistan is barren ground so long as its current power system exists. Participation in the OSCE gives a patina of respectability to Niyazov and allows him to strut on a multilateral stage on a basis of presumed equality with genuine democratic leaders. The OSCE saw fit to suspend Yugoslavia for its regional behavior; it should do so to Turkmenistan for its internal behavior. If Helsinki principles can be stretched to accommodate the Niyazov despotism, they lose their meaning. Taking such action against Turkmenistan would enhance the OSCE's credibility and efforts in other problematic countries and demonstrate that joining the Helsinki process is not an empty formalism.

Mr. Chairman, of all the countries this Commission will examine in its hearings, no case more justifies American policies based on a long-term perspective and adherence to our principles than does Turkmenistan. Saparmurat Niyazov may be around for years, but he is not forever. A minimalist policy toward Turkmenistan today will pay dividends tomorrow.