

Good morning, ladies and gentleman. Thank you for your interest in this morning's briefing on the recent parliamentary elections in Turkey. I want to start by welcoming my colleague and friend from Florida, Congressman Robert Wexler, who is the Chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Europe and Chairman of the Congressional Turkey Caucus. I would also like to welcome our panel of speakers, Dr. Soner Cagaptay, Director of the Turkish Research Program at the Washington Institute and Mr. Ilan Berman, Vice President for Policy at the American Foreign Policy Council.

Before we begin this morning, I would like to mention my disappointment at the State Department's refusal to participate in today's briefing. An invitation was extended to them in an effort to get the administration's view on the elections and they declined our offer. The excuse given to us, despite much evidence to the contrary, was that the State Department does not participate in public briefings. Regardless, we have an excellent panel, and I am certain this will be an enlightening briefing.

As I already mentioned, over the next hour or two, we will examine Turkey's parliamentary elections of this past Sunday and what it means for the future of U.S.-Turkish relations. I was pleased to see that Turkey held successful elections, which were decreed as free, fair and transparent. With roughly 80 percent of Turkey's 42 million eligible voters turning out to the polls on Sunday, I would say that this was a successful election. According to the OSCE's Election Assessment Mission, "The electoral process in Turkey was characterized by pluralism and a high level of public confidence underscored by the transparent, professional and efficient performance of the election administration."

Even though Turkey held successful elections, one cannot forget the reason for these elections being held in the first place. On Sunday, I was reading an interesting article in the Washington Post entitled, "Islamic Attire Dominates Debate Before Turkish Vote," where a very poignant statement was made in the opening of the article, which said "it's the head scarf, stupid." The article goes on to say that "if it weren't for a three-foot-square piece of fabric, sometimes black and stark but more often fancy or lacy, rosy pink or flowery. Turkey's 42 million voters wouldn't be going to the polls." This argument, I believe, will be a continuing challenge for Turkey as the Justice and Development Party works to find a peaceful balance between the Islamic and secular establishments. I also would note the rising tensions between Turkey and the Kurds in Northern Iraq, where currently 140,000 troops are massed along the southeastern border. This tenuous situation could potentially be a problem for U.S.-Turkish relations if, in fact, fighting breaks out. It is my hope that cooler heads will prevail and that tensions ease.

Finally, Prime Minister Erdogan has accomplished a great deal for Turkey's democracy. He has pursued a pro-business agenda, which can be seen in Turkey's thriving economy as well as continuing to push for Turkey's membership into the European Union. I told the Prime Minister personally, last time we met in Ankara, that entry into the EU should be expedited, and I have also told that to my European colleagues, too. I believe these are all positive steps in the right direction, and I look forward to continuing a dialogue with our Turkish partners, in an effort to strengthen this historic partnership that we have shared over the past fifty years. I would now like to turn the floor over to my distinguished colleague Congressman Wexler for his thoughts on the Turkish elections.