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TURKISH-AMERICAN RELATIONS AFTER ERDOGAN'S U.S. VISIT: BUSINESS AS USUAL OR A NEW PAGE IN PARTNERSHIP?

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"Turkey in Focus" is a new service initiated by TUSIAD Washington Office that provides update on issues related to Turkey on a monthly basis.

Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan paid a visit to the US between January 26 and 30. Five ministers; Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul, Defense Minister Vecdi Gonul, Economy Minister Ali Babacan, and State Minister Kursat Tuzmen, as well as 165 businessmen and 53 journalists, accompanied the Prime Minister. Erdogan met with the US President and Vice President on January 28 and Gul met with the US Secretary of State on January 29. Turkish and the U.S. officials discussed the war on terrorism and the Greater Middle East, particularly Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Iran, and the Middle East peace process. The meetings also addressed the issues such as Cyprus, Caucasus, and bilateral trade and economic relations.

Getting Over The Past and Redefining Relations: More than anything else, this visit represented a symbolic end to the tumultuous period of 2003 in the Turkish-American relations. Less than a year after Turkish Parliament's March 1 decision not to allow the US troops to open a northern front through Turkey in the war against Iraq, Erdogan's visit marked a willingness on both sides to "put the past behind", in Erdogan's words. The leaders of the two countries renewed their commitment to the partnership between Turkey and the United States

In their bid to restore the relationship, both Turkish and American leaders put a special emphasis on the need to redefine the basic tenets of cooperation, where the dependence on military cooperation would be diminished and Turkey's "soft power" in the Middle East would be promoted. In Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz's terms, "In the old days (the Turkish-American relationship) was very much dominated by the military threat from the Soviet Union and our cooperation as military allies. I think in this era the

softer side, if you want to call it that, the philosophical side, the common values, the common beliefs in secular democracy, is much more important than the concrete military things”. Erdogan echoed this language in his speech at the American Enterprise Institute on January 29: “Our relations in the future should be developed with more substance and common understanding to facilitate the realization of the regional and global vision that we share.”

New Activism in the Greater Middle East? The vision PM Erdogan was alluding to certainly refers to the idea of “the Greater Middle East” and Turkey’s role in the Bush Administration’s efforts to transform the region. The Bush Administration’s forward strategy in the Middle East converged with the Justice and Development Party’s willingness to play an exemplar role for the Muslim societies, especially for those in the Middle East. Erdogan underlined in many moments of his visit that Turkey, with its predominantly Muslim population and democratic and secular ideology, remained ready and competent to serve as a role model and do its share “to help establish a harmony of civilizations.” In his speech at the American Enterprise Institute, he tried to describe the nature of this new regional role; “Turkey will achieve this not merely through its economic and military power, but its ability to make contributions to the universally accepted values and facilitate their dissemination and interaction among various parts of the world. In this sense, Turkey in its region and especially in the Middle East will be a guide in overcoming instability, a driving force for economic development, and a reliable partner in ensuring security.” Wolfowitz resonated with this reasoning in his interview with CNN Turk: “We’re looking to build a future in the Middle East and in the whole region that is positive for democracy, positive for the values that Turkey and the United States share. I think we are working together as partners. That is the important point.”

Referring to the objections that Turkey’s model could not be imposed on the countries with different social structures and political cultures, Erdogan acknowledged that Turkey’s path to democracy was a not a one-size-fits-all model that can be implemented identically in all other Muslim societies, but rather it could serve as a source of inspiration and a reference point for other Muslim societies. In the mean time, Erdogan said the time had come for these countries “to find their own solutions to their problems”, reiterating the message conveyed by Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul in Iran and Malaysia in 2003, the kind of message the Bush Administration enthusiastically advocates.

While urging the Muslim countries to act swiftly in the self-determined path to democracy, Erdogan also cautioned against accusing the Islamic doctrine, for being the one that encourages terrorist activity. Erdogan implied that such misperceptions and biased characterizations were currently prevalent in the West in general, and the United States in particular.

However, this new emphasis on collaborative effort to promote democracy in the Middle East is yet to be tested. For example, policies against countries that are accused to possess weapons of mass destruction, i.e. Iran and Syria, have the potential to be issues of contention when the policies might require more muscle flexing than diplomacy. In this respect, in the quest for democratization in the Middle East, Turkey and the US are likely

to have differing priorities when “democracy promotion” and “war on terrorism” present conflicting choices between dialogue and use of force in dealing with the autocrats in the region. Turkey’s role as a source of inspiration in the region is also bound to be limited due to the historical baggage dating back to Ottoman ruling in the region. Therefore, beyond the rhetoric, the Turkish and US authorities are yet to describe the specifics they attribute to Turkey in promoting democracy in the Middle East. Formation of a new working group between the two countries is expected to take place in an attempt to define the parameters of this collaboration.

Iraq’s Future and the PKK Problem: The existence of some differences over Iraq policy between Turkey and the US is not secret. These differences largely stem from the US’s over-reliance on the Iraqi Kurds and Turkey’s fear that a federalism based on ethnicity might be detrimental to Iraq’s territorial integrity. In response to Turkish sensitivities, U.S. President Bush assured, in his meeting with Prime Minister Erdogan January 28, of the United States' disapproval of a federal structure in Iraq based on ethnic lines and its desire to see a “democratic Iraq that is territorially intact”. Erdogan told reporters following the meeting with Bush that they did not touch upon the status of Mosul or Kirkuk, the two oil rich cities containing large Turkmen populations. Recently, there have been several violent clashes between the Kurdish and Turkmen groups in these cities and Iraqi Kurds claim to have certain rights over the administration of these towns. These claims have serious implications on the revenue-sharing projections in Iraq.

In his meeting with Bush, Erdogan also said his country wanted to be part of the “physical and political restructuring of Iraq.” He also warned the US of an immature withdrawal from Iraq, strongly urging the US officials to finish the job in the country. He indicated, “A premature U.S. departure from Iraq would deprive the country of a chance of a democratic outcome after long years of dictatorship.”

Another sensitive issue Turkey raised during the talks with the US authorities was the existence of PKK-KADEK militants in the northern Iraq. The US officials reassured Turkey that PKK-KADEK would always remain a terrorist organization in the eye of American officials; irrespective of the name it takes. Indeed, the Bush Administration acted swiftly in placing KONGRA-GEL, the new name of PKK/KADEK, on the US’s list of terrorist organizations.

On the other hand, Turkish officials reportedly reminded the US side about its promise to put US-Turkish joint plan to eliminate the PKK presence, in to effect, and called for taking serious action against the PKK/KADEK militants. Powell affirmed the US’s commitment to this end by saying: “I also told him (Turkish foreign minister) that we understand the difficulties associated with the PKK and that we would be taking appropriate action to demonstrate that we share Turkey's concerns with respect to the activities of the PKK.” Facing other significant challenges in Iraq, and expecting the results of the new Turkish law allowing some members of the group to return to their homes, the US authorities argue that some more time, may be until the next Summer, is needed.

Stepping Up Efforts To Solve the Cyprus Issue: Turkey's increased efforts to restart negotiations on the Cyprus issue constituted an important part of the discussions with the US officials. Reaffirming his stance recently, Erdogan expressed Turkey's determination to "solve the Cyprus problem as soon as possible," in his meeting with the US President Bush. After a series of gestures by the Turkish Cypriots and Turkey in the past few months, and following the December 14, 2003 elections in the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), Turkey had stepped up efforts to find a lasting solution to the 40-year long deadlock. Erdogan seems to have convinced the US officials that he sincerely wants a solution in Cyprus prior to May 1 deadline and that he is also willing to exert the necessary pressure on the Turkish Cypriot leadership to start and continue negotiations with the Greek Cypriots based on the UN plan.

In this regard, Erdogan's calls for increased US efforts to help solve the issue resonated well with the US officials. Both President Bush and Secretary of State Powell praised Turkey's efforts and called for a quick resumption of Cyprus talks. Following his meeting with Turkish Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul January 29, Powell noted, "We had a long conversation on Cyprus. I expressed my thanks to the Minister and to the Turkish Government for some of the steps they have taken recently to align their efforts with those of Kofi Annan and the Annan plan. There is still much more work to be done, but there is a moment of opportunity here that we hope to seize and have referendums and resolve outstanding issues, and hopefully get it all done by the 1st of May."

The United States has already been actively involved in Cyprus efforts. For example, in his letter early January 2004, President Bush had urged Turkish, Greek and Cypriot leaders to resume negotiations immediately on a U.N. plan to unify Cyprus. The US officials paid numerous visits in the last months to convince parties to return to the negotiations table. The US also has a Special Coordinator for Cyprus at the State Department, namely Ambassador Thomas Weston.

Turkey, however, seeks a higher level of US involvement, which would translate into an active US mediation in conflict. Reportedly, Erdogan and Gul submitted a request to have US Secretary of State Colin Powell as a mediator or a "facilitator" between Turkish and Greek Cypriots. Similarly, on January 24 in Davos, Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan had asked U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan to appoint a mediator trusted by both sides to resolve the Cyprus dispute. In line with the UN Secretary General Kofi Annan's disapproval, the US side responded reluctantly to such demands. Instead, Powell "pledged to the minister (Gul) that the United States would make every effort to assist with this work and that (he) would get personally involved as necessary to work with the (UN) secretary general and the parties to see if we cannot solve this longstanding and most difficult problem."

Although less than what it expected, Turkey was successful in getting a deeper US involvement in support of Turkey's recent moves. Following his meeting with Gul, Powell called for renewed international pressure on all sides to resolve the long-running dispute and convince the parties to accept the UN reunification plan. For example, Powell telephoned Greek Cypriot President Tassos Papadopoulos the following weekend to press

him to accept a quick resumption of talks. Greek Cypriot government has been criticized for reacting sluggishly to Turkey's proactive, pro-solution policies. Powell's efforts in convincing UN Secretary General Kofi Annan as well as Greek leaders and Greek Cypriots were also helpful in bringing Turkish and Greek Cypriots for talks to New York.

The UN Secretary-General wrote February 4, to the Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot leaders inviting them to come to New York on February 10, 2004 to resume negotiations on the basis of his plan. According to media reports, Annan's letter requires the two sides to accept Secretary General's discretion to complete the text where the two sides fail to agree. According to Turkish foreign minister, Annan also wanted the island's guarantor states -- Turkey, Greece and Britain -- to approve the compromise draft before the two Cypriot communities put it to referenda. The objective of the negotiations, according to the Secretary General, would be to put a completed text to referenda in April 2004, in time for a reunited Cyprus to accede to the European Union on May 1, 2004. To implement the referenda on time, Annan foresees the completion of talks by the end of March.

The EU is about to decide whether Turkey qualifies for starting accession negotiations at the end of 2004. As the US Administration officials repeatedly point out, reaching a settlement on Cyprus is crucial for Turkey's EU membership and Turkey's journey to the EU constitutes a major element in the US-Turkey partnership. Especially since the Helsinki Summit in 1999, the US support for Turkey's bid for EU membership had a significantly positive impact in getting favorable decisions at the EU meetings.

Bilateral Trade and Economic Relations: Although a large business delegation accompanied Turkish Prime Minister, no significant progress was made on this front. Despite substantial progress recorded in many areas, a number of issues, particularly protective measures on both sides, appear to be restricting further increases in bilateral trade volumes and US investments to Turkey.

Waiting for Bush's June Visit to Turkey: Upcoming NATO summit that will be held in Istanbul in June would be the next stop in reviewing the busy agenda in bilateral relations. US President Bush is expected to attend this meeting and pay an official visit to Ankara. Meanwhile, developments in the following 4 months in both Iraq and Cyprus will be crucial in defining the new parameters in Turkish-US ties. In case a settlement is reached on Cyprus and provided that the US and Turkey smoothly deal with their differences over northern Iraq, the NATO Summit could be a showcase to promote Turkish democracy, its EU orientation, and strong partnership with the US.

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