

A MEETING WITH A DELEGATION OF VISITING TURKISH PARLIAMENTARIANS

March 16, 2005

On March 16, 2005, CSIS hosted a delegation of Turkish parliamentarians during their trip to Washington organized by the Turkish Democracy Foundation (TDF) with the assistance of the National Democratic Institute (NDI). The Turkish Grand National Assembly (TGNA) delegation included five members of the governing Justice and Development Party (JDP) – Faruk Celik representative from Bursa, Agah Kafkas, representative from Corum, Nevzat Dogan representative from Kocaeli, Nimet Cubukcu, representative from Istanbul and Orhan Erdem, representative from Konya – and three members of the opposition Republican People’s Party (RPP) – Zeynep Damla Gurel, representative from Istanbul, Muzaffer Remzi Kurtulmusoglu, representative from Ankara and Selami Yigit, representative from Kars. Kemal Ozturk, Communications Advisor to the Speaker of the TGNA and Ali Emre Kocaoglu from the TDF also attended the meeting.

The designated speaker for the group, Agah Kafkas, began the meeting by explaining that he and his colleagues were members of a special TGNA committee cooperating with the TDF in an effort to improve the Turkish democratic system. The visit to Washington was an important part of this initiative that would permit a better understanding of the functioning of the American democratic system and Congress and would be followed by similar visits to a number of European capitals.

Elaborating on the work of the joint TGNA-TDF effort, Kafkas explained that the two institutions were involved in a one-year collaborative project with NDI focusing on three main issues. These were lawmaking procedures, the relationship between members of parliament and voters and the relationship between members of the TGNA and their assistants and advisers. Kafkas said that four different study groups had been formed composed of former parliamentarians, academics and members of the media and civil society organizations. Parallel to its work abroad, the committee would conduct studies in six or seven provinces in Turkey, inform the Turkish public about its findings every three months and then submit a general evaluation report to the TGNA. Commenting that “for a country to be democratic and to be effective, its parliament has to be effective,” Kafkas said that he was sure that their work would have a positive impact on relations between voters and parliamentarians.

Kafkas added that the TGNA had formed friendship groups with the parliaments of seventy-two countries and was planning to exchange information on parliamentary systems. He said that one member of parliament from the well-developed parliamentary democracies would be invited to an international conference in Turkey in the near future in order to exchange information and to explain their systems.

Kafkas then summarized the delegation's discussions with U.S officials in Washington and said that the delegation had focused on three important issues: Cyprus, the post-Iraq war situation and the PKK and the Armenian problem. Regarding Cyprus, Mr. Kafkas said that although the Turkish Cypriots had done everything they could under the framework of the UN Peace Plan, they still faced economic and political isolation, had not received the support promised by the US and the EU and Turkey expected more tangible steps from the US. On Iraq, Kafkas said the delegation had underlined "the importance of preserving the territorial integrity of Iraq as well as its cultural and social foundation" and Turkey's "sensitivity on any structural change in Kirkuk's demographics." The delegation had also reiterated Turkey's desire to see US action against the PKK presence in Northern Iraq. On the Armenian issue, Kafkas cautioned that if the US congress were "to pass a resolution in April recognizing the so-called Armenian genocide, it would be detrimental to US-Turkish relations."

Responding to a question on mounting anti-Americanism in Turkey and its echoes in Washington, Faruk Celik commented that he did not believe that the current negative opinion poll numbers had "a solid foundation." However, many Turks were uncomfortable with US policies on Cyprus and the PKK camps in Northern Iraq and movement on these issues would help ease tensions between the two countries. He continued: "If we seriously believe in consolidating democracy, then the positive efforts of the Turkish government have to be supported. Otherwise, other arguments could come on to the agenda with marginal groups being offered material that they could use. For example, 150-200 people recently kicked the car of the Turkish Prime Minister and accused him of selling out on Cyprus."

Celik concluded: "The Turkish public's negative opinions and reactions have a direct bearing on politics. During our visit to the US, we observed that the members of congress are first responsible to their voters. In other words, the relationship between a voter and a member of congress has a direct affect on the position of the member. If you set out to solve the important problems in your foreign relations, prepare and present your projects accordingly but do not receive the necessary support from your allies, this has a negative impact on the attitude of the public towards the government. Those of us in democratic countries do not have the luxury of saying that this does not affect the perspective of the government. If the United States were to take a step on Cyprus, for example, this would eliminate 25-30 percent of the tension in US-Turkish relations.