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**“Turkish Democracy: A Model Abroad, Troubled at Home?”**

**The Stimson Center**

**1111 19th St. NW, Washington D.C.**

**Wednesday, February 22, 2012, 10:00 AM- 12:00PM**

On Wednesday, The Project on Middle East Democracy hosted a panel discussing Turkey’s increasingly important role on the world stage and the Arab world supporting democracy and the seemingly widening ap between Turkey’s international and domestic image as a democratic system. The panel featured Executive Director of the Institute for Turkish Studies Dr. **Sinan Ciddi**, Assistant Professor at St. Lawrence University and Turkey Specialist **Howard Eissenstat**, and for ambassador to Turkey and current Direct of the Dinu Patriciu Eurasia Center at the Atlantic Council **Ross Wilson**. The panel was moderated by Senior Reasech associate at the Project on Middle East Democracy **Daphne McCurdy**.

**Daphne Mccurdy** introduced the topic to the panel, summarizing the current state of Turkish politics. Turkey’s role in the region is expanding and Turkey has recently received a lot of positive attention do to their “dynamic foreign policy. However, “we should not lose site of the developments of their [Turkey’s] own democracy,” said Mccurdy. A series of arrests and subsequent detentions have questioned the ruling Justice and Development (AKP) Party’s commitment to democratization.

Dr. **Sinan Ciddi** delivered a series of criticisms concerning the AKP’s behavior with regards to the promised development of a new constitution, the state of judiciary, and the National Intelligence Organizations recent wave of arrests. He stated that the AKP’s dominance of Turkish politics have “shocked even the most speculative of analysts.” The same analysts have begun to project Turkey as a model for the transitioning Arab countries to follow due to its ability to develop a strong, secular national government that is built on economically dominance. However, Ciddi is skeptical of the idea that Turkey can and should be used as a model to be exported internationally. “Three quarters of the constitution implemented in 1982 has been amended,” according to Ciddi who referred to the process as a “sham.” Cidi said he was “skeptical” that the AKP promise of a more open society, increased civil liberties, and minority freedoms will ever come into fruition due to suspicion surrounding the intentions of the party and the general feelings of the public that the government is attempting to expand their own power by transforming the political body from a parliamentary to a presidential system. Ciddi stated that the real opposition to the AKP is the judiciary, which he said has challenged the authority and has even threatened to “shut it down.” In response the AKP party has attempted to change policy concerning the appointment of judges and prosecution. In doing so, Ciddi believes that the government has corrupted and politicized the judiciary “in order to get its own way.” Ciddi briefly discussed the "Ergenekon" controversy in which the AKP has arrested multitudes of high profile leaders, academics, students, and journalists for unsubstantiated charges of attempting to “bring down the government.” Unwarranted arrests Ciddi said are “deteriorating credibility” of the AKP in the electorate. The AKP, said Ciddi, is focused on “bringing down the opposition” instead of focusing on “democratization.” Other controversies such as the alleged split between the AKP and the Gulan movement have been discussed in the press but nonetheless remain unsubstantiated.

**Howard Eissenstat** credited the AKP party for making huge strides in political and economical development. “Close to 100% of the Turkish people believe that free elections are the only way to have a government,” said Eissenstat. Over the last 20 years, the AKP party has proven that they are not Islamists and Putin-style cronyism does not permeate their bureaucracy. According to Eissenstat, much of the problems the AKP faces are “intrinsic of Turkish political power.” He believes that the AKP is turn to nationalistic/militaristic rhetoric is historically characteristic of Turkish politics. Eissenstat alleged three parts to the latest crackdown on “political dissidence. First, he alleged that the initial arrests actually contained criminal activity and he sees the latest crackdown as a result of hysteric investigation that “has gone badly off the rails.” Secondly, he noted that “thousands” had been arrested for affiliation, not necessarily having perpetrated a crime. The arrests are “remarkably” brought from a wide spectrum of industries and services, are held pretrial without access to evidence, and more and more are being held for being “critical of the government.” Finally, he concluded saying that the AKP party is creating a “culture of censorship” as media outlets become increasingly hesitant to criticize the government.

**Robert Wilson** discussed Turkey on two fronts: Turkey as a model and issues of democracy and human rights. Wilson said Turkey’s “history is much too troubled o wish that model on anybody.” However, the model is nonetheless successful and thus makes it an attractive aspiration of the people in the Arab world currently undergoing political transition. Turkey has achieved an “astounding” amount of economic success, was victorious in driving out western invaders, and developing a representative government. However Wilson stated that Turkey still is “not a liberal democracy” and reminded the audience “not to lose sight of Turkish politics as being ‘a contact sport.” Wilson voiced “serious concerns” with respect to human rights abuses. The attacks on the freedom of the press, “hundreds of journalists” sitting in jail, “stretches” the credibility of the party. “The most effective driver of democracy in Turkey are the Turks,” said Wilson. The “vibrant debate” that exists “on all issues” in Turkish societies is an encouraging sign according to Wilson. Wilson concluded saying that the U.S. role, although complicated, needs to be aware of “becoming partisan” in Turkish political battles. He clarified this position responding to a question about how the U.S. could capitalize on AKP dominance. He stated that the U.S. should speak with a “high degree of generality” concerning issues like freedom of the press, but should refrain involving itself in micro-level issues, which Wilson said could be construed as “U.S. meddling.”

The panel answered questions from the audience concerning women’s and minority rights in Turkey, allegations concerning the dispute between the AKP and Gulan movements, and prospects for intervention in Syria. **Eissenstat** stated that while women’s rights have improved still face an increase in violence and prejudice with respect to equality in society and the judicial system. **Ciddi** reiterated that while the media has reported such claims, none have yet to be confirmed by either party. **Wilson** responded to a question concerning the prospect of military intervention in Syria. He said that while “military-led regime change” is not an option, Turkey may be looking at setting up humanitarian corridors in the periphery. Ciddi concurred and said that any intervention would involve the use of Turkey as a “credible source” and said that through support of the international community Turkey’s apprehension of intervening would be alleviated. Eissenstat “does not see the Turkish military going across the border,” but noted the extent to which the intervention movement was supported by Sunni constituencies in the AKP base.