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Transcript

TURKEY'S ROLE IN A TURBULENT MIDDLE EAST

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Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a real pleasure to be here with you all today. Let me thank Ambassador Burns and the Carnegie Endowment for the wonderful reception.

I am here in Washington on an invitation from my good friend Secretary Kerry. I will also meet with counterparts from the Administration and have contacts on the Hill.

Of course, I value those meetings. But, I am equally pleased to address you at this century old institution.

Over the years, Carnegie Endowment turned into a truly global think tank. It has contributed to international peace through creative ideas and strategic thinking.

I am sure you know the famous quote: “*Every great dream begins with a dreamer.*” This institution has been home to many dreamers of peace.

That’s why, I am very happy to have an opportunity to talk to you under this roof about the state of play in the Middle East and Turkey’s role.

This is a topic on which there has been much debate here in this town. And I know that not all the comments have been positive.

So, I appreciate the opportunity to speak about our dream, our vision of a new and different Middle East: one that rises on peace, stability and cooperation.

Dear Guests,

Today, Middle East is largely in a state of turmoil. But, the same Middle East has contributed greatly to the philosophical, cultural and scientific progress of humankind throughout history.

President Obama himself highlighted some of those contributions in his historic Cairo speech. And, we believe that this region still has the potential to create great things.

So, the question is: *How do we turn this potential into concrete achievements?*

After decades of oppression and wars, we witnessed the “Arab Spring”. The people led transformation process started to shake the foundations of the century old status-quo in the region.

In this process, we played a positive and supportive role. We extended around 3 billion Dollars of financial assistance as well as political and technical expertise to Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and Yemen. But, the transformation process is currently characterized by massive challenges.

Let me identify some of them and also share my views for dealing with them.

The conflict in Syria affects Turkey the most. The situation has become more complicated with the emergence of DEASH.

In other words, the situation in Syria have become a serious national security concern for Turkey. We have provided significant contributions to the international coalition as an active member. We have mobilized our military and other resources in its support.

So, we agree on the existence of a major threat. But we also say that a selective approach, focusing just on fighting terrorism, will not remedy the situation in Syria.

The political vacuum in Syria has to be filled with a representative government based on the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people. This is the only way to bring any sort of stability in Syria.

The Geneva Declaration clearly identifies the necessary roadmap for achieving this kind of a political solution.

The parties for any negotiations to end the conflict are clear. These are the Syrian National Coalition and the regime. The Coalition is recognized by 114 countries and 13 international organizations as the legitimate opposition.

However, after the Geneva 2 negotiations, the regime thinks that it has a free hand to continue its violence against the people. This has to stop.

The international community must exert pressure on the regime so that it will sit down at the negotiation table.

We have been working closely with the United States to find a way to move forward for a political solution.

Our efforts on implementing train and equip program is a clear testimony. This program aims to create areas inside Syria that are safe. It will also provide a foothold for Syrians willing to fight DEASH.

Iraq has been in continuous crisis for years. DEASH is the latest episode in this drama and may be the most complicated one.

This terrorist organization has occupied more than one third of Iraq, which is equal to the size of Croatia, in a short time. This was surprising for many. But we had been warning about this possibility for a long time.

Why was Iraq faced with such a crisis? Simply because of the sectarian and oppressive policies of the previous government after the departure of the American troops.

So, there is a need for a policy that reaches out to oppressed people and regains their trust and confidence.

New Iraqi government under Ebadi started well and gained international support. But it is again our duty to remind the Iraqi government that it needs to do more for winning “the others of the country”. Promises must turn into concrete actions, without further delay.

In Iraq, in the short term, there might be some military successes. But lack of confidence between the people and government is continuing.

Military successes will not be enough. There is a need for political and humanitarian steps taken at the same time.

Tikrit and other liberated cities should be held and run by locals. People shouldn't feel that they have come under another term of oppression.

Iraq cannot be governed as before-DEASH. It should evolve into a functioning federal state. This is not something new, it was also foreseen in the Iraqi constitution.

We know the task at hand is not easy and we should not put undue pressure. But unfortunately, the urgency is all too evident.

That's why, we are providing political, military and humanitarian support to Iraq. We are carrying out a train and equip program for Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) and Mosul National Guard units.

On the humanitarian side, we are hosting nearly 2 million people from Syria and Iraq combined. Our expenditure has reached almost 6 billion Dollars; whereas we received only 300 million Dollar worth support from the international community.

We are also doing our part to stop the flow of foreign terrorist fighters. We have taken all the necessary measures. We have set up a no-entry list which now involves 12.800 people and we have deported 1.300 people in this context.

But, this is not an issue we can solve on our own. We need improved information sharing and more international cooperation.

The source countries should also start asking themselves the hardest question: *Who is really the weakest link in this chain?*

In addition to Syria and Iraq, we see sectarianism as a general threat to the region.

There is a standard message that we give to all actors and parties: sectarian based policies create no-win situations. All loose in sectarian struggles, including, first and foremost, those who favour these policies.

Yemen is the most recent example pointing at such dangers. In both Yemen and Libya, what we need is political dialogue. We need political solutions based on national compromise and consensus. As a cornerstone of peace and stability in the Middle East, Egypt is another potential risk for the region.

Egyptian leadership pushes those people they see as opposition underground and towards radicalism. Our concern is that, if the current trend is left unchecked, a new and more violent social outburst in Egypt will be inevitable.

Egypt's deep and structural problems can only be solved in a liberal and efficient political environment. Therefore, we encourage all parties to advocate the establishment of an inclusive political system.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Of course, one cannot speak about the Middle East without touching upon the Palestinian issue. Because, it remains the core challenge in the region.

And actually, we all know parameters of the solution: a State of Israel, living side by side with an independent and sovereign State of Palestine, on 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital.

Yet, despite the best and most sincere efforts of my dear friend Secretary Kerry, the two-state solution is in a coma. You all know the recent Palestinian initiative regarding a UN Security Council Resolution to initiate a peace conference.

Such a resolution would make the Israeli side sit down for serious negotiations for a two-state solution. Unfortunately, this initiative, like others trying to open the way to peace, failed at the UN Security Council.

The main body responsible for protecting international peace and security once again proved incapable of performing its task.

Dear Guests,

Yes, the general picture in the Middle East is not promising. But, there are also reasons for being hopeful.

Look at the political process in Tunisia. This country shows us that a legitimate political solution is possible to the problems faced by the countries in transition. The Tunisian people deserve our full support and solidarity.

We are also very pleased with the political understanding reached between the P5+1 and Iran in Lausanne.

We always advocated diplomacy as the only possible option for a solution to the issue of Iran's nuclear program. That's why, we hope that the ongoing negotiations result in a comprehensive agreement. As always, we are ready to offer our active support to the process.

We also hope that a final and satisfactory solution to the nuclear issue might motivate our Iranian neighbors to facilitate the resolution of other regional problems.

In short, our approach in the Middle East is based on finding comprehensive, political and inclusive solutions.

So, let me put what we imagine into a picture:

- A secure and stable Middle East, where the energy and trade routes interconnect East Mediterranean resources to all directions.
- A region, which no longer makes the headlines with death tolls, but rather with cooperation projects and success stories.

Turkey is doing its part to invest in a common future in the region. We are putting a lot of effort in increasing and liberalizing trade, lifting visas, expanding investments.

On the humanitarian side, being the third largest donor in humanitarian aid in the world, we continue to extend our helping hand throughout the region.

We are trying to ease the pains not only in Syria, but also in Iraq and Palestine.

In Iraq, we were among the first to come to help by sending 751 trucks containing food kits, tents, bedding, blankets, medicines and medical equipment. Our official humanitarian assistance to Gaza only last year is more than 19 million Dollars.

And we will continue to work for a better future for everyone in the Middle East.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I know our topic is Middle East. But, speaking as the Turkish Foreign Minister in Washington, I will not be doing my job in full if I do not mention two other issues: two issues which have created mistrust and confrontation in our region for a long time.

First, Cyprus: we have a window of opportunity to find a political settlement to a problem that has been with us for more than 50 years. We believe 2015 will be an important year for the settlement of the Cyprus issue.

Our commitment for a solution is as strong as ever. We expect the negotiations to resume soon. The Turkish side is ready to go the extra mile to make a lasting settlement possible before the end of the year.

But ultimately, it takes two to tango. And, what is needed for a settlement is true political will. If the Greek Cypriot side and Greece show a similarly strong political will, there is no reason why a settlement cannot be reached.

As always, the active involvement of the US will be important in the critical period ahead. Second, Turkish-Armenian relations. We have been working since 2009 to overcome the division between these two ancient peoples: two people who for centuries coexisted in peace and harmony.

Let me underline this point: Turkey shares the suffering of Armenians. We try, with patience and resolve, to re-establish empathy between the two peoples.

We continue to believe that we can build a peaceful common future only through dialogue. In this context, our President's message last year on the events of 1915 was a historic step. The recent statement of our Prime Minister in January was another step forward, representing our humane perspective.

Just few hours ago, Prime Minister Davutoğlu extended his condolences to the Ottoman Armenians who lost their lives under the tragic circumstances of World War I.

He also announced that, in parallel to the remembrance ceremonies around the world, a ceremony will also be held at Armenian Patriarchy in İstanbul on 24 April.

This is a step of historic significance.

We will continue on this path. We will continue to work for a framework that both addresses the historic aspect of the problem and also helps solve the Nagorno-Karabagh issue.

Dear Guests,

Geography is destiny. And today, we stand at a crossroads for the region.

We in Turkey believe in the promise of our region and its peoples. We are willing and able to stand up to the existing challenges. And so is the U.S.

The history of Turkish-American relations is full of success stories we wrote by working together. Our past achievements in Afghanistan, in the Balkans and elsewhere is testimony to what we can do together in the future.

That's what gives me the confidence to say that Turkey and the US will continue to work as close partners.

Because by working together, we have a better chance of creating the bright future we imagine for the Middle East.

Thank you.