

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to express my deep gratitude to the Center for Strategic and International Studies for having arranged this meeting. I consider it a privilege to address such an eminent audience.

My introductory remarks will be as short as possible in order to leave more time for any questions you may have. In this part of the session I would like to talk about the identity of our party, AK Parti, the Justice and Development Party. Then, I will dwell on the international situation stemming from the September 11th attacks. I will conclude my remarks with our party's views on domestic and foreign policy as well as economic issues of Turkey.

The power basis of our Party is not limited to one or two sections of our society, nor is it limited to a certain geographical region. It encompasses almost all sections of Turkey's population with the exception of some marginal groups. Nation wide opinion polls are clear proof of this.

This power basis is composed mainly of conservatives and it reflects the values of average Turkish citizens. An average Turk is a moderate Muslim. As a consequence of this, our party represents the common values of a moderate Muslim population of Turkey. We aim at consolidating the democratic and secular character of the Turkish society without alienating our power basis.

I now turn to our Party's views on the terrorist attacks of September 11th. Our Party strongly condemns this horrendous attack, which caused the death of about 3,000 innocent people. No reason can justify such barbaric act of violence.

We in Turkey felt deep in our hearts the sorrow of the American people who lost their beloved ones. Nothing can console such a big loss. We understand fully the reaction of the American nation.

The September 11th incidents constitute a very important milestone in the initiation of the cooperation to combat international terrorism. Our Party believes that military measures will not be sufficient to eliminate terrorism. Better mutual understanding between the Muslim world and the West is perhaps as important as military measures, if not more.

At this point a country like Turkey and a political party like ours can make valuable contributions to this mutual understanding. In fact, Turkey has a long tradition of religious tolerance, which prevailed throughout several centuries of Ottoman era. Democracy functions in Turkey despite certain discrepancies and secularism is a constitutional order in Turkey although its definition is still a subject of controversy. Turkey can serve as an example with these characteristics.

Our Party is prepared to make its contribution to the combat against international terror. We will make this contribution not only for the sake of cooperating with the international community in such an important and noble task, but also because of our obligation towards our power basis, which is composed of moderate Muslims. Our party is not only strongly condemning terror, but has also adopted a clear stand against all authoritarian, dictatorial, and anachronistic regimes and

governments, which oppress their people, violate fundamental rights and freedoms and have closed their doors to the rest of the world.

Now I will say a few words on our Party's views on foreign policy.

Turkey is situated in a geographical location neighboring three unstable regions which affect the security of the West, namely the Balkans, Caucasias, and the Middle East. The Caucasias and the Middle East are important regions as they are important energy sources for the West. Instability in the Balkans is important, because of its negative implications on the security of the western European countries.

Apart from these three regions, Turkey has also close cultural and historical ties with the Turkic CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) countries. These countries are located in a geographical region where the areas of influence of countries like China, Russia, India, and some extra-regional countries converge.

This geo-political location and connections of Turkey imputes responsibilities to Turkey on the one hand, while it offers opportunities to her on the other.

Furthermore the young and dynamic population of Turkey provides this country with a comparative advantage. The percentage of the age group 0-14 in the total population of the country is two times bigger in Turkey than in the western European countries. According to the forecast of the World Bank, this gap will increase even further by the year 2020, in favor of Turkey.

Our Party contemplates to use Turkey's advantages stemming from its geo-strategic location for the benefit of the regional or global peace and prosperity.

In its efforts to achieve the foregoing goals, Turkey regards the USA as its natural partner because of the global responsibilities that the USA assumes in the world.

Our Party's perception on Turkey's relations with the USA is based on these foundations.

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As most of you might know, Turkey is currently undergoing the worst economic crisis of the last fifty years. Although there have been some signals of recovery during the last few months, excessive dependence on the IMF funds keeps the economy at a very vulnerable state.

The most important reason of the crisis in Turkey is public's **lack of confidence** in the central government. Government's reluctance to fight corruption and incapability of the government officials make it impossible for Turkish people to trust the current government.

We are aware of the necessity of the economic reforms which are being carried out in Turkey. We cooperated with the ruling parties when the new Public Auctions Bill was voted. We acknowledge decoupling the management of state banks and politics.

On the other hand, we are regretfully watching government's resistance to these reforms. It is worth noting that several ministers were forced to resign because of their personal opposition to some of the reforms.

In order to make successful economic reforms, a government must have fully-extended public support. Public support to the current government has diminished. According to the latest polls, if there were elections today, none of the ruling coalition parties would be able to pass the 10% threshold that they need to be represented in the National Assembly.

Also, the government must assure that no part of the society is adversely affected by the reforms. Unfortunately, the reforms in Turkey were made without paying any attention to social consequences. In Turkish society, lots of people were impoverished and the income disparity got wider among segments.

AK Parti's economic mission is not only to enhance the happiness and welfare of Turkish people, but also to make Turkey a strong, stable and reliable country.

We favor free market economy. We are against state oriented approaches. We dismiss central economic planning.

We envision an economy management based on the principles of transparency and accountability. Our teams are composed of well-educated and reliable people who have very high ethical standards.

We are realistic and reformist. We always consider long term consequences of any economic decision. In terms of economy management, we denounce short sighted, populist approaches. We decreased the number of personnel in Istanbul Municipality while increasing the level and quality of our services. During the same period, the central government kept hiring more personnel.

We are determined to wipe out corruption.

We will make a realistic tax reform in order to prevent informal economy and establish integrity in tax paying. We will decrease the tax rates and simplify taxing system.

Turkey is not utilizing its potential of benefiting from the foreign direct investment flow. Turkey's share of the world's investment flow is less than 0.1 %.

We will do everything to attract foreign investment to Turkey. We will simplify procedures and establish one highly empowered authority that will deal with foreign investors. We will change the accounting procedures so that foreign companies will not have to pay taxes of the fictitious profits that arise from inflation.

We want to make sure that the business world will see Turkey as a reliable partner.

We are a political party which has the biggest public support in Turkey and which is determined to make all the necessary economic reforms.

I would not like to prolong any longer my statement. I thank you all for your attention and look forward to any questions you may wish to ask.

Questions & Answers

Question: You said Turkey can serve as a model. You also said you accept “the secular and democratic character” in Turkey although there were certain discrepancies and matters of controversy. Given the fact that the three political parties you belonged to previously were banned, do you believe that in spite of your problems with the secular system that your party can lead as well as explain Turkey to the rest of the world?

Erdogan: First of all, the definition of secularism and democracy in Turkey is not clear in the current system. We still do not have the Western type of secularism.

Question: You want the implementation of the Anglo-Saxon model in Turkey. And once that is accepted in Turkey, it can serve as a model to the Islamic world?

Erdogan: It could be any western model. With AK Party, there will be a smooth transition.

Question: How difficult will it be for AK Party to come to power given the present situation?

Erdogan: The backing of the population is crucial. The present unhappiness of people is inviting AK Party to lead the country. We want to accept the Copenhagen Criteria. You should not make laws for personal reasons; they should be made for the protection of the people.

Question: You said that your party will contribute greatly in the war against terrorism to the United States and that you see the United States as Turkey’s natural ally. Could you expand a little bit on that?

Erdogan: This is not a new thing. We are saying that this alliance will be perpetuated with AK Party, after it rallies the people’s support. As Turkish political history shows, we had continuity periods during times when one party ruled. Therefore, a government under AK Party will make the Turkey-U.S. alliance stronger.

Question: Given the fact that the previous parties you belonged to in the past have all been banned by the Constitutional Court, that you do not have the support of the Turkish Chief of Staff, and that the political model you represent is a threat to the model U.S. praises at this time, could you expand your views a little bit?

Erdogan: First of all, you misrepresent us because we are not a continuation of any party. Nor are we a party based on religion. We are based on humanity. Our aim is the happiness of our nation. We wish to elevate the democratic and political standards of our people. Our program and statutes are the guarantees of that. This is a brand new party, and you should consider the party as such. We have 73 founding members and only 3 of

them were formerly involved in politics. As a matter of fact, only 2 of my friends in this delegation have been in politics before, with the rest having 'zero-mileage'.

Question: What is your party's position on Turkey's accession to the European Union (EU)?

Erdogan: Our party is resolute in accession to the EU, and expects the EU to be resolute in admitting Turkey. That is why we have included the Maastricht Criteria for the economy and Copenhagen Criteria for human rights in our party program. We find the prolongation of Turkey's accession process wrong, because Turkey has a 42-43 year-long relationship with the EU. While some countries after only 4-5 years of relations with the EU have already had their time schedules on their way to accession, we get suspicious about the prospects for Turkey.

Question: Your program sounded good, but there is no denial that your party has some religious inclinations. And we know that Muslim principles are not conducive to secularism and other principles you have mentioned. If you mean that your party is going to combine these two, the history and the Muslim countries around the world show that this is not possible. So wouldn't you create a dichotomy that would keep the fighting going?

Erdogan: We believe that nobody should be persecuted for his beliefs. On the contrary, the state should protect them. I couldn't quite understand what you meant with 'party inclinations' because this party has no religious inclinations. This is different for me, as a person. Every single vote has to be respected. We are trying to establish a country with secular, democratic and social characteristics. If you can follow us, you can see that yourself. The essential point is to agree on the definition of the words.

Question: I would like to have your views on what kind of close partnership you are thinking of between the U.S. and Turkey as AK Party, given that opinion polls show that the Turkish public is generally against the war against terrorism as they see it as a war against Islam. Since public opinion is so important, what steps will your party take to ensure support?

Erdogan: On the contrary, the Turkish population has suffered very much from terrorism. There is a saying in Turkish, 'We already fell from the roof'. And while we were paying the price, about \$120 billion and 40.000 human lives, no other country helped Turkey. The Turkish people are against terrorism, but they want to find and punish the real ones. And they want to build a unified platform in the war against terrorism. This, we can see from the opinion polls. I think there is a sort of misunderstanding here.

Question: Regarding the Constitutional Court's decision, which says that you could not be elected as a deputy to the Parliament, a necessary step to becoming a Prime Minister, how would AK Party be affected if it were to continue without you?

Erdogan: The court decision does not say that I can't be an MP. With a vote of 6 against 5, it only stipulates that I can't be a founding member. Not to be a founding member does not mean you can't do politics. The Chief Prosecutor also wanted me to be banned from politics. But the judges voted 11 to 0 that I may continue in politics as a Chairman. And I'm doing politics as the leader of this party. When we founded AK Party, we established a new principle: AK Party is not a personal leader-centered party, it is a party based on principles not on one person. Our understanding of leadership is also different from other parties. To our understanding, leadership is not a representation of a monopolistic mentality. It is a product of collective leadership.

Question: Doug Frantz's article in the New York Times on January 8 says that you could not be elected as a deputy to the Turkish Parliament.

Erdogan: Frantz's interpretation is wrong. It's not the Constitutional Court, but the High Election Board that decides the issue.

Question: Do you support the U.S. efforts to punish Usama bin Laden and the likes? Secondly, what do you think of Israel's policies? And thirdly, what alternative would you propose to the IMF loans?

Erdogan: We already announced that we would agree with the decision that an international court yet to be established would take on bin Laden and the likes. We mentioned that this is what terrorists deserve. On the Middle East, I don't think Turkey has done what it should have done so far. We want a cease-fire in the region, and a lasting peace. We think that Turkey should take a bigger part in securing these aims in the region. As for the IMF, Turkey is already a founding member of the IMF. And the program that is being implemented is not a new program. Our problem with today's implementation is that, the national feelings are being hurt. And we think that the problems with the IMF will be minimized when the economic structure of Turkey stabilizes.

Question: You put forth the idea of Turkey as a model, which many Americans would like. Yet, some would say that democracy in most Islamic societies would only lead to government by religious extremists. If there is an election in Saudi Arabia today, some analysts say bin Laden would get more votes than King Fahd. What are your views on that?

Erdogan: I don't think such a situation would happen if this were a democratic state. If the state in question is a democratic one, they would be elected and then can be ousted in the next election. The particularity of democracy is that people can choose to eliminate.

Question: How do you foresee the future relations of Turkey with Iraq and Iran? Secondly, what advice would you give the U.S. on how it develops its relations with them? What is your view on Kurdish education?

Erdogan: It's a pity but Turkey does not have healthy relations with any of its neighbors, Iran and Iraq included. We favor the betterment of our neighborly relations with all of our neighbors. In Turkey, there is no societal tension or discrimination that stems from one's background. As we mentioned in our program, we consider ethnic differences as an asset as long as the unitary body is preserved. As long as the official language remains Turkish, we would like to allow the use of other languages.

Question: As a political party based on Muslim principles, meaning application of Shariah, can you implement democracy and human rights, because verse 51 of the Qu'ran, Chapter 5, stipulates that you should not make friends with Christians and Jews. Also, would you condemn the killings in Sivas while your government was in power?

Erdogan: These are totally different things from each other. The Qu'ran is a religious book; democracy is a form of government. It would be wrong to put both in the same category. The Qu'ran represents my own beliefs, but democracy represents my belief in what type of government there should be. It would be a mistake to go into the question of what happened in Sivas, because I am not the addressee of this question. It is not possible to accept what happened there within the context of cause and effect. While I was the Mayor of Istanbul, I was one of the first ones to condemn these events. That's why it would be wrong to put the blame on the entire party.

Question: You talked about a soft transition when you come to power. How can you improve relations with the secular establishment? What do you think of the National Security Council?

Erdogan: As AK Party, we don't have any problem with any institution. And we are trying to further our relations with all of them. And I have always stated one thing: the State should never persecute its children. Especially when these children are striving for the prosperity of our state. I believe this situation will improve in the future, because ultimately we have to sit around the same table. It helps no one to point out the negative aspects. We have to look on the positive side to try to build a brighter future.

Question: Is Hamas a terrorist organization in your view?

Erdogan: This issue is not within my area of expertise. If they are involved in terrorist activities, then they are terrorists, but it is not within my jurisdiction to judge that.

(Note: Mr. Erdogan responded to questions in Turkish. His answers were translated by Cuneyd Zapsu at AK Party.)