



PROJECT *on* Middle East Democracy

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“Is Turkey Becoming Less Democratic?”

The Project on Middle East Democracy

SEIU Building, 1800 Massachusetts Ave. NW

Monday, September 13, 12:00-1:30 PM

On Monday, September 13th, POMED hosted an event entitled “Is Turkey Becoming Less Democratic?” The event was moderated by **Bill Schneider**, Distinguished Senior Fellow and Resident Scholar at Third Way and the Omer L. and Nancy Hirst Professor of Public Policy at George Mason University. The discussion featured three panelists: **Gonul Tol**, Executive Director of the Center for Turkish Studies at the Middle East Institute; **Daniel Brumberg**, Director of the Muslim World Initiative at the U.S. Institute of Peace; and W. Robert Pearson, former U.S. Ambassador to Turkey and President of the International Research and Exchanges Board.

The panel focused on recent political developments in Turkey and explored recent concerns in Washington that Turkey, under the leadership of its AKP government, may be turning away from the West. The passage of a series of constitutional amendments on September 12th has added fire to a host of debates about the future of Turkey’s government and policy, both domestic and foreign. Panelists were asked to address the state of civil and political liberties in the country, as well as how the new constitutional amendments might affect Turkey’s political future.

In her prepared remarks, Gonul Tol contended **that recent claims that Turkey is turning eastwards are simplistic and cliché**. She asserted that Turkey is in many ways closer to the West than ever before, and pointed out that while considerable attention is paid to Turkey’s improved relations with Iran, little is said about Turkey’s improved relations with Serbia or other European states. She cautioned against assuming that Turkish leaders make decisions based merely on ideology, rather than national interests.

Tol said that it is important to look at the changing internal dynamics in Turkey. Although strained relations with some of its neighbors historically meant that the security establishment was the most influential actor in Turkish government, new regional dynamics have changed Turkey’s security perception. She asserted that Turkey now stresses the civil side of the civil-military balance and has prioritized the use of soft power in foreign policy. This has meant **the de-militarization and de-securitization of Turkey’s relations with other states**.

In addition, Tol recommended that observers not put too much stock in superficial debates about Turkish ideology. Turkey-Israel relations, for example, are based on Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians, and Tol pointed out that *any* Turkish government would oppose attacks on Palestinians or, in another example, a military strike on Iran. **She stressed that Turkey’s foreign policy reflects changes in the region, not changes in ideology**. She seemed optimistic that the current leadership wants to build a more democratic Turkey – although there are still shortcomings in areas such as

minority rights, Turkey is more democratic than it was 10 years ago. Tol concluded that **“Turkish democracy is on the right track,” and that Turkish leaders have the same goals as Western ones, including seeing a Middle East free of nuclear weapons and arriving at a just peace of the Israel-Palestine conflict.**

Daniel Brumberg spoke next, and he also expressed the sense that Turkey is better off today than in the past, but that there are still some worrisome trends taking place in the country. He asked whether Turkey is more liberal today, as well as whether the recent constitutional amendments contribute to or undermine the liberalization of Turkey. Brumberg noted that democracy flourishes best when there is a clear and unified conception of national identity, and that governance becomes difficult when political winners and losers are defined along cultural or ethnic lines. In the Middle East, Brumberg asserted, societies are “profoundly divided,” and debates about the role of religion in government pervade the region. He outlined **three models of how states manage difference**: 1) through **autocracy** or totalitarianism, by which one group completely represses the other; 2) through **liberalized autocracies**, in which there are surface-level political processes, channels for self-expression, and elections, but in which the ruling party is always guaranteed to win; and 3) through the **liberal democratic model**. In the Middle East, Brumberg asserted, the dominant model is the liberal autocracy model.

He asked whether the new constitutional amendments will undermine the balance of power in Turkey, as well as whether they will have an overall liberalizing effect. Although the answer is yet to be seen, Brumberg indicated that recent events point to reasons to be concerned: for instance, the Turkish government has been aggressive in prosecuting and repressing dissent.

Next, Ambassador Pearson expressed confidence that the Turks can and will solve any domestic disagreements that they might have. He argued that recent developments in Turkey represent fundamental changes in Turkish politics, and that Islam has been a growing force in the domestic sphere for decades. The Kemalist revolution was, Pearson stressed, truly revolutionary in that it created a totally new national identity and narrative. Although the original spirit was deeply democratic, however, he noted that Kemalists began acting as a more elite cadre over time.

The September 12th vote on a series of constitutional amendments, in Pearson’s view, represented a genuinely democratic move because they were generally free and fair, and there were no charges of fraud.

Pearson also reminded the audience that the U.S. understanding of internal dynamics in Turkey comes largely through the military establishment, since that is the group with which the U.S. government speaks. Pearson outlined **four factors that he thinks will affect the future of Turkish politics**: 1) The Kurds will try to broaden their base; 2) Institutions will need to adapt – specifically, Pearson asked what will happen in schools and the courts; 3) The anti-Americanism and even some anti-Semitism that exists in Turkey is harmful for democracy and may reveal broader trends that will hinder Turkey’s liberalization; and 4) Turkish leaders will continue to strive for EU membership.

Looking forward, Pearson predicted that **Prime Minister Erdogan** wishes to lead the government and will seek to become president in the 2012 elections or beyond. He also indicated that the AKP might propose a completely new constitution and use that constitution as a platform for the next elections. Pearson ended with a recommendation for U.S. policymakers: to support “a good opposition” in Turkish politics, so that alternative voices can be empowered to offer better ideas to Turkish voters.

In the question-and-answer session, Schneider asked whether any part of the referendum vote was undemocratic. Pearson responded that one shortcoming was that there was no thorough explanation of each of the 26 amendments to voters, and **Tol stated that some of the amendments may be detrimental for separation of powers** in the Turkish government (for example, the granting of additional executive control over the judiciary). She added that judicial impartiality is essential in Turkey, especially since Turkish courts have shut down political parties in the past. Brumberg, similarly, suggested that the courts may merely become an apparatus of the executive branch. Later in the question-and-answer session, an audience member brought up that although there was no evidence of fraud during the vote, the government has increased control over the media – to this, Pearson responded that media control was also a source of concern, both in general and in the run-up to the referendum.

Schneider also asked whether Turkey can be considered a model for democracy in the region, or an exception. Brumberg responded that Turkey is unique and should not necessarily be held up as the model of a liberal, democratic model in the Middle East. He argued that every state's political system is path-dependent, and that Turkey should be analyzed in light of its unique history and development. Tol and Pearson responded, similarly, that Turkey is a unique case, and Pearson added that calling Turkey a model for democracy in the region would distort the role that Turks actually seek to play in the Middle East.

Schneider also asked whether the U.S. should be concerned about the referendum in terms of the implications it might have for the role of religion in Turkish politics. **Tol noted that religiosity is on the rise globally and that Turkey is no exception. However, the emergence of a new identity that involves religion should not be perceived as threatening to the U.S.** Brumberg said that the exact role of religion in the Turkish government will be determined by the ruling party – as such, we will have to wait and see what factions win out, and how internal decisions about the party's identity and platform play out in policy.

One audience member asked whether the new constitutional amendments strengthened civilian control of the military, as well as minority rights. Tol responded that it is a shortcoming of the constitutional reforms that they do not address minority rights; the amendments *do*, however, empower civilian courts and hold military courts more accountable.

Overall, the panelists' remarks provoked thoughtful discussion and provided a fruitful launching point for understanding the current political dynamics in Turkey, as well as how Turkish domestic and foreign policy might develop in the near future.