

Canadian NATO
Parliamentary Association



Association parlementaire
canadienne de l'OTAN

**Report of the Canadian Parliamentary Delegation
Visit to Turkey by the Sub-Committee on
Democratic Governance
Canadian NATO Parliamentary Association (NATO PA)
Ankara and Istanbul, Turkey
March 24-27, 2008**

Report

On March 24-27, 2008, the Sub-Committee on Democratic Governance of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly's Committee on the Civil Dimension of Security visited Ankara and Istanbul, Turkey. The delegation was composed of 15 members of parliament from 10 different countries and was led by the Chairman, Tchetin Kazak (Bulgaria). Canada was represented by Senator Percy Downe, Mr. Leon Benoit, M.P., Mr. Art Hanger, M.P. and Mr. John McKay, M.P.

TURKEY'S EU ACCESSION PROCESS

Turkey's accession process to the European Union featured prominently in the delegation's discussions. Turkey first expressed an interest in relations with the-then European communities in 1958, and an association agreement was signed a few years later in 1963. Turkey formally applied for membership in 1987, but proper accession negotiations did not start until June 2006. Six chapters of the *acquis communautaire* - the EU's body of legislation - were opened, and one of them was immediately completed. Shortly thereafter, a controversy erupted following Turkey's refusal to open its ports and airports to vessels from the-then new EU member Cyprus. As a result, the EU decided to freeze negotiations on six related chapters. Most recently, French President Sarkozy publicly declared that the opening of chapters of the *acquis* dealing directly with membership-related issues should be postponed until a group of wise men is appointed to consider the long-term issue of the EU's final borders. Following President Sarkozy's proposals, the EU Council decided to appoint a wise men's group on the borders of the EU in December 2007 and agreed on a new initiative for the Mediterranean in March 2008.

Parliament and government officials reaffirmed Turkey's unwavering commitment to EU integration, emphasising that there is no question about Turkey's European vocation. Turkey will therefore continue with the reform process, which officials emphasised is necessary for Turkey regardless of the pace of EU negotiations.

Michael Vögele from the EU Commission delegation in Turkey confirmed that, while negotiations were frozen on six chapters, technical co-operation continued on other matters according to the agreed negotiating framework. President Sarkozy's suggestion to freeze other chapters had not so far been endorsed by the EU Council, and therefore had no binding value for the Commission. Nevertheless, Mr. Vögele regretted that little progress had been made in 2007 due to the political crisis in Turkey in the context of the election of Abdullah Gül to the presidency. He hoped that now that the crisis had been successfully resolved, work could re-start on the areas that the EU has identified as problematic.

Mr. Vögele also mentioned the outstanding problems relating to the freedom of assembly and association, the status of religious minorities, economic and social rights, women and children's rights, and torture and ill treatment, while acknowledging the progress made on all these issues. Answering questions from the delegation, he clarified that the recognition of the so-called Armenian genocide was not a requirement for EU membership. Additionally, the EU understood the sensitivities of the Kurdish issue and, although it was monitoring the situation, it also recognised that a solution needed to be found domestically.

TURKEY'S REGIONAL ROLE

The delegation also learned about Turkey's relations with its neighbours to the East and to the South. The end of the Cold War opened new opportunities for Turkey in the region. As a consequence, it has had to redefine its relations with Russia and with countries in the South Caucasus and Central Asia.

Officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs pointed out that Turkey and Russia have a long and tumultuous, common history. Relations developed very fast in the 1990s, driven in particular by a boom in economic and trade links between the two countries. Following a series of milestone events, including the first visit of a Russian president to Turkey in modern history in 2004, the two countries have established an "enhanced multidimensional partnership". Elements of this relationship include: 28 billion US dollars of bilateral trade in 2007; over 6 billion US dollars of direct Turkish investments in Russia; 2.5 million Russian tourists travelling to Turkey in 2007; major energy links between the two countries - Turkey depends on Russia for 60% of its gas supplies and 29% of its oil supplies; annual bilateral diplomatic consultations on a broad range of topics; a 2001 joint action plan for co-operation in Eurasia; and participations in regional organisations in the Black Sea region - BSEC, BLACKSEAFOR / Black Sea Harmony; and cultural exchanges.

Turkey's foreign policy in the South Caucasus and Central Asia aims at the establishment of stable and democratic countries, and the promotion of economic development and energy links. Additionally, Turkey has been wary of any territorial changes and played the role of a status quo power. In the South Caucasus, Turkey has constantly supported the principle of territorial integrity and the peaceful resolution of conflicts through existing negotiating frameworks. Relations with Armenia remain tense however, and the two countries are still looking for a win-win solution.

Following the end of the Cold War, Turkey nurtured the dream of renewing historical ties with Turkic countries in the South Caucasus and Central Asia. This dream however only partially came true, as the newly independent states in the post-Soviet space were preoccupied primarily with consolidating their statehood and national identity, and were therefore wary of any attempt by their neighbours to act as "big brothers". Academics argued that Turkey's influence in Azerbaijan and Central Asia today is mostly cultural and economic, with a strong presence of Turkish businesses in the region. One expert emphasised that to consolidate its role in those countries, Turkey needs to move beyond mere dreams, and adopt a realistic approach, which takes into account the influence of other key players in the region, particularly Russia, China and the United States.

Both officials and independent experts emphasised that Turkey's geostrategic position as a bridge to Eurasia and the Middle East should be regarded as a major asset for the EU. Turkey considers its relations with Europe on the one hand and with its neighbours to the East and to the South on the other, as complementary and mutually reinforcing; several speakers made it clear that Turkey understands that developing relations with its neighbours will make Turkey more attractive to the EU, and vice versa, enhancing relations with the EU will make Turkey more attractive to its neighbours.

TURKEY'S ENERGY POLICY

One of the priorities of Turkey's energy policy is the diversification of energy supplies and routes. In this regard, Hilmi Güler, Turkey's Minister of Energy, emphasised Turkey's ambition to become a major energy hub and presented plans to develop existing East-West and North-South corridors. Other priorities of Turkey's energy policy include: a diversification of the energy mix - including greater emphasis on renewable and nuclear energy; liberalisation of the energy market; research and development; and enhancing the physical security of energy infrastructures.

TIME TO REFORM TURKEY'S SECULARIST MODEL?

The visit came at a challenging moment in Turkey's political life, amidst evidence of an ongoing struggle between supporters of the ruling AKP party and secularist forces. This included tensions surrounding the election of Abdullah Gül to the presidency in 2007, opposed in particular by the military which warned against the Islamisation of Turkey; the controversy connected with a decision to lift the ban on headscarves in universities; and a petition to the Constitutional Court to ban the AKP and bar its main leaders from political activities.

Ali Bardakoglu, Head of the Directorate for Religious Affairs, presented some additional features of Turkey's model of secularism. He explained that the directorate acts as an "information bridge" to better explain to the population the sources of Islam. The directorate oversees the 80,000 mosques in the country and supervises the 80,000 religious officers employed by the state as civil servants, ensuring that religious life is conducted "in an organised and efficient way, satisfying the communities' needs". Although the directorate is not responsible for non-Muslim communities, it maintains excellent relations with the leaders of other faiths. A priority area for its work is the training of religious officers, regarding such issues as human rights protection, prevention of gender discrimination, environmental protection, etc. Another priority is to avoid any misuse of Islam by terrorists. The dominant version of Islam in Turkey is indeed characterised by tolerance, resistance to extremism, and compatibility with secularism.

THE "KURDISH ISSUE"

Another major domestic challenge relates to the situation of Turkey's Kurdish population. Mr. Candar argued that this was in fact the number one issue in Turkey. However, it is extremely sensitive; in fact, the existence of a "Kurdish issue" as such has never been officially acknowledged in Turkey and appears only latently in public discussions. Rather, the focus has been on promoting economic development in Turkey's Southeast and on fighting PKK terrorism. In contrast, Mr. Candar argued that

terrorism is only a by-product of the Kurdish question, and resolving this question would isolate the PKK and undermine its support base.

He explained that Kurds were well represented in the institutions, the civil service, and business. There are for instance some 95 members of parliament - including 75 elected under the AKP banner, and five or six ministers, of Kurdish descent. However, tensions appear whenever individuals or groups use their Kurdish identity as a basis for collective claims.

According to Mr. Candar, the creation of an autonomous Kurdish region in Iraq, while it could not serve as a direct model for Turkey, should prompt the current government to consider ways to address the political claims of Turkey's Kurdish population. One way would be to engage with the Iraqi province of Kurdistan. Such a gesture would send a positive message to Turkey's Kurdish population, amounting to a de facto acknowledgement of the Kurdish identity. Mr. Candar also suggested that, having received a strong mandate from the population in the 2007 elections, the government should deliver on its promise of a democratic and civilian constitution, and, in this context, promote a new definition of citizenship. While federalism is not an option for Turkey, the government should also consider measures granting greater self-government powers at the municipal level. Mr. Candar was confident that Turkey's EU accession process would help Turkey address the status of its Kurdish population.

Asked about the current state of discussions on a new constitution, Mr. Aydin explained that several drafts were being discussed. Initial steps have raised fears that the ruling party would present a new constitution without consulting other stakeholders. The official draft, commissioned by the AKP from a committee of lawyers, has not yet been made public. To ensure that a broad public debate takes place, a group of some 200 civil society organisations have come together to discuss the principles on which a new constitution should be based. This NGO consortium is now engaged in talks with the government, parliament and political parties.

FIGHTING AGAINST TERRORISM

Government officials confirmed that the fight against terrorism is one of Turkey's main priorities at home and abroad. Turkey considers that terrorism should be considered as a human rights violation, as well as a crime against humanity. It has developed a comprehensive national counter-terrorism policy, which does not focus exclusively on security, but also takes into account other economic, social, diplomatic and financial dimensions. Implementation of this policy involves various government departments, including the Turkish armed forces, which play a central role in policing border areas.

Respectfully submitted,

Mr. Leon Benoit, M.P.

Chair

Canadian NATO Parliamentary Association (NATO PA)

Travel Costs

ASSOCIATION	Canadian NATO Parliamentary Association (NATO PA)
ACTIVITY	Visit to Turkey by the Sub-Committee on Democratic Governance
DESTINATION	Ankara and Istanbul, Turkey
DATES	March 24-27, 2008
DELEGATION	
SENATE	Senator Percy Downe
HOUSE OF COMMONS	Mr. Leon Benoit, M.P. Mr. Art Hanger, M.P. Mr. John McKay, M.P.
STAFF	
TRANSPORTATION	\$19,598.95
ACCOMMODATION	\$3,360.31
HOSPITALITY	\$0.00
PER DIEMS	\$2,415.26
OFFICIAL GIFTS	\$0.00
MISCELLANEOUS/REGISTRATION FEES	\$79.17
TOTAL	\$25,453.69