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To: Foreign Affairs LA  
From: Kate Nahapetian, Government Affairs Director  
Date: November 30, 2005

Re: **“The Trouble with Turkey”**

I am writing to share with you a powerful Op/Ed in today’s Boston Globe by John Tirman, the Executive Director of the Center for International Studies at MIT. Tirman describes the Turkish government’s widespread attacks on freedom of expression, noting that:

“The powerful [Turkish] military, itself guided by Ataturk’s extreme nationalism, is now demanding **the prosecution of some 50 writers and publishers** for insulting the state, raising issues about Kurds in Turkey, and exploring the Armenian genocide of the First World War.”

In seeking to explain the silence of U.S. officials on these and other abuses, Tirman concludes that:

**“[T]he United States finds itself frustrated by a [Turkish] military it helped strengthen and train. And that explains why American political leaders have been mute on Turkey’s repression of free speech and the cascade of other misdeeds by the military.** We need them to behave in Iraq, and the price for that is silence on the relentless abuses of democratic values. It is reminiscent of America’s lavish support for the Shah of Iran in the 1970s and of Saddam Hussein in the 1980s.”

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In the ongoing debate about “democratization,” Turkey is a vivid example of how difficult it can be. Its inability to end old habits of repression and embrace democratic values presents an agonizing dilemma for Europe and a reminder of failed policies of the United States.

Formally a republic since the early 1920s, when its great military hero, Kemal Ataturk, carved out the modern Turkish state from the remains of the Ottoman Empire, Turkey has mostly had elected governments ever since. But it has been a “guided” democracy, and the guide in this case is the iron fist of the military. It remains so to this day, despite Turkey’s professed desire to become a member of the European Union.

The powerful military, itself guided by Ataturk’s extreme nationalism, is now demanding the prosecution of some 50 writers and publishers for insulting the state, raising issues about Kurds in Turkey, and exploring the Armenian genocide of the First World War. Among those being prosecuted is Fatih Tas, the publisher of a book I wrote in 1997 about US-Turkish relations, which he had translated and released in Turkey earlier this year. Among the cited crimes are my many interviews with Kurds who had been forcibly evacuated by the military and descriptions of the scale of human rights abuse, including 1 million displaced people, many of whom now live in shantytowns on the outskirts of Istanbul. He could go to prison.

Suppression of speech is not the only problem. Turkish forces recently bumbled a covert operation in the Kurdish areas of southwest Turkey, where they planted and exploded bombs to make it appear that the old Kurdish rebel group, the PKK, remained active and a threat to state security. It’s not the first time such nefarious activities have been exposed.

These are the actions of the “deep state,” that part of the permanent governing structure — security forces, intelligence operatives, paramilitaries — which abhors the possibility of EU standards being applied to them. So they create phony crises and arbitrary prosecutions to subvert those in Turkey who seek EU membership.

Politicians are typically afraid to confront the military over the abuses and bullying. Prime ministers have been overthrown by the military and even executed; the current constitution was written by the generals after a 1980 coup. Political discourse has always been curtailed, and most journalists, party leaders, and other public figures censor themselves.

For Europe, the dilemma in all this bad news is obvious. Does Turkey deserve EU membership? Many Europeans, some of them anti-Muslim, harbor grave doubts about admitting a poor country of 70 million whose dispossessed may swarm into the prosperous parts of the continent. They prefer to highlight the alarming human rights violations. But Turkey is serving up a ready-made excuse for rejection, with the state firmly in the grip of hard-line militarists.

For the US government, the chief promoter of Turkey’s EU ambitions, the policy choices are less stark but fraught with embittering irony. Turkey was for years the largest recipient of US military assistance after Israel and Egypt, including massive arms transfers - ostensibly as a hedge against the Soviet Union, and then Iran and Iraq. But Turkey refuses to do Washington’s bidding in the region, and anti-Americanism is at an all-time high. And the weapons Turkey received were used in the civil war with the Kurds that resulted in 40,000 killed.

Meanwhile, the United States is protecting Kurdish ambitions in Iraq, including its bid for the oil-rich city of Kirkuk. Turkey has vowed to “take action” should Kirkuk fall into Kurdish hands, since that would be the missing piece the Kurds need for secession and an independent Kurdish state. Turkey could intervene militarily, close oil pipelines, shut off water supplies, support militias and death squads - generally adding to the myriad forms of extreme violence that the war in Iraq has bred.

So the United States finds itself frustrated by a military it helped strengthen and train. And that explains why American political leaders have been mute on Turkey’s repression of free speech and the cascade of other misdeeds by the military. We need them to behave in Iraq, and the price for that is silence on the relentless abuses of democratic values. It is reminiscent of America’s lavish support for the Shah of Iran in the 1970s and of Saddam Hussein in the 1980s.

Such stratagems never work in the end. Democracy can’t flourish without sunlight, and now it is Washington, again, that is in the way.