

Responses to Philadelphia World Affairs Council

Q: As you more than well know, Turkey is geopolitically and strategically of great world significance and for these reasons has been considered an essential ally of the United States for many decades. How do you believe the United States should react to current political developments in Turkey, both the coup attempt and all that has followed in terms of President Erdoğan's sweeping moves to purge opposition figures from many institutions of Turkish society?

F.G. Indeed Turkey has been a member of NATO since the 1950s. In part because it was NATO's desire, and in part because of our respect for that organization we have fought in the Korean war. And indeed Turkey occupies a very important location geopolitically speaking. Turkey's location is critical for NATO's mission and the organization built an infrastructure in Turkey to be able to fulfill that mission. Incirlik air base is well known but the infrastructure is not limited to that base.

Right now, all critical voices are silenced in Turkey and only the voice of those in power is heard. Consequently both Turkish people and outside observers are misled. The misperception about the coup continues because there is only one voice. The government interprets everything according to their calculations. They are using this event to express the antipathy they already had against Hizmet movement. The coup attempt is serving to justify their plans to persecute Hizmet movement. International observers rightfully pointed out that the lists of people to be dismissed, detained or arrested were ready. Indeed this is a display of hate and rage that has been harbored by them but they acted so prematurely that they did not realize how this would be perceived. Experts and observers ask: How can you round up thousands of people the morning after the coup attempt calling them coup perpetrators, kicking them out of their homes, declaring them monsters? You pick up people, men and women, from their homes and subject them to despicable treatment. Their enmity was such that they could not even plan this persecution properly. The social historians and social psychologists of the future will analyze these events and these days will be recorded as dark pages in world history.

When something becomes a matter of international relations and diplomacy there can be reluctance about taking certain actions that would otherwise be very reasonable. There is an alliance that dates back 60 years, the two countries stood and walked together for democracy. The relationship cannot be cut because of a single incident.

I don't see it as possible that the U.S. could view Turkish government's actions positively. I think they are concerned about cutting this 60-year old relationship completely, destroying what has been built so far, or making a diplomatic mistake. But I don't believe this will continue forever. There can be reactions and even sanctions from the world, from the European Union or European Parliament.

I think at some point international human rights organizations, intellectuals, legal organizations may react and push states to act, saying enough is enough. Perhaps in realizing that they cannot afford to be completely cut off from the world, Turkish leaders might change course.

Of course there are also actions that should be taken in terms of diplomacy. The United States is a country with 200 years of experience of governing a diverse population. I think the U.S. is now putting this experience into use.

Q: It's widely reported that you and many of your followers were considered, and considered yourselves, allies of Erdoğan and his party when he came to power originally in Turkey on a campaign platform urging substantial changes in the rigidly secularist ideology which had ruled Turkey since Kemal Atatürk. Is it correct that you started as allies and, if so, what has been the path that led to the present extreme estrangement?

F.G. I have never been close to Erdogan and have never felt close to him. I have known former prime minister and then president Demirel. I met former president Ismet Inonu but I was a child then. I cannot talk about having sympathy or apathy toward him because I was a child. But I knew Mr. Demirel as a political leader and I had respect for him because he was promoting democracy, human rights and a moderate form of secularism, not a rigid and aggressive form of secularism but a mild one. A secularism that respects every person and every worldview. That was necessary for Turkey to be better integrated with the world. Then came Mr. Turgut Ozal who also promised the same things. He was influenced by American culture and he knew the world. We had a personal friendship with him but more importantly because of his promises I supported him. People around me who shared my feelings supported him. The late Prime Minister Mr. Bulent Ecevit also promoted democracy and was respected by Hizmet participants. Indeed, whoever promoted democracy, universal human rights were supported by Hizmet movement participants.

When Mr. Erdogan began preparing to start his own political party, he visited me. This was our first face-to-face meeting with him. I advised him regarding his relationship with Mr. Necmeddin Erbakan, the leader of the party he was planning to depart from, and with the military, which staged multiple coups in the past and had significant power on domestic politics. I urged him to avoid confrontation with either Mr. Erbakan or the military. But I later learned that on his way out in the elevator, Mr. Erdogan told the person next to him that this movement should be finished off at the first opportunity. Therefore, despite the fact that the movement was much smaller at that time, it was still disturbing to him.

The reason for them to appear warm to the movement for a while is now becoming more clear, thanks to statements by people close to Erdogan. They were expecting Hizmet participants around the world to act like members of Turkish foreign corps.

Hizmet participants have been engaged in dialogue activities, promoting universal human values, organizing cultural festivals, bringing all colors of the world together, They were expected by Mr. Erdogan to promote him as a great leader and in particular the leader of all Muslims in the world. Such a promotion of an individual cannot be reconciled with promoting universal human values.

But he did not welcome this attitude. Despite the fact that Hizmet participants around the world have not been against him, he regarded their lack of enthusiastic support for him as a sign of opposition.

Then he began threatening to close down the college prep courses years before the public corruption probe. He himself said that he changed four ministers of education to be able to implement his plan against the schools. When the public corruption probe surfaced it was immediately blamed on the movement. I still don't know who wiretapped their conversations. Were they domestic or foreign intelligence agencies? I don't know the members of the judiciary who conducted the investigation. I came to know them when their images began to appear on TV. But after blaming the probe on the movement they began jailing people, appointing trustees to companies. Those so-called trustees took advantage of their positions to oppress people, and they became vehicles for confiscation of private property. The government silenced all positive voices. All of this happened prior to the latest coup incident. It is now understood that they have been seeking a one-man regime all along. On the wall of Turkish parliament it is written that "sovereignty belongs to people unconditionally". His ambition was to acquire sovereignty unconditionally for himself. He still has not abandoned that ambition.

For a while he used the members of the judiciary to bring part of the military under his tutelage. Once he achieved that he turned around and let them out of prison, made an alliance with them, including Maoists, to target the very same members of the judiciary that he used before. He used hate speech openly, he slandered people.

This latest incident in July was also used to the same effect. In the future, when social historians, psycho-sociologists analyze these events the ugliness of all of these will emerge.

Q: Did your lack of support for Erdogan's idea of an executive presidential system play a role in the split between AKP and Hizmet movement?

F.G. I don't feel qualified to comment on the presidential system that but I don't see the kind of system they are seeking as appropriate for Turkey. Such a system can cause polarization and cracks in the society. What should be done instead is to make the present system more democratic. Many times I wished they would examine the laws of United Kingdom, the constitution of the United States and consider them in drafting the Turkish constitution. I see this very important for integration with the world. Therefore they could not get the support they were seeking from me due to

my concerns. Perhaps that disturbed him a lot because he was seeking absolute power for himself and was seeing himself as the leader of all Muslims of the world. His inner circles kept praising him. When they did not get the response they expected, perhaps that disturbed them a lot.

Q: For many Americans, of many different political persuasions actually, the lessons of events and of American policy itself in the Middle East, and the greater Islamic world, since 9/11/2001, is that the old U.S. Cold War strategy of accepting the rule of any friendly dictator, so long as stability is maintained within that regime's nation, is preferable to the violent and tumultuous forces unleashed by any fracturing of dictatorial stability, regardless of the human rights implications of such a policy. If you could advise the American people about a proper role for the United States in the Middle East and the wider Muslim world, would you advise in favor of supporting stability at any cost, as the lesser of the evils available, or would you advise any form of engagement aimed at allowing the more complete expression of human rights in these societies?

30:32

F.G. The United States has strategic thought organizations, the think tanks. They have been leading the world for years. Due to this leadership experience, what these institutions say will probably be the last word on this matter. A totalitarian system can be tolerated temporarily as the lesser one of two evils. But at the same time, they can try to do what is feasible in order to help a nation get out of a whirlpool, in alliance with the world, through measures that have teeth. If this is the long-term plan, than a totalitarian system can be tolerated for the short term. But to turn a blind eye to such a system indefinitely is disrespect to humanity.

There are five essentials that religion and modern legal systems seek to protect: Life and physical health, religion, mental health, family and dignity, and property. A sixth element can be added, and that is freedom. Bediuzzaman says that "I can tolerate hunger and thirst, but I cannot be without freedom". For a human to be truly human, they need to be free. To deprive anyone of freedom is disrespect to all humanity.

This is what is going on in Turkey today. Human rights are being trampled upon. I seek your excuse but there are reports of rapes. Dead people are piled on top of each other like haystacks. Even the right to a proper burial is denied to some people.

Q: Most Americans, and indeed people around the world, first heard about you and your movement at the moment on the night of July 15th when President Erdoğan accused you of being behind the attempted military coup in Turkey. What should our audience and other concerned citizens know about you, your history and your movement, to put the current controversy into what you see as proper context?

42:40

F.G. Hizmet movement participants have established schools around the world without discriminating colors, valuing every human being simply because they are human beings. In the face of terrible weapons of today, trying to bring together fellow human beings, facilitating their conversation and reconciliation, blocking the paths that lead to violent conflicts, God willing. As pointed out by an intellectual at the beginning of the last century we face three major problems: One is poverty which led to a struggle between the communist and the capitalist systems in history. Prevention of poverty by establishing systems for investment so that everybody can have their livelihood somehow. Struggle against poverty, against ignorance and against conflicts and polarization of the society driven by intolerance. These are problems of all humanity. These problems continue in the presence of weapons much more powerful than those dropped on Japan in the 1945s, may God protect us. The best way to prevent conflicts with catastrophic results is to integrate the white with the black, the blue, the pink, and the orange. Can we prevent such conflicts completely? But we must do what we can and then we leave the rest to God. This was the foundational idea of Hizmet movement.

People who devoted themselves to Hizmet movement acted with this perspective. How can we be sure that this is indeed the case? I think the latest episode in Turkey can be seen as a bright mirror on this matter. The institutions established by Hizmet movement participants were confiscated. People were subjected to oppression and tyranny, molestation, and unlawful acquisition of their private properties. My heart is aching. There are institutions where I stayed, where I worked in the construction of, like a construction worker. They confiscated all of them. They kicked all the people in those institutions out. Properties, companies of business owners have been transferred to the regulatory agencies. These are matters that touch one's heart. As I am touched and you are touched, so are thousands of people. Thousands of people have been left without food or drink in detention centers. In the face of all this oppression, not a single individual attempted to raise their fist. If this is not proof that this movement is a humanitarian movement, then I think there is a serious case of blindness.