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Congressional Human Rights Caucus Task Force on International Religious Freedom **“Religious Freedom in Turkey: With a New Government in Power, Has Anything Changed for Religious Believers?”**

Cannon House Office Building, Room 201

Tuesday, July 8, 2008 12pm

The Congressional Human Rights Caucus Task Force on International Religious Freedom invited **Ziya Meral**, a Turkish researcher, and **Patricia Carley**, Policy Director for the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom to lead a staff briefing on the current political and social scene within Turkey and religious freedom. **All comments were made off the record.**

Patricia Carley reviewed the recent moves by the AKP party and the Turkish military, as well as the constitutional case regarding the use of headscarves in the public sphere and the ongoing case regarding the legality of the AKP party. She highlighted two **key issues that continue to frame these debates; secularism and national identity.**

Turkey defines secularism differently from the U.S. “Separation of Church and State” framework, and calls for **state control over, and sometimes hostility to, religious expression.** Historically, this has been controversial among Turks, and the AKP has its roots in this movement.

National identity has been linked to a fear of territorial dismemberment and can be seen in various laws aimed to undermine religious and ethnic minorities (religious minorities tend to also be ethnic minorities).

Regardless of whether one sees the AKP party as a moderate political party, or whether it is merely masking more radical objectives, the **AKP’s platform is in line with international standards and banning the party could be disastrous for democracy in Turkey.**

Ziya Meral believes that the current debate is evidence of birthing pains, as Turkey struggles to move toward a post-modern, post-national identity while trying to hold onto a 19th century idea of a nation state.

Seen as Pro-Western, pragmatic and genuinely interested in democracy, **the AKP party gave hope to many religious minorities that Turkey’s political landscape would be reformed to make space for them.** Over the last 6 years, the AKP party has carried out various reforms, including the Association and Foundations laws, and reports of torture have decreased.

Currently, however, there is **some disillusionment with the party.** Private attacks on non-Muslims have increased and the AKP has failed to speak out against the rhetoric by key

individuals that religious missionaries are trying to destroy Turkey from within.

When asked about how religious minorities may respond if the AKP party is banned, Carley suggested that **religious minorities are placed between a rock and a hard place. Though perhaps currently disillusioned by the AKP, they do not want to see the return to the previous political status quo in Turkey.** Meral suggested that banning the party may actually make the party more popular as people may be increasingly irritated with the traditional party.

When asked what the U.S. or E.U. can do, Carley noted that many believe that if the AKP party is banned, **Turkey's bid to join the E.U. will be over—or at least seriously postponed.** Meral suggested that **public U.S. involvement could backfire**, as anti-American sentiments run high in Turkey. Instead, he recommended that the **E.U. take the lead by invoking the European Convention on Human Rights instead of supporting a particular party.**