Nuclear Questions

We experienced SOMA. In addition, if you think three years ago that the PM defended it by saying “There are no investments without risk. So you shouldn’t put bottled gas in your home as well”...

It is clear that we should question the media and the stated approach to Turkey's nuclear energy project. Everyone must be on guard. This is how I approached the "Weapons of Mass Destruction and Nuclear Energy in the Middle East" workshop organized by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in Istanbul. Think-tanks like the Stanley Foundation and CNS participated in the meeting, and I took notes on Turkey during the meetings. There are many critical questions that Turkey should respond to related to its nuclear energy program.

1- Saudi Arabia, Jordan, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Egypt, Turkey... All of these countries in the Middle East are pursuing nuclear energy. But none of them has adequate experts for it. For example, Ariane Tabatabai, who works on nuclear disarmament at Harvard University, said that there is only one expert in the UAE; in Saudi Arabia, there is also only one. Turkey is relatively well-off from a technical perspective. There are academics who have taken senior positions in the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), like one of the conference participants Professor Necmi Dayday. But, for example, the only senior faculty member who gets to grapple with security and arms control issues is Prof. Dr. Mustafa Kibaroğlu. Does the Turkish academy prepare itself for this job? Does the Turkish Government build staff from the Foreign Ministry to the Chief of Staff?

2- Even if the experts exist, Turkey does not have the necessary legal infrastructure for the supervision of nuclear energy plants. For example, Turkey Atomic Energy Agency (TAEK) will be responsible for the regulation and operation of nuclear plants. In addition, it is not clear to what extent TAEK would be effective in making the decisions in the Akkuyu Plant owned by the Russian company Rosatom. For example, let's say an accident occurred. Would the Russian company make decisions taking into account its property or the public safety? And what would the role of TAEK be in this decision? This is what happened in Fukushima. Despite the oppositions of the company, the engineer in the field flooded and cooled the plant with the sea water, reducing the impact of the disaster, but destroying the hardware of the facility. Is the regulation in Turkey prepared for this scenario?

3- The agreement made in 2010 with the Russians for Akkuyu has many outstanding issues. The plant will be Russian property on Turkish soil. When I talked to Kibaroğlu and Dayday, I understood that even the IAEA representative who will be responsible for security audits, called “safeguards,” in Akkuyu has not yet been determined. The Russians will begin the construction, but when will IAEA begin its supervision? Is it when the Russians declare they want it? A senior American nuclear energy expert said, “Considering the high safety net level of the nuclear plants, it is possible to assume that
there is a Russian base in Turkey with Akkuyu.” Did the Turkish Government make the necessary works about the safety aspect of the job?

4- The most critical link in transforming nuclear energy into nuclear weapons is the fuel. However, according to Çiğdem Bilezikçi Pekar’s report, published last month by EDAM, one of Turkey’s best think tanks, it is not yet clear how Ankara will implement a program to manage the fuel used in the nuclear power plants. Turkey will be obliged to store highly radioactive used fuel after the re-processing application. Nuclear disarmament is another issue in addition to the environmental dimension. How will this be addressed? Why is there no information available?

5- Scott Sagan from Stanford University made a spectacular presentation about the acquisition of nuclear weapons and democracy. One graph shows how nuclear weapons programs take shape after signing The Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). And while democratic countries such as Switzerland, Sweden, and Australia finalize their programs without any tricks once they sign NPT, non-democratic countries such as Iran, North Korea, Syria continue with them. I know that this is a much broader subject. But while Turkey moves towards nuclear energy, does its democratization continue at the same rate in terms of the creation of institutions to oversee this process? How will the most important actors make up for the deficiency of the free press and civil society in this process?

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After SOMA, after the tendency towards authoritarianism, I do not trust in nuclear. And I will try to convey what I have learned as the occasion arises.