



TCA's First Annual Turkish American Women Leadership Forum

**Washington, D.C.
March 11-12, 2019**

Executive Summary

On March 11-12, 2019, the Turkish Coalition of America held its First Annual Turkish American Women Leadership Forum in Washington, D.C.

34 distinguished female community leaders from all regions of the United States traveled to the nation's capital for discussions on enhancing women's political engagement. Delegates came from the District of Columbia and 15 states—California, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Texas, Virginia, and Washington.

The Forum highlighted the leadership role that Turkish American women can play in their communities in reaching out to their elected representatives and raising the Turkish American voice on the local, state and federal levels.

The program included panel discussions on issues pertinent to Turkish American women, the responsibilities of congressional offices, the importance of maintaining continuous dialogue with elected officials, entrepreneurship, perspectives on U.S.-Turkey relations, women's rights and activism and women in U.S. politics.

Monday, March 11, 2019

Welcome Reception and Dinner

TCA President G. Lincoln McCurdy welcomed the participants, provided an overview of TCA's mission, programs, and activities. He also underlined the importance of having the Turkish American voices heard on Capitol Hill and need for grassroots activism at the local level.

Session I: Turkish American Women Activism

After the networking reception, women leaders from five Turkish American cultural associations across the United States got together on a panel to discuss issues pertaining their respective communities. The panelists provided the following regional updates:

- San Diego, CA: The Turkish American community has been working on the “House of Turkey” project to fund a Turkish cultural heritage center at Balboa Park, which attracts 13 million visitors each year. The project has raised \$250000 and the construction of the House of Turkey will begin in June 2019. (<http://houseofturkey.org>)

- Bay Area, CA: The Turkish American community is establishing a referral service and hotline to find internships, creating a database of Turkish American professionals, and building the first Turkish American community center in Northern California under the leadership of a new organization titled “Empowering Turkish American Community” (ETAC). (<http://etacusa.org>)

- Los Angeles, CA: Association of Turkish Americans of Southern California (ATASC) is the umbrella organization that has four semi-autonomous organizations that cover the vast geography and size of the community. (<http://www.atasc.org>) The members organize fundraisers for local schools, homeless shelters, and hospitals. ATASC also runs an 8-month long, vigorous Turkish American Women’s leadership education program to empower disempowered rural and immigrant women.

- Seattle, WA: Turkish American Cultural Association of Washington (TACA) has a Turkish school that teaches Turkish language and culture to Turkish American children, and provides after-school activities. The Turkish American community in the Pacific Northwest organizes the TurkFest, hosts lectures and discussions, as well as a Republic Day ball each year. TACA also organizes a Turkish film festival and International Children’s Friendship Festival with representation from 40 countries and features cross-cultural learning activities for children and families. (<http://www.taca.org>)

- New Jersey: The Turkish American community hosts women representing Turkish NGOs at United Nations conferences. They also encourage young women to be politically engaged and to support Congressional candidates for their causes. The community focuses on training women of all ages in the tri-state area to empower them in the areas of politics, business, and gender equality.

- Washington, D.C.: the American Turkish Association of Washington, D.C. has a long history of women presidents and a majority female board of directors. ATADC’s mission is to promote Turkish culture and heritage through the famous Turkish Festival, and to strengthen the Turkish American community through educational programs at the Ataturk School and workshops for teachers. Every year they host a women’s day to increase awareness on vital issues concerning women globally and raise money to support their

causes. They also recognize and award inspiring Turkish American women, reflecting a theme of women supporting each other. (<https://www.atadc.us>)

Following the panel, the participants continued to network and held group discussion on the leadership roles women play in the Turkish American community.

Tuesday, March 12, 2019

Session II: Breakfast with Democratic Congressional Staff Members

On Day II of the Turkish American Women Leadership Forum, at breakfast, participants got together with senior staff members, i.e. chiefs of staff and their legislative aides that work for Democratic members of Congress. They had the chance to ask their questions about the legislative processes such as drafting bills, letters, and amendments. The staff members underscored the importance of voice of the constituents, actively participating and working with representatives. They encouraged the participants to reach out to their elected officials to educate them on issues that matter to the Turkish American community. They also mentioned that, while there is still no gender parity among the chiefs of staff, more women have taken these leadership positions compared to the past.

Session III: Women in U.S. Politics

This panel featured a former member of Congress and senior staff members and focused on the change in the 116th Congress with the record increase in the proportion of women elected officials. The question of “why women don’t run for office” due to lack of confidence or support has now been replaced by “why so many women are running now” since they are energized and encouraged.

The panelists highlighted that organizations such as Emily’s List have and continue to help running female candidates and highlight the rising role models in American politics. They argued that women help figure out the path forward, to get bipartisan support, and get things done. They also encouraged the delegates that being politically involved and becoming a political leader can happen at any level, local or congressional, as long as women leaders believe in what they can accomplish. One panelist noted the necessity of being prepared to run and the necessity of fundraising.

In addressing a common concern about motherhood being a limiting factor, one panelist stated that she uses being a mother as a factor that energizes and motivates her political engagement as she wants a better country for her children. The speakers and the audience discussed the challenges to paid family leave and more readily available childcare facilities in the public sector in the US.

The panelists also underlined the need for more women constituent voices to be heard at the congressional level, as the disproportionate number of letters that congressional offices receive are from men. They also discussed the role that social media plays in “alternative facts” and how women need to speak their truth and push back when necessary.

Session IV: Perspectives on US-Turkey Relations

The fourth session was dedicated to the Turkish and American perspectives on the outstanding issues in the bilateral relationship. While there have been several challenges to the U.S.-Turkey relationship, all panelists agreed that it is too vital to abandon.

From Turkey's perspective, the NATO withdrawal of Patriot missiles has left southeastern Turkish airspace vulnerable to aerial threats from the Middle East, leading to the S-400 air and missile defense system deal with Russia. Ankara has long criticized the U.S. support to the PKK-linked YPG in Syria. Turkey's unmet extradition request for Fethullah Gulen in the aftermath of the failed coup attempt in July 15, 2016 also remains as an irritant in the relationship.

From the U.S. perspective, a Turkish purchase of a Russian weapons system is likely to trigger the "Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions Act" (CAATSA) upon the delivery of S-400 systems.

While some panelists were cautiously pessimistic about the challenges ahead, they mentioned that NATO is focused very strongly on keeping the Alliance intact. It was also argued that people-to-people exchanges are key to the economic and social fiber of US-Turkey relations. Hence the US should value its North Atlantic economic partnerships more bilaterally and move forward in the private sector and economic cooperation with Turkey.

Session V: Luncheon with Congresswoman Virginia Foxx

The delegates met with Congresswoman Virginia Foxx (R-NC/5th) for a luncheon at the Capitol Hill Club. Rep. Foxx motivated the women to work hard, not get discouraged to run for public office, and to use their talents in political life. She also encouraged them to reach out to their members of Congress with issues of federal importance and get in touch with their district offices.

Session VI: Turkish American Women's Business Success Stories

This panel was dedicated to issues pertaining Turkish American women's career journeys, female mentorship, and overcoming the glass ceiling. Successful Turkish American businesswomen told their personal stories, how they handled challenges and opportunities, and shared views on having children and a successful career at the same time.

They argued that at the workplace, women need to stand against gender discrimination, be assertive, and utilize the benefits of their heritage. They should also mentor young professional women, help with referrals, and share opportunities with the members of the Turkish American community. The panelists also reminded the participants that women need to give themselves credit for balancing their family and work schedules while pursuing success.

Session VII: Women's Rights and Activism in Turkey

This panel focused on gender issues and ways to promote women's participation in politics in Turkey. While women's suffrage was granted in December 1934 in Turkey, long before many

other Western societies, very few women run for public office. The panelists also highlighted the importance of effective implementation of laws protecting women, gender equality, and eliminating domestic violence.

One panelist shared her experience in refugee integration projects in Turkey, since Turkey has accepted a tremendous number of refugees and women have taken active roles in overcoming their trauma through compassion.

Session VIII: Tour of the U.S. Capitol led by Congresswoman Virginia Foxx

The delegates received an exclusive tour of the U.S. Capitol and a briefing by Congresswoman Virginia Foxx (NC-5th) in the chamber of the U.S. House of Representatives on the operational procedures of Congress. Rep. Foxx provided the delegates a rare opportunity of sitting on the floor where the President of the United States delivers the State of the Union Address. She also showed them how votes are casted on the House floor.

Session IX: Reception on Capitol Hill

TCA organized a reception, in cooperation with the Co-Chairs of the Congressional Caucus on US-Turkey Relations and Turkish Americans, in honor of the Turkish American Women Leadership Forum delegates, at Rayburn Office Building.

Members of Congress who attended the reception were Representatives Don Beyer (VA-8th), Steve Cohen (TN-9th), Tom Cole (OK-4th), Eddie Bernice Johnson (TX-30th), Ann McLane Kuster (NH-2nd), Tom Malinowski (NJ-7th), Carol Miller (WV-3rd), Rep. Jimmy Panetta (CA-20th), Guy Reschenthaler (PA-14th), and Joe Wilson (SC-2nd). Several of the women delegates were able to meet with their members of Congress as constituents.

Officials from the Turkish Embassy in Washington, D.C. and representatives of the Turkish American organizations also attended the reception to meet the delegates.

Session X: Dinner with Congressman Steve Chabot

Congressman Steve Chabot (R-OH/1st), a Co-Chair of the Congressional Caucus on U.S.-Turkey Relations and Turkish Americans (Turkey Caucus), spoke at the concluding dinner. He underlined the importance of the US-Turkey alliance and answered the participants' questions on the outstanding issues in the bilateral relations. He explained to them his committee assignments pertaining foreign affairs. Congressman Chabot also encouraged the delegates to meet with their members of Congress.