

## Insights into Turkish Domestic and International Politics during July 2012

### Key Points:

- *Syria is in the grips of a full fledged civil war, with opposition forces assassinating the country's minister of defense and other high ranking officials in a Damascus meeting of senior regime officials.*
- *Fighting has escalated near the Turkish-Syrian border. Turkish military units are being deployed as a precaution, especially in light of reports of PKK forces seizing portions of northern Syria.*
- *Oil exports from the Kurdish region of Iraq to Turkey continues to draw the ire of government officials in Baghdad. However, despite the disputes, cooperation on projects will likely continue.*
- *Azerbaijan's energy minister weighed into the NABUCCO West Vs TAP debate, saying the former was the best option for delivering Shah Deniz gas to Europe.*

## Syria

*The al-Assad regime looks more fragile by the day despite conducting regular operations against rebel strongholds throughout the country. Though outgunned by regime forces, opposition fighters struck the most high profile blow of the nearly two year long conflict by assassinating Syria's minister and deputy minister of defense, along with the assistant vice president in a Damascus bombing on July 18 during a meeting of the regime's highest ranking members.*

Syria's information minister blamed foreign intelligence agencies from "Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Israel" as being behind the attack, though the practicality of such coalition including the Jewish state seems far fetched at best. Prime Minister Erdogan denied Turkish involvement, saying, "Misinformation is a common method for governments to use in times like these. No one can say that we would take such a step toward a fraternal people like the Syrians."

Meanwhile, Turkey has been forced to reinforce its military forces deployed along the country's border with Syria after opposition forces overran several crossing points on the Syrian side. Mobile missile battery units of the Turkish army (TSK) based out of Iskenderun have deployed near the border town of Islahiye due to fears that PKK fighters will take advantage of the instability riveting Syria. According to reports coming out of areas of northern Syria, the PKK has been given a free hand by Damascus to seize certain areas there in order to keep them out of the hands of the Free Syrian Army and other opposition forces. Like Hamas and Hezbollah, the PKK has refrained from openly taking sides in the conflict out of fear of alienating Damascus or the opposition. For Ankara, the seizure of territory under the banner of the PKK – Turkey's most dangerous domestic threat – is a worrying development; one which could result in Turkish incursions into Syria if Kurdish fighters use the country as a launching pad for insurrection against the TSK.

The furor surrounding last month's downing of a Turkish military plane by Syrian forces has calmed considerably, with both governments' appearing to want the incident to be forgotten. Turkey's version of the story has raised doubts at home, with commentators questioning the military's assertion that the plane was downed in international waters. Even more disturbing for all parties involved were rumors that Russian military officers were behind the controls of the missile batteries alleged to have shot down the aircraft. The consequences of Russian involvement are certainly daunting for leaders in Moscow, Ankara, Damascus and Washington, and likely explain the quiet after the initial storm.

## Geopolitical Shifts

*The AKP's much heralded 'zero problems' foreign policy is one casualty of the Arab Spring, and Turkey's criticism of the tottering al-Assad regime has antagonized fellow Shiite powers in Tehran and Baghdad. Under the stewardship of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, Iraq has become increasingly hostile to Turkish interests in the region, especially due to Ankara's close relations with the emerging oil power that is the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) of Iraq. The presence of increasingly mature Kurdish political organizations in Syria, Iraq, Iran and Turkey indicates the presence of new player in the geopolitical shifts taking place in the region. While the Kurds have long put their national and ethnic identities at the forefront of their struggle, they largely remain adherents the Sunni school of Islam, something they share with regional powers Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan.*

As Syria devolves into ethnic and religious conflict, the pragmatic AKP leadership would be wise to weigh the price of making peace with its own Kurdish population and those in neighboring countries as a means of balancing against a Shiite axis on its East. Certainly such a prospect is easier said than done, but critics of such a scenario should consider the impressive foreign policy accomplishments of the AKP-led government

prior to the Arab Spring. While a long-term peace with Turkey's Kurds doesn't appear to be possible in the short term, the regional situation post-al-Assad may necessitate such out of the box thinking on part of Turkish leaders.

## Energy

*Further straining ties between Baghdad and Ankara have been the former's assertion that oil shipments from the Kurdish Autonomous Region of Iraq (KAR) to Turkey are illegal. A row between Iraq's national government and their regional counterparts in Arbil on oil revenue sharing has resulted in the Iraqi Oil Ministry lashing out at Turkey for buying what it calls, smuggled Iraqi oil. Turkey's energy ministry has denied the charge, and while the row will do nothing to ease rising tensions between the two counties, they will likely continue to cooperate on joint measures like maintenance and security for the Kirkuk-Ceyhan*

*pipeline. Indeed, on July 16 the Iraqi government signed a joint agreement with partners from Dubai, Kuwait and Turkey's TPAO for an oil exploration deal in the Basra province*

Shareholders in the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) were forced to respond to a statement by Azerbaijani Energy Minister Natic Aliyev saying he considered NABUCCO West the best option for delivering Caspian gas to Europe. The European Commission announced that it did not matter which project carried gas to EU markets as long as diversification efforts away from a reliance on Gazprom were successful. Gas from the Shah Deniz II development would first travel across Turkey's transport system – likely via the TANAP pipeline – to the country's Western border, where it could potentially be transported via TAP or Nabucco West. The Shah Deniz consortium is set to make a final decision in mid-2013.

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