

Insights into Turkish Domestic and International Politics during March 16-31st 2013

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Key Points:

- *A cease fire is declared by PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan to coincide with the Kurdish New Year. PKK fighters cross into Iraq, though the next steps in the process remain unclear.*
- *Leftist militants attack the Ministry of Justice and AKP headquarters in Ankara while Erdogan visits Denmark. Prime Minister pins the blame on the "Deep State".*
- *Israel officially apologizes for the Mavi Marmara incident and promises to compensate the victims' families. Full diplomatic relations are restored between the once close allies and Erdogan offers a conciliatory note on his huge diplomatic success.*
- *Iraq and Turkey continue to work on planning a Basra-Ceyhan oil pipeline despite rift over Iraqi-Kurdistan. In apologizing to Turkey, Israel's future for cooperating with Turkey on a gas pipeline project looks bright.*

A new Kurdish Opening

As he did when he commanded Kurdish prisoners to end their hunger strikes in October 2012, PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan has followed through on his early March promise to bring a halt to the three decade conflict between his organization and the Turkish Republic. In a March 21 message coinciding with the Kurdish New Year of Nevruz, Ocalan commanded his fighters to withdraw from the country to their redoubts in the mountains of northwestern Iraq.

His letter was read aloud in Turkish and Kurdish by two BDP members of parliament to a crowd of thousands assembled in Diyarbakir's Nevruz Park.

"We have come to a point today where guns shall be silenced and thoughts and ideas shall speak," said Ocalan. "A new era begins now; politics comes to the fore, not arms. Now it is time for our armed elements to move outside (Turkey's) borders."

While cease fires have been declared before – like in 1999 following his capture in Kenya – Ocalan's endorsement gives the proposition of peace a real opportunity. As a consequence of the announcement, the Turkish military has halted cross border operations into Iraq for the time being. There are some reports that the fighters will hand their weapons over to the Kurdish Regional Government of Iraq. However, there is also speculation that they may not be granted amnesty to return to Turkey. This has led to confusion over the reality of them handing over their weapons. (Seibert and Vela, www.thenational.ae, 22 March 2013).

Especially important to the millions of Turks also listening was Ocalan's comment that "today we are waking up to a new Middle East, a new Turkey, and a new future." The statement, specifically mentioning a united Turkey, should placate military and nationalist figures fearful of an eventually unified Kurdish state. Kurdish citizens, especially those residing in Istanbul and other major metropolitan areas, are largely integrated into Turkish society. While the idea of a separate state may have been plausible at the conflict's outset, it is hard to imagine the roughly two

million Kurds currently living in Istanbul pulling up stakes to move back East.

With Erdogan standing on the other end of the spectrum as head of the government, the chances of nationalist or military interference in a peace agreement seem unlikely. While nationalist parties like the MHP still insist on a republic based off of Turkish ethnicity, their influence has largely been collared. Mainstream parties like the ruling AKP and opposition CHP vie for Kurdish votes along with the BDP, consequently moderating their policies towards the country's largest minority. The MHP's diminishing returns in recent elections appear to indicate their flawed ethos.

What remains to be seen is the next step in the peace process, which is unclear in all practicality. The cease fire hinges upon a genuine attempt – if in the PKK's eyes only – to incorporate Kurdish concerns into concrete legislative action. Increased self-governance, education and court cases in Kurdish, along with the release of hundreds of activists, reporters and students detained under the country's arcane terrorism statutes are the main demands going forward.

Whether that will happen remains to be seen, though as summer approaches, there will be increased legislative action on a number of issues surrounding the proposed new constitution. Hopefully Turkish politicians and leaders won't just be satisfied with a cease fire, but will follow through on their part of the bargain.

Israel apologizes

Inside a trailer sitting alongside American President Barak Obama's waiting Air Force One on March 22, Israeli Prime Minister Bibi Netanyahu finally apologized to Erdogan over the Mavi Marmara incident. In addition to the apology, Israel will compensate the relatives of the nine Turkish activists killed when Israeli commandoes stormed the ship.

The Israeli prime minister also pointed out that Jerusalem has lifted many of the restrictions on goods entering the Gaza strip. He also mentioned to Erdogan

that he had seen Erdogan's clarification on his comments calling Zionism a "crime against humanity". The apology and compensation, along with the easing of the blockade, is a complete victory for the Turkish prime minister.

The restoration of full diplomatic relations as a result of the call is the first step in restoring ties between the once close allies. For his part, Erdogan accepted the apology without qualification and said that "he cherished the longstanding relationship between Turkey and Israel." (Vela, www.foreignpolicy.com, 22 March 2013).

But the rapprochement is also a calculated move on both leaders' part to gain a stable ally amidst the shifting order of the Middle East. Syrian incursions into the Golan Heights, a growing refugee crisis and the possibility of WMDs being lost or used by militants are all issues of central importance to both Turkey and Israel. In getting the apology, Erdogan received the plaudits the Muslim world for standing up to Israel. For Israel, a vocal critic of their policies is silenced and ties are restored with a fellow Middle East democracy and the first Muslim nation to recognize its right to existence.

Militant Leftist resurrection

For the second time in two months, an attack by members of the leftist Revolutionary People's Liberation Front (DHKP/C) was carried out in the streets of Ankara. In two separate incidents on March 19, the AKP party headquarters was subjected to a coordinated attack by gunmen wielding automatic weapons. Across the city, two hand grenades were tossed at the Ministry of Justice complex. Neither attack resulted in major casualties, though there were some minor injuries.

The DHKP/C immediately claimed responsibility. The group was also behind the February suicide attack on the U.S. embassy that killed on Turkish security guard and maimed a nearby Turkish journalist.

Throughout the 1970s the country was plagued by attacks and assassinations by both nationalist and leftist militant groups. Turkey's descent into chaos

during this time was a main justification for the 1980 military coup which overthrew the elected government and penned the current constitution. That document is on its last legs as the parliament's constitutional committee finalizes its proposals ahead of the summer.

Prime Minister Erdogan, who was on a trip to Denmark at the time, blamed the attacks on the "Deep State", referring to efforts at disturbing the ongoing prosecution of the Ergenekon coup suspects. Dozens of those suspects were sentenced to lengthy prison sentences earlier in the week, with 60 receiving life sentences.

The "Deep State" indeed deserves the suspicion, but it is unclear who profits from the attacks. One important piece of context to the narrative of the unstable 1970s was that many government agents masqueraded as leftist terrorist organizations to carry out attacks. Whether that is the case now or the DHKP/C is truly waging a guerilla war against the government is unclear. But amidst the Kurdish peace agreement and the Israeli apology for the Mavi Marmara incident, the incidents quickly dropped out of the news cycle. Whoever sought to benefit from the attention likely failed in that endeavor.

Pipelines

Despite the ongoing feud between the Kurdish Regional Government in Erbil and Baghdad, Turkey's Energy Minister Taner Yildiz confirmed talks are ongoing between Turkey and the Iraqi Oil Ministry to construct the Basra-Ceyhan pipeline.

The pipeline was initially agreed upon in June 2012 according to Yildiz, and the Turkish energy minister claimed that the profitability of such a project would eventually outweigh the ire between Baghdad and Ankara. Iraq's motivation in construction is certainly as much to do with geopolitics as it is profits. By diversifying oil output away from Basra, the Iraqi government can plausibly remove one factor of Iranian influence in its economic matters. A Basra-Ceyhan pipeline would remain open should the gulf become closed in the event of a crisis in the Strait of Hormuz, which is the gateway to the Persian Gulf.

Israel and Turkey's resumption of diplomatic ties may also have a huge impact on the region's energy politics. The opportunity for a pipeline project running from the Leviathan gas field, which sits in Israeli and Greek Cypriot waters, to Turkey is more pronounced than it was just weeks ago. Reports in the Israeli media say that Ankara is eager to use the potential of Israeli gas shipments as leverage to convince the Kremlin to drop its support of the al-Assad regime in Syria.

Yildiz refused to speculate much when pressed on the issue, saying that until ties were fully restored, the

situation was hypothetical. There are expected to be over 18 wells dug in the field by the end of 2013.

In other project news, the TANAP pipeline project was ratified by the Turkish Cabinet on March 18. Once complete, the pipeline will transport gas from the Shah Deniz field into European markets at an initial rate of 16 billion cubic meters of gas per year. While EU leaders look certainly forward to any diversification efforts away from Russian supplies, Turkey will receive about 6 billion square meters of that total to feed its ever increasing energy needs.

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