

## Insights into Turkish Domestic and International Politics during 1-15 June 2013

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### Key Points:

- *Despite heavy police action to clear Taksim Square, the protests continue.*
- *Erdogan's hard line stance towards the demonstrations is opening a rift inside the AKP, with one camp supportive of President Abdullah Gul's conciliatory approach towards protesters.*
- *The prime minister hints at foreign and domestic plots behind the Gezi Park situation, making him look increasingly out of touch with the reality on the ground in Istanbul.*
- *Turkey's play in Syria falters as Sunni extremists come to the fore of the opposition. Meanwhile Bashar al-Assad's forces secure victories against the fractured opposition.*
- *Exxon and TPAO in talks to secure an exploration block for shale gas in the Black Sea.*
- *Tensions in Iraqi Kurdistan ebb as Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki visits Erbil.*

**Domestic political aspects of Gezi Park**

*If anything, the protests have shown a starkly divided republic. While most violence has taken place between police and protesters, the former responsible for the majority of it, the fact remains that the demographic makeup of the protesters are at once diverse, yet not a core AKP constituency.*

Inside the AKP, Erdogan's unrelenting tone is causing a shift of followers into two distinct camps. The party currently appeals to religious conservatives, Kurds, nationalists and the economic elite.

On the one hand, more nationalist-minded supporters back the prime minister and agree with his dismissal of protesters' complaints. However, a camp more supportive of President Abdullah Gul's conciliatory approach, has also emerged. The prime minister's bombastic tone has played well with the party faithful in the past, but the Gezi Park issue is not necessarily a partisan one. Many Turkish citizens are genuinely concerned about the unchecked development in the country's municipalities. Erdogan's dismissive attitude towards the distress of an initially peaceful demonstration has exacerbated tensions within the party regarding his autocratic and self-righteous style.

Many critical party members of Erdogan's tact are supporters of the Gulen movement. The movement's adherents supported the AKP's original mission of styling the party along Europe's Christian Democratic parties. Though religious in background, the Gul wing of the party has been hesitant about introducing religious beliefs in the form of legislation and policy in some matters, best exemplified by the recent alcohol sales restrictions. While the party's members are more diverse than its reputation presents, Erdogan's move to cut out liberal MPs from the party lists in 2011 helped solidify the more conservative legislative agenda.

The prime minister announced on June 15 that occupiers of the park had until the evening to evacuate. A heavy police presence moved in and

cleared large sections of Taksim Square, yet at the time of writing, the unrest continues. The protests have drawn comparisons to the 2011 'Occupy Wall Street' movement in the U.S. and Western Europe. In some instances, the comparison is apt.

Neither protest was successfully co-opted by opposition parties, despite the CHP's best efforts in Turkey. More so, aside from being a central outlet for anger at the status quo, neither movement has announced achievable goals. While Gezi Park's protesters initially stood for saving one of Istanbul's last remaining green spaces, the uproar has transitioned into a general anti-Erdogan event. The rudderlessness of the protests is such that while AKP-friendly media outlets heralded a constructive meeting between its leaders and the prime minister, international journalists on the ground in Taksim reported that no one in the park knew who these leaders were.

Another factor not adequately discussed is the country's growing income disparity. Despite impressive economic growth at around 7 percent a year, unemployment remains around 9-10 percent. For youth, who make up the majority of participants in the protest, the unemployment rate doubles.

Erdogan, playing to his conservative, nationalist base, also claimed that he had proof that the entire matter – aside from a few "sincere brothers" – was a plot against his ruling government.

"We will make public with documents that the real issue was not Gezi Park. This is a coordinated process from the outside and the inside of the country," said Erdogan.

Whether true or not, his statement resembles one which would be more familiar coming from Russia's Vladimir Putin or Egypt's Hosni Mubarak. This is not to say that Turkey's protesters face the same political situation as those protesters who braved the cold Bolotnaya Square or pro-Mubarak thugs in Tahrir. Turkey remains firmly in NATO's embrace, its road to EU accession is static yet on going, and its democratic institutions are effective. Erdogan is right on one

account; he still commands a strong following at the ballot box.

But the rhetoric of outside forces, usually alluding to the West's undermining of the Turkish Republic, plays well to favourable domestic audiences despite a lack of authenticity.

Instead of accepting that his political opponent's constituents have legitimate complaints, the prime minister continues to undermine his legitimacy as the head of a democratically elected government. He indeed won 50 percent of the vote in the most recent elections, but even those who voted against him remain his fellow citizens. Tarring them as foreign or criminal agents will do nothing to alleviate the festering crisis in Taksim Square that threatens the decade of stable AKP governance.

### **Syria**

*If anything, the unrest to its north has taken the focus off the regime of Bashar al-Assad, who secured a string of victories over the under-armed opposition forces.*

Al-Assad's regime has issued sarcastic communiques calling on the Turkish government to respect Taksim protesters' rights. The irony was lost on all who see the distinction between a heavy handed police crackdown in Turkey compared to the systematic torture and murder of protesters by the Syrian secret police in 2011.

Ankara has backed the Free Syrian Army in hopes of supporting less ideologically conservative jihadis, but the FSA is an entity in name only. Increasingly, the opposition forces in Syria with the best weapons and results are those supplied by Gulf state sponsors, like the Al Qaeda-allied Jabhat al-Nusra.

Video of an opposition fighter cutting the organs out of a recently killed regime soldier while espousing religious epithets about Shias has exacerbated fears in Turkey's Hatay Province and its half a million Alawites.

As Hezbollah openly sends fighters into the breach for the battle of Aleppo, Turkey's Alevis, who make up 10 percent of the population, are concerned about the effects of region-wide sectarian conflict.

In Reyhanli, demonstrations have broken out not only over citizens perceived vulnerability to the violence to the south, but also due to the influx of Syrian refugees who work for cheaper wages than Turkish citizens.

Now that the U.S. has acknowledged the Syrian regime has used chemical weapons against the opposition, the onus for action is on the White House. For Erdogan, the timing of increased U.S. involvement could be critical in halting the protests. In one instance, American action in Syria could turn the tide against a now resurgent Syrian military, thus taking some of the international media focus off Taksim Square. Should this occur, Washington's criticism of the Turkish police response would likely be muted, as the logistical necessities for military action in Syria would require Turkish bases.

However that scenario comes fraught with its own risks, for the AKP government would run the risk of alienating large sections of the Turkish public who are sceptical of a U.S. military presence. The AKP buoyed over its defiance in the face of President George W. Bush's push to invade Iraq in 2003. Should the government reverse this trend in the case of Syria, the AKP could alienate a wider section of the voters ahead of the next round of voting given that only 28 percent of Turkish people support the government's policies on Syria according to a recent Metropoll survey.

### **Energy and pipelines**

*Exxon Mobil is in talks with Turkey's state-owned petroleum company, TPAO to purchase a stake in a Black Sea exploration venture for shale gas. Besim Sisman, TPAO's chief executive told Reuters that the allotted block would be located on the western sections of Turkey's littoral boundary, near those of Ukraine and Romania.*

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The United States impressive production of its shale gas reserves has prompted a boom in the industry, with Turkey looking to explore any option that alleviates its reliance on energy imports.

TPAO is also set to bid on blocks off the Lebanese shore with Royal Dutch Shell and is also in tenders for crude exploration in Algeria.

In Iraq, the atmosphere has been tempered between Baghdad and Erbil. Amidst increasing sectarian violence between Shias and Sunnis, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki visited the Kurdish Regional Government's capital. While no specific agreements were reached that would end the impasse over energy revenues, the meeting itself is an astounding break in precedent.

Given Saddam Hussein regime's attempted annihilation of the Kurds during his reign, the visit of the sitting Iraqi prime minister is a breath of fresh air. While talks will continue, the easing of tensions between the government in Baghdad and the KRG is good for business. Despite potential for high risk, high rewards are widely accepted in the energy industry in

the Middle East. Yet, an outbreak in hostilities between the Kurdish security forces and the Iraqi Army would have been a negative for all parties involved. As sectarian conflicts spread from Syria, the best tonic for keeping peace in the region may be energy investment and revenues.

With the unrest continuing in Taksim, Erdogan's focus is elsewhere. Energy Minister Taner Yildiz has continued his work at breakneck speed, travelling from conference to conference and trying to secure deals across the region. But on major deals, like an energy deal with Israel or construction on pipeline infrastructure out of the KRG, the prime minister's consent and signature are needed.

While his eye is on the unrest at home, concerns like energy independence may fall by the way side.

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