

Insights into Turkish Domestic and International Politics during November 16-30th 2012

By John Van Pool, EGF Turkey and Black Sea Regional Analyst

Key Points:

- *Turkey requests Patriot missile defense systems from NATO out of fears of Syria launching WMD-tipped rockets at opposition fighters along the border.*
- *Prime Minister Erdogan's anti-Israel stance gains him credibility in the Muslim world while alienating him from opportunities to help solve the Israeli-Palestinian situation.*
- *Investigations continue into the 1993 death of then-president Turgut Ozal. Although unrelated to the country's current problems, a history of "Deep State" involvement in the government created a country where conspiracy theories fester.*
- *The AKP conducts an internal discussion on the possibility of revoking immunity from MPs which would specifically affect Kurdish BDP deputies.*
- *BOTAS raises prices on gas sold for domestic electricity supplies, while Gazprom seals long term export deals with four private Turkish firms.*
- *ENI continues to worry about its future in Turkey following the row over Cyprus, and TANAP is ratified by Azerbaijan's parliament.*
- *In Iraq, Erdogan and al-Maliki trade barbs over the widening rift between the KRG and Baghdad.*

Syria

Reports of increasing activity by Syrian government forces around the country's chemical and biological warfare sites put Turkish officials in an increasingly tenuous position at the end of November. The world's attention swung back to Syria after sources inside NATO indicated that Turkey would request protective measures against missile bound chemical weapons.

President Bashar al-Assad's forces have slowly been ceding ground to the opposition, leaving Turkish military officials fearful of a "last strike scenario". The prospect of Syrian forces launching missile bound weapons of mass destruction (WMD) at opposition held territory, much of which is contiguous to the countries' mutual border, has lead the Turkish government to gauge the alliance's willingness to deploy Patriot missile defense systems. With Syria's inability or unwillingness to accurately control artillery fire that has occasionally strayed across the Turkish border in the past few months, TSK officials do not wish to take any chances should such a scenario arise with missile bound WMDs.

Arab-Israeli Conflict

In the aftermath of the recent conflict in Gaza, Turkish Prime Minister Tayip Erdogan's harsh rhetoric widened the gulf between the Israel and Turkey. The prime minister notably altered his country's orientation following Israeli's 2006 incursion into Lebanon, Operation Cast Lead. Although genuinely disturbed at the rate of civilian casualties that accompany Israeli military operations, Erdogan also made a calculated political decision. As The Council on Foreign Affairs Steven A. Cook points out, "The reality is this: You cannot be strategic partners with Jerusalem and be a regional leader." (Foreign Policy, Overdone Turkey, November 2012).

Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi's handling of negotiations that lead to the ceasefire between Hamas and Israel left Erdogan bereft of the usual adoration he receives as a regional leader. Given his typically polemic, one-sided view of the Israeli-

Palestinian issue, the prime minister has lost credibility as a levelheaded arbiter that such a situation requires, at least in the eyes of the Israelis and the West. The respect he garners in the Muslim world for such a stance against Israeli policies and tactics – justified or not – does little to ameliorate the peace process.

Following the cease fire, reports of Israeli overtures to Ankara leaked out. Holding together a center-right coalition ahead of upcoming elections in which he is expected to win, Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, knows that the fissure between his country and Turkey does not benefit the Jewish state. Israeli overtures to Ankara might rather be a signal of Jerusalem's (and perhaps Washington's) desperation with the current Turkish policy with respect to the Arab-Israeli conflict, which presently leaves Israel without a reliable strategic partner in the region. Whether the political leadership in either country wishes to risk reconciliation is questionable, but the split certainly does nothing to alleviate the longest running trouble spot in the Middle East.

New Investigation into Turgut Ozal's Death

The State Inspection Council is expected to produce its findings in the investigation into the death in 1993 of then-President Turgut Ozal. The charismatic leader of Turkey during the turbulent 1990s, Ozal was originally thought to have died of complications related to heart failure. But conspiracy theories have pervaded about the circumstances of his passing since, with many believing the "Deep State" was complicit in murder.

The findings of the investigation remain sealed while the Ankara Prosecutors Office conducts its own investigation. Leaks to outlets of the Turkish press have done little to alleviate the theories as to what actually killed Ozal. The State Inspection Council's findings allegedly say the exhumation of Ozal's body show signs of poisoning over a period of months, and allude to complicity by two former employees of the presidential palace.

The military's historic interference in the democratic process has left an environment where such questions persist, whether relevant or not to the present issues Turkey faces. Whatever the investigations' findings, the issue is likely to prove more sensation than substance in terms of the country's political stability.

The Kurds in Turkey

The AKP holds an outright majority in the parliament and the party is currently conducting an internal discussion on whether to follow through on recent statements by the prime minister regarding deputies' immunity. Amidst the ongoing violence between PKK militants and the government, Erdogan suggested that members of parliament who met with members of the outlawed Kurdish separatist movement should lose their immunity. The remarks mainly concern MPs from the BDP party, whose members sit as individuals due to the house's threshold rule (EGF Turkey File 1-15 November, 2012).

The decision can be passed outright by the AKP majority in the General Assembly, while the opposition CHP and MHP support the removal of immunity. The CHP believes immunity should still apply to committee chairs, however.

As the internal AKP debate goes on, a split has emerged between those who wish to follow through on the prime minister's suggestion and those opposed for political reasons. A number of Kurdish AKP parliamentarians are said to believe that an approach like the prime minister's risks further alienating the country's Kurdish population. These deputies fear such a move could result in a backlash from the country's south eastern electoral districts in which the BDP eventually gains seats at the expense of the AKP.

With the debate ongoing, AKP deputies should also consider what the loss of immunity will mean in the future should their party's political fortunes wane. Voiding immunity of MPs is a dangerous precedent that could come back to haunt the party.

The Kurds in Iraq

Despite Turkey's ongoing issues with its Kurdish minority, Erdogan has waded into its Iraqi neighbors disputes with the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in Erbil. The prime minister and his Iraqi counterpart, Nouri al-Maliki have prodded each other over a number of issues in the recent past, of which the KRG's rift with the government in Baghdad appears to be the most contentious. With Ankara and Erbil growing closer due to energy and business ties, Baghdad is left out in the cold and faces an increasingly autonomous entity to the north. All three parties walk a fine line given the ethnic, religious and political tensions at play, and one hopes that cooler heads eventually prevail in settling the growing tensions.

Raising Gas Prices

In domestic energy, state-owned BOTAS raised gas prices 37 percent to electric power plants, an increase that could eventually be passed on to consumers in 2013. The company sells a majority of its gas supplies to power plants at high prices, although nearly a quarter of its overall supplies are sold to private residences at subsidized prices. The effect on the economy will likely be seen in the first quarter of the New Year, as fuel prices have been gradually raised over the past few months amidst diminishing government subsidies.

Relations with Gazprom

Despite a year-long negotiating deadlock between BOTAS and Kremlin-controlled Gazprom, the Russian energy giant recently sealed an agreement with four private Turkish firms for gas imports over the next three decades. Companies Afkel, Bosphorus and Kibar have secured 30 year import contracts via Russia's Western Pipeline, while Bati Hatti has reached a similar deal over the next 23 years. The move is a positive for Gazprom, as it seeks to divest its customer base away from the EU. For Turkey, the deals guarantee continued supplies despite the current impasse between BOTAS and Gazprom.

Tensions with ENI

ENI is continuing its public defense of exploration deals with the government of Cyprus, saying it is acting legitimately with regards to EU law. ENI officials have taken their case before EU officials after Turkish Energy Minister, Taner Yildiz, said the company's future work in the country would be blocked if it continued with its gas exploration off the coast of Cyprus. Ankara feels the exploration deals are unfair to Turkish Cypriots, although the dispute has repercussions for current work in Turkey as well. Gazprom and ENI are joint venture owners of the Blue Stream pipeline, and it remains to be seen whether

Yildiz's words have an impact on that line's operations.

TANAP pipeline

Meanwhile, the TANAP pipeline has been approved by the Azerbaijani parliament, moving forward hopes that NABUCCO still remains relevant, albeit in a different form than originally conceived. A vital cog in the EU's goal of establishing a Southern Gas Corridor outside the control of Russia, TANAP will open European markets up to gas supplies from the Shah Deniz II field. Turkey's domestic needs will also be bolstered by the project's completion, as 37.5 percent of the gas will be purposed for Turkish consumption.

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Director and Founder: Dr Marat Terterov

Email: Marat.Terterov@gpf-europe.com

Avenue Du Manoir D'Anjou 8

Brussels 1150 Belgium

Tel/Fax: +322 770 1001

info@gpf-europe.com

www.gpf-europe.com

www.gpf-europe.ru