

Insights into Turkish Domestic and International Politics during April 16th - May 15th 2013

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Key Points:

- *Domestic politics heat up as the opposition CHP accuses Prime Minister Erdogan of authoritarianism in seeking the presidency after his term as prime minister is up.*
- *A judicial reform aimed at clarifying aspects of Turkish terrorism laws aims to placate EU critics and could lead to the release of hundreds of imprisoned activists.*
- *Turkey continues to avoid direct military intervention into Syria's civil war, though fears of the sectarian conflict's spread has the country on edge.*
- *U.S. sanctions aimed at Iran's nuclear program necessitate Turkish efforts at diversifying its energy reliance away from Tehran.*
- *Israel makes overtures to Ankara regarding a natural gas pipeline in the eastern Mediterranean, while TANAP is set for construction to begin following ratification of the agreement by both Turkish and Azerbaijani parliaments.*

Syria – Reyhanli bombings

On May 11, two car bombs rocked the center of the Turkish border town of Reyhanli within minutes of each other, killing 52 persons.

The Sunni-majority town is a transit point for refugees fleeing the fighting as well as a staging ground for opposition forces and others looking to cross into the contested Syrian province of Idlib. Turkey immediately blamed the bombings on the regime of Syrian President, Bashar al-Assad, with Deputy Prime Minister, Bulent Arinc, saying “With their secret services and armed groups, they are certainly one of the usual suspects to instigate and carry out such an outrageous plot.”

In the event’s aftermath, there were reports of Turks attacking Syrian refugees throughout the town. Despite Ankara’s decidedly anti-Assad stance, the country’s backing of the Syrian opposition forces is an unpopular one. Opinion polls regularly report the public’s dissatisfaction with taking sides in another country’s civil war. Perhaps unwisely, opposition CHP head, Kemal Kilicdaroglu, attempted to capture this sentiment, saying Erdogan was responsible for the deaths, explicitly calling him “the murderer”. Unnamed CHP critics are also commenting in the press, saying they believe the bombings were instigated at the behest of the government to push the country closer to war with Syria.

So far, 17 people have been arrested in connection with the incident. But more concerning for Turkish leaders is the presence of Syrian agents operating in the country. Since the conflict began and refugee populations swelled on the Turkish side of the border, there have been reports of pro-Assad agents attempting to kidnap and return dissidents to the Syrian side of the fence. Arinc expounded on this, telling reporters “We know that Syrian refugees have become a target of the Syrian regime. Reyhanli was not chosen by coincidence.”

While the investigation is ongoing, signs indicate the culpability of the al-Assad regime. In the immediate aftermath of the explosions, there were rumors that NATO could potentially declare the attack an Article 5-

invoking incident. However such an act is unlikely given the hesitance of the United States to become involved in the conflict.

The timing of the bombing came just ahead of the prime minister’s visit to Washington D.C., where it is expected he’ll make the case for increased American participation. On May 9, Erdogan gave a prime time interview to the American broadcaster NBC where he explicitly stated that “It is clear the regime has used chemical weapons and missiles.” (NBC News, 9 May 2013, Connor). Like the British and Israelis before him, who leveled similar accusations at al-Assad, Erdogan provided no specifics as to when and where the WMDs were used.

The Turkish leader chastised the American inaction, saying President Obama’s famous “red line” had been crossed long ago. While Erdogan stated that he wanted the U.S. to assume more responsibilities in managing the conflict, he said he would leave specifics out until he met the American president in person.

The likelihood of American action in Syria appears remote, however, as a war weary electorate seems to have little interest in becoming involved in another sectarian conflict in a Muslim country. Short of Syrian forces using chemical weapons on a scale so large that world opinion could not ignore it, the burden of the war will fall on Turkey. While Erdogan’s political savvy works well in convincing or cajoling his domestic opponents, it is unlikely he will convince the Americans to pick up the tab.

PKK Withdrawal

In early May, despite misgivings of PKK fighters regarding the sincerity of the cease fire, the organization’s fighters began a phased withdrawal from Turkey to their hideouts in northern Iraq. With an estimated 2,000 active combatants inside Turkey, a complete withdrawal will take at least three to four months. Meanwhile, tensions between the PKK and Turkish Security Forces (TSK) remain tense. Kurdish fighters have complained that surveillance flights along the border have increased, with PKK leader Murat Karayilan threatening retaliation if the cease fire is used as an opportunity to attack. The fear is not

without precedent, with many Kurds still vividly recalling TSK attacks during a 1999 peace agreement where an estimated 500 were killed.

By mid-May though, reports were filtering in of PKK fighters arriving in the Harur area of northern Iraq. But the withdrawal has added fuel to the already complicated relationship between the Kurds, Turkey and Iraq. On May 14, Baghdad decried the fighters crossing into its territory as a violation of Iraqi sovereignty. It also promised to bring a complaint to the U.N. Security Council in hopes the body would “take the necessary decision to prevent the violation of Iraq’s sovereignty.”

In reality, the complaints from Baghdad ring hollow. The Iraqi government has little influence and control over northern Iraq, whose governance falls under the authority of the Kurdish Regional Government in Erbil. Though the PKK and Iraqi Kurdish peshmerga are distinctly separate organizations, the presence of PKK fighters from Turkey will not, in all likelihood, be Baghdad’s headache to deal with.

The fighters’ departure from Turkey is the first part of Karayilan’s plan to move the peace process forward. After the gradual withdrawal, the PKK leader said he expects the government to move on constitutional amendments to redefine the meaning of “Turkishness”. He urged further BDP demands to be heard as well, such as granting education and legal proceedings in Kurdish along with a delineation of powers to local governments. Karayilan’s plan also has a third phase, which calls for the PKK to lay down its arms completely once imprisoned leader Abdullah Ocalan and other fighters are released from prison.

Prime Minister Tayip Erdogan has previously stated that while integration in the political and cultural issues are expected, Ocalan’s freedom was never up for discussion. Despite the current détente, it is difficult to see the government freeing the most feared man in Turkey. The conflict that has claimed more than 40,000 lives on both sides, meaning that it may be one demand too far for both sides to agree on. Should such an impasse arrive, the burden of peace will likely fall on Ocalan himself. His

unquestioned authority in the Kurdish community might be enough to convince fighters to lay down their weapons for good if the constitutional changes are made. But the sticking point is, would he willingly sacrifice his own chance at freedom to do so?

Constitution

The months of bickering over the proposal of a new constitution continue, but the AKP head negotiator on the matter has placed a July 1 deadline to reach a consensus. Currently the majority party, the AKP, is three votes short of being able to hold a referendum on the current draft. Independent Kurdish lawmakers, who are BDP deputies in reality, are seen as the key to closing this gap as well as taking the additional 37 votes needed to replace the 1980 “Coup constitution”.

The Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) looks unlikely to lend any support to a document that reflects the concerns of Kurds or any of the country’s other minority groups. Its stagnant approach centering on nationalism based off of Turkishness looks set to relegate the party to an independent status come the next elections.

CHP infighting has paralyzed the party of Ataturk, with deputies sniping at one another in the press and parliamentary committees on what seems like a weekly basis. One faction, which sees the AKP’s gains with Kurdish voters since 2007, is supportive of the ceasefire and looks to vote for a constitution that reflects that. The nationalist camp has rebuked this stance, however, and is unwilling to support the AKP or acknowledge the demands of Kurdish citizens.

Should the ceasefire continue without incident, the chances of BDP support are high, thus leaving just a few CHP deputies as the potential deciders on a new constitution. The CHP must now get its own house in order and decide if it wants to continue to carry the reflexive, secular stance that has led to recent electoral defeats. If so, it may continue on as a minority party that has more things in common with the nationalist MHP than its more centrist colleagues.

Pipelines and the Economy

In late April the Kurdish Regional Government of Iraq announced that it will soon complete the pipeline being constructed connecting the Taq Taq oil field with existing infrastructure running between Turkey and Iraq. Once operational, it will be pumped to the port of Ceyhan where it will be shipped to international markets.

The announcement has further irritated the Oil Ministry of Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. Baghdad has labeled the export of KRG produced crude and gas as piracy, and the issue has strained relations with Ankara. Turkey's increasingly close energy partnership with Erbil will be a topic of discussion during Edogan's visit to the U.S., as the Americans are fearful of seeing one ally alienate another in al-Maliki. But as Turkey's energy needs look to rise exponentially in the future, despite urging caution, American pressure will result in no significant change. Though fearful of driving al-Maliki closer to Tehran, the Americans recognize the importance of weaning Turkey off of Russian and Iranian energy supplies.

Representatives from the American firm Noble Energy, which owns a 36 percent share of the gas in the eastern Mediterranean Tamar field, are likely to be found in Washington during the prime minister's trip as well. The company's CEO recently indicated during a trip to Israel that the company would pursue work that could eventually require a Turkey-Israeli pipeline. However, it is unclear what the firm's future is with Turkey, as Ankara has a ban in place for any companies currently doing business with Greek Cyprus.

In other news, Russia's Energy Minister, Alexander Novak, said that a proposed oil pipeline connecting the Turkish Black Sea coast was "economically not viable." (*Zaman*, 21 April 2013, Hava). The project, which had drawn interest from Rosneft and Transneft, hit an impasse over concerns of the costliness of shipping compared to the lower tariffs for shipping via the Bosphorous. Major Russian investors are unlikely to contradict such plain language by Novak, who speaks for the Kremlin, while ENI's ban for working with Cyprus leaves the entire pipeline's future unclear.

Energy Minister Taner Yildiz spent part of late April reassuring investors and reporters that Turkish Petroleum Corporation (TPAO) and the Turkish Pipeline Corporation (BOTAS) would maintain their stakes in the TANAP pipeline project. (*Zaman*, 17 April 2013).

Outside of acting as a transit hub, Turkey is increasingly looking to create its own energy supplies to match rising domestic demand. A Japanese-French consortium of Mitsubishi Heavy Industries, Itochu Corporation and GDF Suez submitted a \$22 billion bid to design and build Turkey's second nuclear power plant. The deal is a boon for Japan, as the agreement is the first project of its kind to be signed since the Fukushima disaster. For Turkey, who relies on imported fossil fuels for 97 percent of its energy needs, it is another step in cutting its reliance on contentious partners.

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