

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

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Key Points:

- *A chemical attack is allegedly launched in Damascus' suburbs, threatening to elicit a U.S. military response and possibly a wider regional war. Turkey backs the Americans, with Prime Minister Erdogan and President Abdullah Gul saying Bashar al-Assad must go.*
- *Kurdish fighters in northern Syria establish their own administrative areas in the country while continuing to fight jihadist elements of the Free Syrian Army. Their autonomy may be a flashpoint should Turkey be forced to make a ground incursion into Syria.*
- *Egypt's military-backed government continues to snipe back at the Turkish prime minister, who has emerged as its most vocal critic outside of Egypt.*
- *The poor relations between Ankara and Cairo may be costing Turkey influence and money with regional partners who supported the military putsch that unseated Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi.*

Syria

On August 21, a chemical attack, possibly using the nerve agent Sarin, was launched on the rebel-contested Ghouta neighborhood, an eastern suburb of the Syrian capital, Damascus. According to a report by The Guardian, the Syrian Fourth Armored Division, headed by the president's brother Maher al-Assad, may have been responsible. ("Did Assad's ruthless brother mastermind alleged Syria gas attack?" The Guardian, 24 August 2013.) A separate Reuters' source claims that the 155th Brigade, a missile unit, may have been behind the attack that is alleged to have killed over 1,400. ("Syrian army moves Scud missiles to avoid strike," Reuters, 29 August 2013.)

Conjecture has arisen in some circles that the reports are a fabrication aimed at justifying a Western intervention.

While conflating Saddam Hussein's missing WMDs and Syria's use of Sarin is easy, the situation and players are certainly different. The two most vocal advocates of military action against al-Assad aren't Washington D.C. and London, but rather Ankara and Paris. The latter's Socialist President, Francois Hollande, has told his diplomatic corps that he "is ready to punish" al-Assad's forces for breaking international norms by using chemical weapons. Turkey's Islamist-leaning Prime Minister, Tayip Erdogan, has been similarly bellicose, criticizing U.S. President Barak Obama's "limited" approach that would not seek regime change in Syria.

"It can't be a 24-hour hit-and-run," said Erdogan, "What matters is stopping the bloodshed in Syria and weakening the regime to the point where it gives up." ("Turkey says limited Syria strikes not enough, regime change should be aim," Today's Zaman, 30 August 2013.)

Recent diplomat dealings between France and Turkey have been anything but civil, yet the two NATO allies find themselves in accord on al-Assad's use of chemical weapons. The fact that the two strongest critics of the 2003 American invasion of Iraq have taken such a position moots the convenient narrative

of American complicity in the fable of a false flag operation in Syria.

Yet doubt remains in many circles about who is truly responsible for the attack. Saleh Muslim, the head of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party, the main PKK-affiliate in Syria, even voiced his disbelief.

"The regime in Syria ... has chemical weapons, but they wouldn't use them around Damascus, five kilometers from the [UN] committee which is investigating chemical weapons. Of course they are not so stupid as to do so," said Muslim.

Muslim's take exemplifies the complicated nature of foreign intervention into Syria, especially for Turkey. The revolution is a cacophony of fighting between a number of actors. In recent months, Kurdish fighters have established a quasi-state in north-eastern Syria. On August 31, the PYD's official Twitter account announced that two blocs in the Supreme Kurdish Council agreed to form a transitional government in northern Syria.

At the same time, Kurdish fighters find themselves fighting jihadist groups under the banner of the Free Syrian Army. The northern city of Ras al-Ayn, which is currently split in half between the two camps, also sits on the Turkish border. Should the Syrian Kurds successfully establish their own autonomous region, the fear is that Turkey's largest minority might seek a similar settlement should the PKK-peace deal fall through.

But to many Kurds on the ground in Syria's north, the establishment of an administrative state was a situation forced on them. ("The civil war within Syria's Civil War," Foreign Policy, 28 August 2013.) According to a police officer working for the Kurdish administration in the city of Rumeilan, "Not Assad (sic), but the Islamists are now our biggest enemy. The Assad regime only oppressed us. The jihadists want to exterminate us."

"The war created a vacuum," he said. "There was no authority. What we have on the ground is not separatism, but self-administrative areas. We are just

filling up this vacuum. We don't want to separate. We want to get our rights and stay within Syria."

A Turkish incursion into Syria may be necessary should al-Assad feel an existential threat from a Western military strike. But a Turkish military operation in Kurdish-held areas would likely set back the country's own PKK-peace agreement. Such a conflict could also risk drawing in the Kurdish Regional Government of Iraq.

As the likelihood of a Western strike against Syria increases, President Abdullah Gul has followed on the prime minister's push for action. But he has also called for a political solution to run concurrent to military action saying, "I don't believe any intervention without putting forward a political strategy would achieve a result." ("No military intervention can succeed without revealing a political strategy," Anadolu Wire Service, 31 August 2013.)

For Turkish leaders who have wedded themselves to al-Assad's ouster, the way forward is riddled with unknowns. A U.S. attack on Syria's military and chemical weapon sites runs the risk of Syrian counter strikes into southern Turkey. The country's southern border is protected with NATO-supplied Patriot missile batteries as well as the large alliance base at Incirlik. But should a Syrian Scud strike a target, Erdogan risks facing an angry Turkish public who has never been in favour of interfering in Syria's civil war.

If the Free Syrian Army begins turning the tide against the largely Alawite regime, can Turkey guarantee that the radical Islamist elements it has supported will not turn repressive against the country's minorities? These factors, coupled with the aforementioned risks of alienating the region's Kurdish population, run the risk of blowing back on Turkey.

Like the Americans, however, Prime Minister Erdogan has associated himself with an al-Assad exit. A best case scenario would be for Ankara to use its leverage with the U.S., Russia and Iran to push for a final political solution on the matter despite the displeasure such action would bring from both the rebels and government forces. Worst case, the prospect of a wider war worsens, dragging in major

and regional powers alike. Out of fear for the latter, Turkey may be the best positioned external stakeholder to push for one last try at a more peaceful, if unpalatable, outcome.

Egypt

Turkey's deteriorating relations with the military-installed government in Egypt may have it on the right side of history, but its stance is hurting the country economically. Prime Minister Erdogan has been the most outspoken critic of the military coup that unseated Muslim Brotherhood President, Mohammed Morsi, in July. Turkish officials have been in a war of words with Egypt's new government as the violence there spread after a heavy handed military response to pro-Morsi protests.

The prime minister is right to condemn the ouster of a democratically elected Egyptian government. Yet his references to Israeli complicity in Morsi's ouster taints the more legitimate sides of his criticism. The accusation appeared yet more ridiculous when his office confirmed that the prime minister was referring to statements made by Algerian-born, French philosopher Bernard-Henri Levy, at a 2011 roundtable at Tel Aviv University. ("Israel behind Egypt's coup, Erdogan says," The Lede blog, The New York Times, 20 August 2013.) The fact that Levy holds no office in Israel or that academics make provocative statements at roundtables appears to have never occurred to the prime minister.

Recent economic returns seem to indicate that the country is now being negatively affected by the tensions with Cairo, however. On August 27, the United Arab Emirates suspended a \$12 billion investment in Turkey's coal industry, effectively killing what has been dubbed Turkey's largest energy project. According to statements made by Energy Minister Taner Yildiz, Turkey was not consulted on the matter, although it had begun discussions with other partners in hopes of resuscitating the project.

The UAE and its more powerful Gulf neighbour, Saudi Arabia, have publicly backed the coup in Egypt. Despite their convergence on the Syrian situation, Turkey's criticism of the interim Egyptian government

appears to have opened a rift with the Saudis. An indicator of how serious Ankara takes the situation was Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu's visit to the Kingdom on August 28.

The country's account deficit is also being affected by the Egypt situation. Following the July 3 coup, Turkish exports shipped through the Egyptian port of Damietta fell by 30 percent. ("Turkey may struggle to narrow its deficit," Times of Oman, 27 August). Exports to Middle Eastern markets account for 19 percent of Turkey's overall exports. Prior to the recent unrest in Egypt, trade between the two countries was

worth \$5.16 billion in 2012, with Turkish exports accounting for \$3.68 billion alone.

On the basis of principal, Turkey is right to call what took place in Egypt a coup, something Western powers like the United States have not had the courage to do in such an unequivocal manner. Yet looking back at Erdogan's alienation of regional partners, one questions the wisdom of such a strategy when Turkey's currency, the lira, is underperforming and emerging economies are feeling the Federal Reserve's pullback of stimulus.

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