

Insights into Turkish Domestic and International Politics during July 16-31, 2013

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Key Points:

- *The Kurdish PYD seizes several towns in Syria's northwest, ejecting Islamist groups from a Turkish border crossing.*
- *Turkey reaches out to the PYD, whose leader visits and meets with the country's political and military representatives.*
- *Reporters Without Borders drops Turkey to 154 in its press freedom index.*
- *The PKK and AKP snipe at one another about adherence to the ceasefire. Progress on adjustment to legislation intended to ameliorate the Kurdish dilemma must be made soon, otherwise the momentum and dialogue gains made during recent months might slip away.*
- *Turkey's energy import payments decreased in early 2013, while plans for a proposed nuclear plant are rejected by the Ministry of Environment and Urban Planning.*
- *Genel reports that the Kurdish Regional Government of Iraq will have its own export pipeline by 2014. It remains to be seen what the next move of the Iraqi Government will be.*

Syria

An example of the fracturing of combatants in Syria at the end of July saw large scale fighting erupt between the Democratic Union of Kurdistan (PYD) and the Islamist rebel group of Jabhat al-Nusra. Taking place directly on the border with Turkey in the city of Ras al-Ain, the Kurdish fighters eventually ejected the Islamists, who were supported by Al Qaeda in Iraq and the Levant. The PYD's success left the border crossing in the ethnically diverse city in the hands of the Syrian branch of the PKK, an occurrence that immediately set off alarms in Ankara.

According to reports from the Syrian Observatory on Human Rights, Al Qaeda and Jabhat al-Nusra have been put on the back foot by the combat that flared across Syria's northwest. No doubt the fighting is likely focused on ethnic differences, pitting the Kurds against the mainly Arab and foreign jihadists of the Islamist camp. Also at stake though are the oil rich provinces along the Syrian-Turkish border.

The PYD announced that it would create an autonomous region of Western Kurdistan. However, the PYD is not the only Kurdish group in the area. The Massoud Barzani-backed Kurdish National Council, which represents several political groups, has rejected the PYD's plan to carve out a Kurdish enclave in the country.

While the idea of an autonomous Kurdish region on its borders certainly worries Turkish military and political leaders, Ankara has reacted calmly. When it became clear that the Islamist fighters were no longer in control of the border crossing at Ras al-Ain, Turkish Security Forces (TSK) remained at their posts. The absence of incursions by the TSK stands in contrast to regular strikes into Iraq prior to the April cease-fire with the PKK. Even more astounding was the 25 July trip of PYD head Salih Muslim, who met with Turkish military and political leaders.

According to a Reuters report, Turkey wants the PYD to agree not to threaten border security or seek an autonomous region in Syria through violence. More so, the Kurdish fighters must continue to oppose the Assad regime.

As the enemies of President Bashar al-Assad turn on one another, the Syrian Army continues to roll back to divided opposition forces in house to house battles across the country. The city of Aleppo looks likely to fall next as Hezbollah wades further into the conflict. The Free Syrian Army (FSA), never truly a united force, faces as much risk from its own internal divisions as it does from the Russian-armed government. Turkish leaders appear to be reevaluating their early sponsorship of the FSA, and their meeting with Muslim may be a sign of this change in strategy. As they attempt to make progress on the PKK peace plan at home, Turkish leaders may figure that there is no better time than now to extend the olive branch to the dominant fighting force in northwest Syria.

One question must remain in the back of Turkish leaders minds though: If the PYD successfully carves out a Kurdish-run enclave from Syria, is Turkey's southeast next?

Press Freedom

The lack of extensive coverage by Turkey's media conglomerates in the early days of the Taksim Square protests was reflective of the current state of press freedom in the country. The protests were certainly newsworthy, but Turkey's cowed media companies made little mention as they spread. Since the \$2.5 billion tax fine by the AKP government against the usually critical Dogan Group in 2009, newspapers and television coverage has become increasingly pro-government. Lacking a pro-AKP stance, many outlets refuse to report in the first place, fearful of drawing the ire of the government.

A late July publication from Reporters Without Borders summed up the situation, dropping Turkey to 154 in ranks of press freedom. The World Press Freedom Index also criticized the country's media in light of the Taksim Square protests, saying its stances on news have lead to "paranoia about security, which has a tendency to see every criticism as a plot hatched by a variety of illegal organizations."

Anyone listening to Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan's comments about the protesters aims would understand where this story line emanated. Turkey continues to be the world's leading jailer of journalists with 100 imprisoned at the beginning of the year. In the weeks since Gezi Park, the Turkish Union of Journalists estimates that 60 have been fired or resigned. The most notable of these has been Yavuz Baydar, whose editors refused to run his government-critical columns in the pro-AKP newspaper Sabah.

In response, Baydar published an op-ed in the New York Times, where he lambasted the growing intimacy between media executives and the government. Like the major broadcasters in the United States, Turkey's television and print media are subsidiaries of larger conglomerates. In light of the Dogan Group's near extinction on what many see as a trumped up tax fraud case, Turkish media has cut back criticism. If not wholly pro-government, outlets tend to avoid controversy all together. The best example of this was CNN Turk's airing of a cooking show during the height of the unrest in Taksim Square.

Erdogan gave his opinion on the role of the media in celebration of Journalists Day on July 24, saying that the media should consider the country's interests and public order in pursuit of stories. This is not a surprising stance considering the number of imprisoned journalists in jail on trumped up, anti-terrorism charges. The prime minister, and consequently the ruling AKP view media criticism as a punishable offense. More so, such an offense is typically done at the behest of outside actors, or the ever present Deep State.

While this is typical of how press freedom is viewed across much of the developing world, it is a worrying stance for a country that is a candidate for the European Union.

PKK Peace Agreement

The cease fire continues to hold, a sign of hope despite the dire pronouncements from both the government and the PKK. This is due to two factors.

First, credit is due to the AKP government's even headed approach to the matter, specifically in corralling of reactionary military elements that have never bought into the deal. The second is PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan's impressive hold over the country's Kurdish community. The PKK has largely held to its end of the bargain, having only reportedly reacted to the repair and refurbishment of Turkish military outposts in the country's southeast. Given the mistrust on both sides, the fact that the deal has held this long is impressive in itself.

However, the glacial pace of constitutional negotiations, specifically reforms related to the Kurdish issue, threaten the past months' work. These reforms include steps to boost the rights of the Kurdish minority, including abolishing an anti-terrorism law under which thousands have been imprisoned for links to the PKK, granting full Kurdish-language education and lowering the threshold of votes which parties need to enter parliament. (Reuters, "Kurds give Turkey 'final warning' on peace deal", 19 July 2013).

The government claims the PKK has not evacuated its personnel from the country, one of the tenets of the cease fire. The Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) says the fighters have held to their end of the bargain and demanded that the second part of the agreement negotiated by Ocalan, the legislative reforms, begin immediately.

Amidst this, Turkish media reports said that in his latest meeting with BDP deputies, Ocalan claimed the third and final part of the cease fire deal, granting unarmed fighters return to Turkey, could start in November. BDP Deputy Pervin Buldan, who met with Ocalan, denied this to the Turkish Daily, Hurriyet:

"The second phase of the peace process has not been completed yet, how can we go on with the third phase?" said Buldan.

The onus is on the AKP to take the next step. Verifying 100 percent adherence of the fighters' withdrawal is impossible. With regards to honouring the agreement, the

lack of large scale violence since April should be proof enough. In Ocalan, the Turks have a unique tool with which to work. His authority is unquestioned by the country's Kurdish population, meaning there likely will be no splintering of rogue groups once a deal is reached. But his health is reported to be poor, and given the changing dynamics of Kurdish fortunes in the Middle East, there is no guarantee that a unified Kurdistan wouldn't appeal to Turkey's Kurds in the distant future. Better to take the first step now, rather than let slip the progress made.

Energy and Pipelines

According to a recent report issued by TurkStat, Turkey's energy imports dropped 8.3 percent in the first half of the year. The decrease of \$2.4 billion is a positive for the country given that a large part of the 6 percent budget deficit is related to the import of foreign energy. During the first quarter of 2013, the country's economy grew a steady 3 percent, although this is far below the little over 5 percent annual growth averaged since 2003.

Part of the country's efforts to cut the reliance on energy imports involves the development of two nuclear power plants. However, in late July the Ministry of Environment and Urban Planning rejected the Rosatom-planned Akkyu plant's environmental impact assessment, setting back the expected start of construction.

The ministry cited deficiencies in form and content and called on the plant's holding company, Akkuyu NGS, to develop the plan in all aspects. (Hurriyet Daily, "Building of Turkey's first nuke plant faces delay risk," 31 July 2013).

Rosatom quickly countered rumours of delays, saying they would refurbish the report by August 15, which would have little effect on the planned 2019 start date.

According to the government, Akkuyu and the proposed Sinop nuclear power plant are expected to cut \$7.2 billion from the natural gas imports bill when up and running.

As all things Turkey seem to connect to the Kurds, Genel announced that the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) would see the completion of its own oil pipeline connecting to Turkey by the end of 2013. The line will carry crude from the Taq Taq and Tawke fields north of the capital Erbil to the Turkish border.

What is unclear is how the Iraqi Government will react, given that the Oil Ministry has been completely cut out from being the primary collector of oil revenue. The KRG disputes the Oil Ministry's role in having a first take at profits produced from Kurdish energy sources. Increased sectarian violence in Iraq does not bode well for cooler heads to prevail should the Iraqi government decide to push the issue.

Both Erbil and Ankara should be wary of such a situation, as the government of Nouri al-Maliki might use the issue to coalesce support amongst Iraq's splintering Shia and Sunni communities. The KRG's forces, mainly battle hardened are certainly a capable enough force to make such a move unpalatable. But should the worst happen, all parties involved, including Turkish investors, would stand to lose a fortune.

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