

Insights into Turkish Domestic and International Politics during July 2011

Key developments:

- *Turkey is shaken by the abrupt early retirement of the four highest-ranking military officials in the country just prior to the August meeting of the Supreme Military Council. The generals' resignations, requesting retirement, are in protest at the continued detention of military officers as part of the "Sledgehammer" coup plot investigation.*
- *The domestic political scene calms as the Republican People's Party (CHP) ends its parliamentary boycott, although the "independent" Peace and Democratic Party (BDP) delegates continue to refuse to be sworn in.*
- *Despite the fact that over 10,000 Syrians have crossed the border and sought refuge in Turkey, in July Ankara maintained a muted stance towards the Syrian crackdown as no viable alternative to the Assad regime has emerged.*
- *Iran, Syria and Iraq announce the Islamic Gas Pipeline project that will compete with Nabucco, while Turkey and Azerbaijan continue to argue over energy issues that could threaten the progress of the Nabucco gas pipeline*

Military Shakeup

On Friday, June 29, 2011 news broke that the four highest-ranking military officials in the Turkish Security Forces (TSK) had sought early retirement in an abrupt announcement. General Isik Kosaner, on the job as head of the armed forces for little more than a year, along with the heads of the country's ground, naval and air forces tendered the request for early retirement in protest against the government's continued crackdown in the "Sledgehammer" coup plot. Kosaner, known to be a staunch secularist but rather subdued compared to previous military chiefs, decided on the action following meetings with Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

In a release to the media, Kosaner said, "It is impossible to accept that these detentions are based on any universal laws, justice, or rules of conscience. Fourteen generals and admirals and 58 colonels have lost their right to be evaluated in the coming Supreme Military Council and were punished beforehand even though there have been no definitive judicial decisions against them."

The Supreme Military Council went ahead with its scheduled meeting on August 1, with the prime minister, defense minister and nine generals present. The four generals who retired the previous Friday as well as the imprisoned commander of the Aegean army who faces charges stemming from "Sledgehammer" did not attend. It is hard to see the unexpected retirements as anything but the final word on the previous decade's struggle by the AKP-led government to rein in a military with a history of toppling elected governments. Though the markets appeared to be rattled briefly, they quickly returned to normal as the country remained calm. Kosaner will be replaced by General Necdet Ozel, head of the TSK's paramilitary police.

Domestic Issues

Despite the CHP and BDP party deputies boycotting the swearing in to the parliament early in July, calm, if only in the Turkish political sense, has again returned to the country. While the AKP's capture of 50 percent of the available seats in the legislature is a definite sign of its continued popularity, the thin margin by which it failed to gain enough seats to circumvent the opposition parties must have been frustrating for its leaders.

Prime Minister Erdogan, ever the astute political operator, struck a note of conciliation in the face of boycott threats from his party's rivals. The political situation seems to be marked by charges being traded, with outside observers concluding that both sides raised legitimately viable points.

A number of deputies from the CHP, BDP and National Movement Party (MHP) were prevented from taking their seats in the parliament due to a variety of reasons, including past convictions or even ongoing prison sentences. As recently elected Turkish parliament speaker Cemil Çiçek pointed out, legislative rules bar anyone who has past convictions or who is currently serving time in prison from being sworn in. Moreover, there may be some truth to accusations that the opposition party candidates placed incarcerated representatives on polling sheets intentionally as a means of forcing early release from jail.

However, due consideration should be given to those boycotting members of the CHP and BDP who pointed out that some of the cases against those deputies are politically motivated. Regardless of parliamentary rules, suspicions were bound to rise when one seat won by the BDP was transferred to the AKP by the election board.

Regardless of the validity of the arguments, the boycott effectively ended in mid-July after a meeting of the CHP deputies and parliamentary speaker Çiçek. The Kurdish BDP deputies continue their boycott, though jailed PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan stated through his lawyers that they could take oaths.

So while the political scene seems to have settled into a midsummer calm, the boycott by the BDP raises the possibility of continued alienation on the part of the Kurdish minority. Indeed, the longer the stalemate goes on, the more likely it is that many Kurds will see the violent tactics of the PKK as the only way of expressing their dissatisfaction with their position in Turkey. Turkish soldiers suffered a number of deadly attacks in the south east of the country during July, and the situation there will only deteriorate further should a political solution not be reached.

However, even as the elections slowly fade to the back of many Turkish citizens' minds, a prominent scandal has gripped the attention of the country. Some of the country's top football teams are currently embroiled in a match-fixing investigation by the government, with many high-profile executives being arrested and charged over the past few weeks. The president of the Istanbul-based Fenerbahçe S.K. has been charged along with 30 others following a match-fixing probe stemming from last season's games, while its director was detained for interrogations on July 29. The coach of Beşiktaş, last year's Turkish Cup winners, has been arrested and charged along with the club's Deputy Chairman, while former Samsunspor chairman İsmail Uyanık, told the newspaper Radikal that Turkish Football Federation and the national team have been involved in match-fixing.

The start of the Turkish football league's domestic season has been pushed back to September 9 to allow the investigation to go on, and Fifa is now investigating Uyanık's claims. Turkish citizens are understandably outraged at the investigation's findings, with many commentators on the country's news websites saying that they expect such corruption by politicians, not footballers.

Middle East

Tensions between Ankara and Damascus have waned over the course of July despite the continued crackdown by pro-Assad forces on protesters across Syria. It is estimated that over 10,000 Syrians have taken refuge across the

Turkish-Syrian border, with word of atrocities committed against largely unarmed demonstrators continuing to seep into the camps housing the refugees. Though the harsh rhetoric exchanged by members of the two governments a month ago appears to have died down for now, the continuing upheaval in Syria that has left 1,600 dead could spark more condemnation from Ankara.

Prime Minister Erdogan has managed to keep Turkey on the right side of the debate so far without taking a direct stand against the regime of his personal friend, Bashar al-Assad. However, the longer the unrest and killings go on, the more likely it is that Turkey will be forced to publicly side with either the West, which continues to decry the methods used by Damascus, or with Syrian allies like Russia, China and Iran. Russia and China continue to quash any possibility of a UN Security Council resolution condemning the Assad regime, while Iran recently warned Turkey against meddling in Syrian affairs. In a media outlet run by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, an op-ed warned that Turkey could only achieve dominance in the region through an alliance with Iran and Syria and should therefore refrain from involving itself in Syria's domestic matters so that the situation there could return to normal.

Talk of a military intervention by Turkish forces is farfetched at best considering there is no viable candidate in the scattered opposition likely to succeed the current Syrian government. Hence, Ankara's hope is that the bloodshed will stop and Assad will gradually implement long-promised reforms in the Alawite-dominated government. For much as Ankara is genuinely concerned about human rights, it would not like to share a border with a country that would likely be ungovernable, should Assad fall.

While rhetoric between Ankara and Damascus has quieted for now, the acrimony between Israel and Turkey over last year's Gaza flotilla raid continues to sour relations between the once-close allies. Turkey continues to demand a formal apology for the deaths of nine Turkish activists aboard a ship attempting to break the Gaza naval blockade last summer, further calling on Israel to end the blockade all together. Israel, led by a right-wing government under Benjamin Netanyahu, has balked at such actions, justifying the Israeli commandos' actions by saying they were attacked when boarding the ship.

On his visit to Washington on July 29, however, Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak admitted that the time may be coming when Israel would make some form of amends for the deaths. "We are willing to consider an apology over problems that arose during the operation on the Marmara, if there were any," Barak said during a meeting with US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton. "I don't like it, but it's the choice that needs to be."

The announcement follows months of careful steps taken by Israel to prevent further antagonizing Turkey, especially in light of the departure of Hosni Mubarak from Egypt, which left the Jewish state with a lack of effective allies in the region. Netanyahu sent a congratulatory letter to Erdogan for his success in the recent elections, and Ankara appeared to reciprocate by pulling the Mavi Marmara, on which last year's killings took place, from the most recent attempt to break Israel's economic blockade of Gaza. With Erdogan recently announcing that he would like to visit the closed territory, it remains to be seen how the bilateral relationship stands come September's expected Palestinian bid for statehood before the United Nations.

Pipeline and Energy Issues

On July 26, the governments of Iran, Iraq and Syria announced plans to construct a new energy transportation pipeline through the three countries as well as through Lebanon and under the Mediterranean, dubbing it the "Islamic Gas Pipeline" project. The announcement, made in Tehran, claimed the pipeline could be a competitor to the EU-backed Nabucco pipeline. Estimated to cost \$10 billion, Europe will be able to receive up to 40 billion cubic meters of gas a year from the pipeline. If correct, that is 30 percent more than what the EU expects from Nabucco if it is put into operation by 2016 as planned.

Meanwhile, Russia's Gazprom has publicly rebuffed Turkish state gas company BOTAŞ's attempt to allow six private Turkish companies to become involved in the Blue Stream pipeline deal, saying it was negotiated by the two

governments in 1997 and was outside of privatization. Gazprom is unlikely to give any of the Turkish companies a Seller's Consent Protocol, which if granted could have potentially saved Turkey \$40 billion over the remaining 14 years of the current contract.

In other news, Azerbaijan and Turkey continue to trade barbs over Nabucco negotiations. Baku claimed that Ankara might be indifferent to the project as Azerbaijan did not receive a copy of the signed contract from Turkey. Relations between the two countries were further strained following Azerbaijan's absence from the signing ceremony for the project's legal framework in early June. The agreement was signed by Nabucco Gas Pipeline International GmbH and energy ministries of the five transit countries, Austria, Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and Turkey. The obligatory bilateral transit agreement between Azerbaijan and Turkey to solidify the project has yet to be signed, though issues may have been ironed out for the moment following Erdogan's visit to Baku on July 27. Relations between the two countries are particularly important as far as energy issues are concerned, as they are partners not only in the Nabucco project, but also in the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) and the Interconnection Turkey-Greece-Italy (ITGI) projects.

As Brussels empties amidst the summer holiday period, it is hoped that the project's individual partners can work out their differences in a timely manner for an agreement to be codified. With Nabucco's poor track record, however, it remains to be seen whether the participants can all just get along.

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