

Insights into Turkish Domestic and International Politics during January 2013

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Key Points:

- *Reports leak about the training of Turkish soldiers for missions to secure Syria's weapons of mass destruction.*
 - *Construction is underway on Kurdish Regional Government's pipeline projects to Turkey. The project continues to be a thorn in the side of Baghdad, alienating it from Ankara as well as Erbil.*
 - *KRG-Turkish cooperation is also key in Ankara's efforts at creating a counterweight to the PYD in Syria, with pro-Masoud Barzani groups seen as a better option than PKK sympathetic militant groups.*
 - *Turkey's judicial and penal systems come under scrutiny despite substantial EU funding to improve prisoners living conditions.*
 - *In a move to diversify away from cleaner gas-powered electrical production plants, tenders for coal powered plants are on the rise. The growth in coal power plants is part of a government effort to lessen reliance on gas supplies from Russia and Iran.*
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Syria

Forces in Syria continue the slow but deadly business of battle, with regime forces ceding ground across the country. But the sheer firepower available to the government forces of President Bashar al-Assad continues to keep the fighting from turning into a rout. A late January airstrike by Israeli planes into the Golan Heights has worsened the situation, with Damascus and Tehran saying reprisal military strikes are justified. The stakes of the conflict continue to alarm key regional states, with reports now speaking of “the preparations of Turkish and Jordanian Special Forces to secure Syria’s weapons of mass destruction (WMD)”.

The Obama administration is said to have approved the training by chemical weapon specialists in NATO after reports surfaced in late 2012 that the Assad regime had loaded them into artillery shells. The warnings sent by Washington and Moscow to cease any such actions appear to have worked. But as the al-Assad regime continues to cede ground to the rebels, concern is rising of a scenario in which Syria’s WMD arsenal is used by the regime or is seized by opposition groups. In addition to training the Turkish forces, Washington has reportedly sent covert messages to the Syrian military commanders in charge of the WMD sites promising protection in return for securing the weapons. So far, no regime official has taken up the offer.

Turkey’s involvement in securing WMDs inside Syria has caused consternation in Ankara, however. Some government officials have concerns that Turkish security forces could be used as pawns in place of Western troops. While that calculus has some logic, the fact is that Turkey cannot risk Syria’s WMDs being lost, especially with fears of pro-PKK groups controlling large swaths in the north of the country. Should the al-Assad regime fall, Turkish leaders will face two unpopular choices of whether to intervene to secure the weapons or hope they do not fall into unfriendly hands. Despite the unpopularity of the first option, it is the best choice in security terms.

Kurdish Regional Government

With construction having begun on the oil and gas pipelines on the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) side, Turkey’s newest energy partner doesn’t appear to be worried about Baghdad’s anger. The pipelines are scheduled to be complete by 2014. However, Turkish firms risk being cut out of contracts around the city of Basra. Further, political tensions between Ankara and Baghdad continue to be painted in an ethnic and religious context while Sunni Vice President Tareq al-Hashemi remains in Turkey after fleeing a death sentence for terrorism charges. Finally, the U.S. – a longtime supporter of Iraq’s Kurds – is unhappy with the energy agreement that has left Baghdad stewing. Washington fears the rift between the KRG and the government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki only pushes Baghdad closer to Tehran.

But the government of Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan has made a calculated decision that its energy growth and diversification needs require a partner like the KRG. The calculus has been aided by a KRG crackdown on pro-PKK groups inside northern Iraq, which has helped Turkey decide it is best to let the government of President Masoud Barzani of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) try to influence the situation in Syria with respect to its two million Kurds.

Barzani’s KDP stands as the only viable opposition to the PKK whose brother organization in Syria, the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PYD), is a potent military force. However, the PYD has avoided clashes with the al-Assad regime and strictly controls and protects Kurdish areas in the northern sections of Syria abandoned by government forces. Barzani’s attempt at creating a counterweight to the PYD has been the creation of the Syria-based Kurdistan National Council (KNC). The KNC currently holds a tense peace with the PYD, though once the situation in Syria solidifies, Kurdish infighting has the potential to erupt between the two diverse groups.

Turkey’s hope is that Barzani’s KNC manages to gain support amongst the Syrian Kurds. If not, a pro-PKK

base provided by the PYD means that Turkish military forces could be drawn into the country.

Turkish Prisons

One of the more stereotypical Western fables about Turkey is that whatever happens while visiting the country, at all costs one should avoid ending up in a Turkish prison cell. A recent report by International Centre for Prison Studies (ICPS) echoes concerns raised by human rights groups about the state of the country's penal system and the alarming growth of the prison population which had reached 124,677 prisoners in October 2012. However, not all of those were convicted criminals, others were being detained while they awaited trial. The report comes on the heels of a multi-year EU sponsored prison revitalization project intended to train prison staff and improve conditions for prisoners ("Turkey: Denying Prisoners Medical Access as Disciplining Tool?", Eurasia.net).

The increase in the country's prison population may have a connection to the frequent high profile coup cases that have made headlines over the past year. But such an increase, especially in those awaiting trial, indicates a state in dire need of judicial reform. Such news is reflected in the EU's latest report card on Turkey's accession which plainly stated "Judicial reform and the normalisation of civilian-military relations remain priorities of the government."

Prosecutorial overreach can be blamed on many cases of activists being detained on charges that would not

pass muster in most democracies, though legislative allowances for such prosecutions are at the heart of such charges. Until all of these issues are addressed, Turkey's prison cells will continue to fill.

Energy

A recent announcement by the Turkish Energy Ministry appears to have opened up the market for more coal powered energy plants. According to the country's energy regulating authority, applications for gas powered energy production plants were down while those running on coal power had increased substantially. The energy ministry's move is intended to break the country's reliance on gas powered electricity production which is largely powered by Iranian and Russian gas. Turkey and Iran's mutual distrust has grown over disputes on take-or-pay natural gas contracts, Iranian acquiescence of the PKK, Tehran's nuclear program and Syria. Turkey's reliance on Russia leaves Ankara in a tenuous position given Moscow's history of using gas supplies as a political tool should disputes arise as they have with Ukraine.

The diversification of power suppliers is good for Turkey's energy diversification but bad for the environment, as coal burning plants are known polluters. However, like most nations seeking to meet growing domestic demands and maintain its robust growth, Turkey has decided that economic concerns trump environmental ones.

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