

Insights into Turkish Domestic and International Politics during November 1-15th 2012

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Key Points:

- *Hostilities erupt between Kurdish fighters and the FSA in Syria, with some Kurdish groups siding with the opposition forces.*
- *Prime Minister Erdogan condemns Israel in the latest round of fighting between the Jewish state and Hamas controlled Gaza.*
- *A month long hunger strike by Kurdish prisoners in Turkey is close to being called off as the PKK and the government hold talks.*
- *The AKP pushes through a draft law designating new municipalities, although the opposition claims they have gerrymandered for an advantage in upcoming elections.*
- *The government gives the go-ahead to sell electricity to Syria despite the current impasse with Damascus.*
- *Turkey threatens ENI over its Cyprus exploration bid, while Tehran and Ankara renegotiate ahead of the cessation of the "take or pay" natural gas contracts.*

Syria

The civil war continues in Syria, as the conflict continues to fracture along ethnic and religious lines. Amidst heavy fighting in Aleppo between the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and the government, Kurdish fighters aligned with the Kurdish Democratic Union (PYD) clashed with FSA fighters. A handful of combatants on both sides were killed before a tentative truce was called. The PYD – which is closely associated with the PKK – is said to be interested in protecting Kurdish neighborhoods and wishes to take no part in the civil war. Many Kurds, though persecuted under al-Assad, see the FSA as a puppet of Turkey. There are major concerns in Ankara regarding the recent autonomy given to Syria's Kurds as the al-Assad regime fights for survival.

In addition to ethnic conflict, there are reports that the incident in Aleppo involved Kurdish factions, some aligned with the FSA, who took up arms against the PYD. In other nearby regions, fighters aligned with the Kurdish National Council (KNC) and the Kurdish Salahuddin Ayubi Brigade of the FSA are reported to have fired upon PYD fighters.

All of these developments are highly frustrating for the FSA, as it struggles to consolidate upon the “high ground” against the regime, as summed up in the following comment by one FSA source:

What are they [the PYD] trying to do? In the west, Idlib is controlled by the FSA -- there are experienced and well-armed opposition fighters. In the south, the PKK and PYD are surrounded by opposition forces. In Azaz, there are Turkmen fighters, and in the north there is Turkey. When a real fight erupts, how long can they endure and to which place do they think they can escape?

An intensification of fighting along these ethnic lines is a nightmare scenario for all parties involved, with the specters of the Lebanese Civil War and post-Saddam Iraq hanging over the entire affair. That said, leaders in Ankara are likely relieved at reports of inter-Kurdish fighting, since this weakens their hand in the development of any concerted anti-Turkish position

Gaza

Israel's assassination of Hamas' military leader has put the territory in danger of a full scale invasion. The group's resumption of rocket attacks on southern Israel was the catalyst to the current flare up in violence. Despite Western backing of the Israeli bombardment of Gaza, which has left nearly 50 dead at the time of writing, Turkish Prime Minister, Tayyip Erdogan, continued to criticize the Jewish state's policies regarding the territory.

Erdogan has asserted that the current centre-right government of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu initiated the conflict ahead of upcoming elections. While calling on both parties to cease firing on one another, the Turkish Prime Minister continued his unbridled criticism of Israeli policies in Gaza.

Indeed, the AKP government's present relationship with Israel rests on the 2010 Mavi Mamara incident, where Israeli special forces killed Turkish activists expressing solidarity for blockaded Palestinians in Gaza. Until Turkey's three key demands are met by Israel – an apology for the deaths aboard the ship, compensation and the ending of the Gaza blockade – the nations' relations will likely remain frozen.

Though Erdogan continues to receive praise around the Muslim world for his stance, the world's eyes are on Cairo. Many are curious how Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood government will handle the matter. Despite some fears that it is ceding its regional clout to an ascendant Egypt, Turkey may be fortunate to avoid becoming mired in the rather “challenging business” of negotiating a cease fire between the Palestinians and Israelis. The country has enough on its agenda with Syria. Further, as some Kurdish sources have noted, Ankara's condemnation of Israeli strikes smacks of hypocrisy given that Turkish Security Forces (TSK) continue to fight the PKK in the Turkey's south eastern provinces.

The Kurds

Regional shifts in wake of the Arab Spring have transformed the Middle East over the course of the

past two years. But the long running Kurdish issue that has plagued successive Turkish governments continues to be a domestic and security concern that will not go away. Sources say the current hunger strikes by Kurdish prisoners will likely end if imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan calls for them to end. Talks are said to be ongoing between Turkish Intelligence Services and the PKK in Turkey and in Norway.

The strikes intended to secure the end of Ocalan's solitary confinement, make Kurdish an official language, and allow education and court proceedings to be conducted in Kurdish. While the prime minister has appeared exasperated that his "Kurdish Opening" has all but failed, Deputy Prime Minister Bulent Arinc, has continued to push for reconciliation with the country's largest minority. He has previously stated that Kurdish will be used in court and that Ocalan's isolation will end. More importantly, he has spearheaded efforts that resulted in the AKP's promotion of the new constitution that will lower the parliament's 10 percent threshold rule. The Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) views the rule as an impediment to its full participation in the legislative body.

If Arinc is sincere on the threshold rule, the new constitution could be the catalyst necessary to bring the long running conflict out of the hills of Turkey's southeast and into the democratic organs of the state. Uncertainty with Syria's Kurds and the security situation along the border necessitates that the issue be addressed as soon as possible. It is imperative for Turkey's external security and internal stability that moderate Kurdish voices are seen to be making progress.

Domestic Politics

The opposition has reacted furiously to a recent AKP draft law that restructured the country's municipalities. The results of the new electoral maps appear to have ceded an advantage to the AKP in the next round of elections. Thirteen cities with populations of over 750,000 will have new statuses,

with the incorporation of large swathes of rural areas into these cities thought to contain large groups of AKP supporters. Both the CHP and MHP claim that their respective mayors elected in the 2009 polls would now lose out to AKP opponents if the 2011 election results were used. The CHP has demanded a meeting with President Abdullah Gul to ask that the debate be re-tabled in the parliament.

Gerrymandering is one of the ugly sides of representative democracy. However, if opposition parties already lag behind the AKP in the polls, it is because of the ruling party's superior ground game and voter appeal. While they are well within their rights to demand a re-examination of the draft law that has evidently helped the AKP, they should spend more energy on appealing to voters they have lost over the past decade.

Energy

Despite its break with Damascus, Turkey's government signed off on the energy company Aksa selling electricity to northern Syria. Turkey supplies around 20 percent of its southern neighbour's power, although at one stage considered cutting off supply following the shelling of Turkish territory in early October (EGF Turkey File, 1-15 October). According to Energy Minister Taner Yildiz, Ankara deemed that average Syrians would likely suffer as a result of a power cut.

Meanwhile, Italian energy company ENI has drawn the ire of the government with its plans to invest in Cyprus' newfound gas fields. Both the energy and foreign ministries have issued statements on the matter, the former saying that ENI would not be allowed to take part in future energy projects in Turkey if it worked in Cyprus. The row is an issue for the Blue Stream pipeline, as ENI is a major partner in the project that brings Russian gas to Turkey via the Black Sea. While Turkish statements have been explicit in mentioning only new projects, the move shows Ankara's willingness to play politics with its energy ventures if need be. Though it lacks energy deposits in contrast to many of its neighbours,

Turkey's importance as a key transit line for European markets allows it to gamble.

As negotiations between Iran and Turkey continue over the next round of natural gas contracts, Energy Minister Yildiz assured citizens that there would be no increase in gas prices in the foreseeable future. Turkey is set to end its problematic "take or pay" natural gas contracts with Tehran next year, though Yildiz mentioned that the Iranian offer was not as low as he had initially thought it would be.

In the meantime, Iran is unhappy with Turkey's recent acquiescence of a U.S.-sponsored missile defense system in its southeast, while Teheran and Ankara continue disagreeing in relation to the situation in Syria. While the gas contracts are big business for Iran, and increasingly important for an energy hungry Turkey, it is questionable whether their disputes will carry over to the negotiation table. If so, Turkish officials will be hoping for an increase in gas output from other suppliers like Russia, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan.

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