

A snapshot of Turkey's domestic and regional politics during May 2011

Key Points:

- *Uprisings in the Middle East continue to make diplomacy a difficult game to master for leaders in Turkey, with Syria's potential implosion being a matter of great concern for those in power in Ankara.*
- *With Parliamentary elections scheduled for June 12, and the AKP seeing stronger challenges across the political spectrum, tensions are on the rise in the country. It is unlikely, however, that the AKP will face electoral defeat.*
- *The Nabucco pipeline continues to be mired in uncertainty as Brussels has not been able to persuade suppliers to sign on to the project.*

Unrest in the Middle East continues to impact upon Turkey's role in the region

On May 2, Turkish Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, joined the chorus of other world leaders calling on Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi to step down and allow for a peaceful transition of power. Later in the month, Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu echoed this view, stating that the Libyan National Transition Council headed by Mustafa Abdul Jaleel was “a legal and credible representative of the Libyan people”. He added: “There is no room for the previous regime”.

There seems to be a marked change in tone compared to the early stages of the Libyan uprising, when sources in the Turkish Foreign Ministry had stated that helping the rebels overthrow Gaddafi would rob them of the satisfaction of ridding the country of the dictator on their own. This was in spite of the rebels' desperate requests for outside intervention. Erdogan's statements also sent mixed messages as, within the space of a few days, he said that the no-fly zone had his “heartfelt support” while also decrying “foreign intervention in Libya”.

In Syria, the crackdown continues in places like Daraa, with some estimates putting the death toll at nearly 900. Ankara, like much of the world, finds itself in the uncomfortable position of wanting to halt further bloodshed while at the same time fearing the collapse of the country into chaos. Amidst the continuing unrest, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad is said to have promised Erdogan over the phone that he would implement reform, but little has been seen of such promises even as the Syrian military attempts a violent clampdown on the unrest. Sources in the Turkish government claim that Erdogan has warned the Syrian leader against a repeat of the incident at Hama in 1982, when an Islamist uprising was put down by the military, killing over 10,000 people.

Turkey is in a delicate position due to several factors. Relations between Turkey and Syria have grown stronger since the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in 2002. Bilateral trade between the neighbors has tripled in the last three years, and the two leaders are rumored to be good friends. However, Syria is also home to over 1.4 million Kurds, while in response to the continuing crackdown, Turkey hosted meetings of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, enraging Damascus. Furthermore, the foreign ministry in Ankara announced that it will not be sending any more delegations to Syria for the time being. Though it is unlikely that Erdogan will publicly call on Assad to step down as he did with Gaddafi and Egypt's Hosni Mubarak, the positive relations of the past years seem to be cooling rapidly for the time being.

Domestic political tension mounts as parliamentary elections approach

The inherent danger that exists in politics in Turkey was exemplified in early May when unidentified gunmen attacked Prime Minister Erdogan's convoy shortly after his appearance at a political rally in the northern province of Kastamonu. The prime minister was not in the convoy at the time – he had taken a helicopter from the rally instead – but the attack killed one police officer.

After the incident the Prime Minister slammed the perpetrators, saying, “Call them whatever you want, these terrorists, these separatist powers, those who realize that they cannot handle their business at the ballot boxes, think that they can achieve results only this way”.

As the June elections approach, the rhetoric has only grown more heated, especially in light of the attack on the prime minister's convoy and a spate of bombings across the country. Speaking in Sirnak, Erdogan accused the

Republican People's Party (CHP) and pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) of sowing unrest in the country. The prime minister went on to say that a Turkish prison housing coup suspects, journalists and Kurdish activists was in communication with Kandil – home to PKK headquarters – in order to defeat AKP in the upcoming elections. Meanwhile, President Abdullah Gul has asked the government to find out who has been releasing a series of sex tapes of prominent leaders of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). The story has been widely reported in the Turkish press ahead of the elections. However, the MHP has stated that despite the tapes, they will continue to campaign as usual.

Meanwhile, the AKP's conservative views have been criticized by women's rights groups in Turkey, despite the government signing a declaration to reinforce women's rights in the country. Turkey and 46 other members of the Council of Europe signed the "Convention on Preventing Domestic Violence and other forms of Violence against Women" in Istanbul during the second week of May. However, following a spate of fatal and near fatal attacks on women who have filed for divorce from abusive husbands or spurned suitors, domestic violence has been increasingly discussed in the urban centers. Some have blamed the AKP's near decade-long rule for the increasingly conservative nature of Turkish life compared to past decades. However, it is difficult to discern whether there is increased violence against women now or whether it is being reported more than in the past.

According to Human Rights Watch (HRW), part of the problem is that authorities fail to consider threats against women legitimate. HRW spokesperson Gauri Van Gulik has said that "police and prosecutors don't take women seriously".

Though the AKP surely is not responsible for violent attacks against women, the cultural tolerance it promotes seems to vary from situation to situation. Journalists like Nedin Sener and Ahmet Sik, who have criticized the AKP and its supporters, continue to be in prison on secret charges that the government refuses to explain. However, in February, a theology teacher who said women wearing low-cut clothes are partly responsible if they are raped was saved from being fired after the government's highest academic authority ruled that he was protected by freedom of speech.

Pipeline geopolitics: Brussels-driven projects remain in a phase of uncertainty

Nabucco's progress remains questionable, though many in Brussels continue to push for a concrete set of agreements that will enable the implementation of the much discussed alternative to Europe's Russian energy supplies. At a meeting in Turkmenistan in late May, Turkmen and Azerbaijani representatives met with their counterparts from Nabucco who urged the two Caspian neighbors to put aside their differences and commit to supplying the proposed pipeline. Pipeline planners pushed for agreements from both countries, underlining the need for commitment by all parties involved and saying that the "window of opportunity" for the project's construction would be closing soon.

Brussels fears that as the South Stream project continues to pick up steam under Gazprom's leadership, and shale gas production increases in Europe, the Nabucco pipeline project will be consigned to the dustbin of history. Though France has banned shale gas extraction, Poland has stated that it would ramp up its planned shale gas production in a move to free itself from over-reliance on Russian gas supplies.

To counter hesitation on the part of Azerbaijan, the European Commission recently announced that it would continue to explore possible options for the export of Azeri gas to European Union markets. Energy Directorate

policy coordinator Brendan Devlin recently stated that, “We will continue our efforts over 2011 and we will look at all options to export gas through transit states and also through the Black Sea in order to give Azerbaijan the strategic independence it needs”.

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