

## Insights into Turkish Domestic and International Politics during June 2012

### Key Points:

- *Syria shoots down a Turkish military plane, greatly heightening tensions between the countries.*
- *Although Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan threatens action in response to any further threats from Syria, domestic opinion polls from just prior to the incident show a Turkish public hesitant to confront the Assad regime.*
- *Meanwhile, the CHP and AKP party leadership meets in an attempt to revive reconciliation efforts with the country's Kurdish minority.*
- *As constitution discussions continue, Erdogan's statements on the necessity of a strong presidential office worries his critics who fear he will take over and extend his reign as head of the country following the end of his term as prime minister.*
- *In the energy sector, Azerbaijan and Turkey appear to have finalized the TANAP pipeline agreement while Turkish Energy Minister, Taner Yildiz, discusses the future of nuclear power in Turkey at the World Economic Forums.*

## Syria

*To begin this edition, a prediction made in the May 2012 EGF Turkey file saying that the “al-Assad regime will continue to crack down on dissidents at home in the harshest measures as it did in Houla while avoiding any potential conflict that could justify an intervention by Turkey or its Western allies,” has been proven wrong in short order.*

While accounts vary as to the exact location of the incident, all agree that on June 22 an unarmed Turkish military jet was shot down near the Turkish-Syrian maritime border by Syrian military forces. Ankara has taken its case to NATO, and while alliance members have backed Turkey in its condemnation of the downing, sources in Brussels are skeptical of Turkey's assurances that the plane was on a routine mission when shot down. Turkey has said that while the flight path accidentally crossed Syrian airspace, the shooting took place over international waters.

Prime Minister Tayip Erdogan has responded to the incident with the position that any Syrian military movements within the proximity of the countries' mutual border will be viewed as a threat, and has deployed mechanized and anti-aircraft units to the border.

Despite the downing, public opinion in Turkey is strongly opposed to an escalation with Syria. A recent poll in Turkey revealed that 56 percent of respondents oppose an intervention compared to 11 percent who would support one. There was also a lack of support for arming Syria's rebels, with only around eight percent in favor while only around 15 percent approved of the establishment of security zones by the military. However it should be noted that the survey by the Center for Economics and Foreign Policy Studies was conducted prior to the downing of the Turkish military aircraft.

In the meantime, domestic opposition, specifically from the CHP and Kurdish BDP, has continued to heap criticism of Erdogan's AKP government in light of the

incident and relations with Syria more broadly. CHP deputy chairman on foreign relations, Faruk Logoglu, asserted that while he blamed the majority of the violence in Syria on al-Assad loyalists, he also implied that Erdogan was positioning himself as a Sunni standard-bearer for Western efforts to roll back Shiite Iran's influence in the Middle East.

While many Western and Arab observers now see the shooting as the straw that broke the camel's back in the Syria-Turkey relationship, the Erdogan government faces a largely apathetic public response to the extremely complex situation unfolding on the ground in Syria. While Turkey's Alevis remain skeptical of the Sunni lead opposition movement opposing al-Assad, Turkey's Kurdish minority is equally skeptical of the country's leadership as Turkish armed forces (TSK) continue combat PKK militants in the country's southeast. This divided domestic scene will make any military action by Turkey unpalatable unless Syrian forces strike first. With the presence of TSK armored divisions increasingly visible on the Turkey-Syria border, however, such a scenario should not be ruled out entirely. As Turkish foreign policy chief, Ahmed Davutoglu's "zero problems with the neighbours" ideology rolls back into the 1990s (when Turkey and Syria were on the brink of war), nothing should be taken for granted.

## Kurdish issues

*Syria aside, the main opposition CHP's leader, Kemal Kilicdaroglu, met with Prime Minister Erdogan and other leaders from the country's two main parties to discuss the future of the country's Kurdish reconciliation process. The meeting was requested by Kilicdarglu to discuss a recently updated CHP draft of a 1989 roadmap to solve the country's most divisive conflict.*

While self congratulations were expressed after the meeting, those hopeful for the end of the strife are likely to look back to a similar meeting between the two men on the issue in July 2010 that led to little

gain. The AKP's own conciliatory measures towards the Kurdish minority can only be described as a short term failure – with an uptick of violence and the jailing of Kurdish BDP deputies for ties to the outlawed PKK only exacerbating the tension between the government and the country's largest minority.

However, there may be hope in the long-term as government mandated measures of allowing Kurdish to be spoken and taught in some education programs may alleviate alienation of Turkey's Kurds as 'others'. Increasingly positive relations between Ankara and the Kurdish Regional Government due to energy and economic cooperation may also foster a climate of greater warmth and confidence building. Genuine reconciliation, however, is only likely to emerge as part of political, cultural and economic factors that are not entirely in the control of political actors.

### **Government**

*On June 11 representatives from the Constitutional Reconciliation Commission of the Turkish parliament met with President Abdullah Gul to inform him of ongoing negotiations and rally his support for their work in drafting a new constitution. However, as the deal making continues, critics are concerned of the direction of the new government, specifically if more powers are granted to the office of the president.*

The position has long been seen as symbolic in comparison to the roles of the parliament and prime minister. But comments made by Erdogan in a June television interview have unnerved some critics when he said, "A further step should be taken to get more successful results for our country; it could be either a presidential or a semi-presidential system." Comparisons to Russian President, Vladimir Putin, have been made and while accusations of Erdogan's dictatorial intentions are likely overblown, his remarks follow last July's parliamentary elections which Erdogan said would be his last.

Given the progress Turkey has made both democratically and economically under Erdogan's stewardship over the last decade, it is understandable why he would be loathe to give up power to another – be they a political ally or opposition member. But following the government's fracturing of the military's influence on the country's political scene, it would be a dangerous precedent for Erdogan to accede to a more powerful presidency position.

### **Energy**

*On June 27, the leaders of Azerbaijan and Turkey signed what now appears to be the final agreement on the TANAP pipeline – a project worth an estimated \$7 billion. The signing moves TANAP one step closer to reality, and codifies the agreements to transfer natural gas supplies from the Shah Deniz field to European markets as part of the Southern Energy corridor. It is also possible that Turkmen gas supplies will also transit across Turkey westbound via TANAP. Brussels was errily silent at the news, as noted here before, that NABUCCO in its original form is now likely a thing of the past. The completion of TANAP, the Baku-Tbilisi-Cayhan crude oil pipeline and the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum are all positive steps in Europe's diversification away from Gazprom, though NABUCCO's decade long preparations are now being looked at as a substantial waste of time and energy by some in Brussels.*

In other Turkish energy related developments, Energy Minister Taner Yildiz announced the country's intention to build 23 new nuclear power plants by 2023 at a meeting of the World Economic Forum in early June. With the country facing ever increasing usage as the economy booms and domestic consumption rises – the reliance of the country's energy needs on a fossil fueled electric grid is becoming increasingly evident as a disadvantage. This last point was driven home on June 27 when a bomb stopped transmission of Iranian natural gas supplies to Turkey for four to five days. While Europe switches off its nuclear reactors in the wake of the Fukushima

disaster in Japan, developing economies like Turkey have made the gamble to go nuclear.

---

#### Disclaimer

The information presented in this report is believed to be correct at the time of publication. Please note that the contents of the report are based on materials gathered in good faith from both primary and secondary sources, the accuracy of which we are not always in a position to guarantee. EGF does not accept any liability for subsequent actions taken by third parties based on any of the information provided in our reports, if such information may subsequently be proven to be inaccurate.

#### EGF Turkey File

Published by European Geopolitical Forum SPRL  
Copyright European Geopolitical Forum SPRL  
Director and Founder: Dr Marat Terterov  
Email: [Marat.Terterov@gpf-europe.com](mailto:Marat.Terterov@gpf-europe.com)

Avenue Du Manoir D'Anjou 8  
Brussels 1150 Belgium  
Tel/Fax: +322 770 1001  
[info@gpf-europe.com](mailto:info@gpf-europe.com)  
[www.gpf-europe.com](http://www.gpf-europe.com)  
[www.gpf-europe.ru](http://www.gpf-europe.ru)