

Insights into Turkish Domestic and International Politics during August 2012

Key Points:

- *Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu leads the Turkish effort at the Security Council to establish buffer zones in northern Syria.*
- *Fears of the PKK's resurgence in Syria are played up by opposition parties to undermine an already fragile AKP position.*
- *Relations between Iran and Turkey remain cool after the kidnapping of 48 Iranians in Syria by rebel forces.*
- *Egyptian President Mursi will propose a four power meeting over Syria between his country, Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia.*
- *Turkey continues to court the KRG of Iraq, with the foreign minister's visit to Kirkuk infuriating Baghdad.*

Syria

On Wednesday August 29, Turkish Foreign Minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, led a delegation to the United Nations headquarters to push for the creation of safe zones in northern Syria. The move failed for all intents and purposes, with the Security Council meeting issuing neither a non-binding statement of support nor a binding resolution on the proposal. The foreign minister's appeal indicates the increasing stress the government is facing in dealing with the instability on its southern border.

The Turkish government is concerned with the increasing number of refugees streaming across the countries' mutual borders. As Davutoglu noted, when UN and Arab League envoy Kofi Annan began his mediation mission there were around 13,000 Syrian refugees in Turkey. On the eve of Davutoglu's departure for New York City, the number was estimated to be over 80,000 and rising fast. This influx is the result of an orchestrated air campaign by the government of Bashar al-Assad, which is attacking the Free Syrian Army and civilians without discretion. For months, the Turkish government has said that 100,000 Syrian refugees would be a tipping point both logistically and morally in its view of Syria's civil war. According to Davutoglu, as that threshold draws closer, "it is no longer an internal conflict but an international issue."

One major caveat to Turkey's advocacy of buffer zones is that it will not seek to establish them alone, nor without international support. With vetoes in the Security Council, Russia and China were never likely to alter their non-interventionist stance. In a sign that foreign policy makes "strange bedfellows", France endorsed the Turkish proposal ahead of the meeting despite the countries' high-profile falling out over the Armenian Genocide. France has stated that should the safe zones be established, they would need to be no-fly areas. This means an increased Western military presence in the region. In light of European powers' shortcomings in NATO's Libyan operation, a reliance on U.S. logistical and military resources will

be required. This last caveat concerns Washington, which doesn't want to be seen as invading a fourth Muslim country in just over a decade. This is to say nothing of a country in the midst of a tight, domestically focused election campaign.

In the ever complicated Kurdish aspect to the Syrian crisis, opposition parties like the CHP and MHP continue to play up fears of a PKK resurgence in northern Syria. Both have found that the AKP's stance on Syria - unpopular with many voters - has been their most successful cudgel after a decade spent wandering in the political wilderness of Turkish politics.

Kurdish fighters in northern Syria have done leaders in Ankara no favors when raising PKK banners at town halls in villages abandoned by al-Assad forces. Iraqi Kurdistan Regional government (KRG) head, Massoud Barzani, even admitted that Iraqi Kurd forces were training Kurds defecting from the Syrian army. Commercials showing the PKK banners and Kurdish fighters crossing into Syria from Iraq have run in Turkey, eroding support for the AKP's position. One prevalent rumor making the rounds is that the pro-opposition stance is being orchestrated as part of an American conspiracy. In establishing a Kurdish homeland in the region, the theory goes, the U.S. would succeed in its ultimate goal of breaking up Turkey.

Like most conspiracy theories, it works only if certain nuances are omitted. First, Ankara's ties with Erbil have never been closer. In the effort to maintain good relations with the KRG, it has consequently antagonized Baghdad over oil revenues. Secondly, should a Kurdish nation appear out of the remnants of Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria, it would be surrounded by hostile neighbors. With Ankara's support gone, Erbil faces bleak prospects in its relations with Tehran, Baghdad and possibly Damascus. Finally, it remains to be seen what benefit the U.S. has in the loss of Turkey. As one of the few NATO allies that can pull its own weight militarily, it also continues to play a key role balancing Russian influence in the Black Sea

region. More so, Turkey provides the U.S. with a largely credible ally in the Muslim world, though that perception varies on the country now more than ever. Turkey's stance on Syria is unpopular domestically, but the AKP is likely to accept the loss in popularity given that elections are far off. However, should the civil war in Syria drag on and its disorganized opposition becomes dominated by Islamic fundamentalists, they could distance themselves from the movement they've supported so far.

Iran

Relations with Iran have been fraying over Syria, and were further damaged when the Iran's Chief of Staff commented that if Ankara continued to advance the policies of the United States, "it would be Turkey's turn." The general's comments put a cloud over a meeting between Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi and his counterpart Davutoglu on August 8th. The two foreign ministers discussed the kidnapping of 48 Iranians in Syria, with newspapers in Iran reporting that Turkey was funding the rebel group responsible. Since then, there have been reports of an Iranian spy ring operating in the eastern province of Igridir, bordering Iran. Additionally, sources in Turkey say PKK fighters, who'd crossed over from Iran, were responsible for the killing of six Turkish soldiers and two village guards near in the countries' mutual border in early August.

The spotlight on the neighbors' relationship will be put to the test further following Egyptian President's, Mohammed Mursi, proposal for a group of four meeting to solve the Syrian crisis at the August 30th Non Aligned Summit in Tehran. The proposed group of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Iran, is said to have the support of the Iranian leadership. However, given Mursi's remarks that al-Assad needed to go, it remains unlikely that Iran will support its closest ally in the region stepping down without a fight.

The only bright spot in the relationship is Turkey's exemption from the U.S. and EU oil embargo on

Tehran. Turkey was one of seven countries not subject to the moratorium since it initiated a 20 percent cut in imports ahead of the sanctions. Turkey's leaders have already been looking for a way to diversify away from the unreliable Iranian energy supplier. The country's power production capacity is dependent on Iranian crude supplies that are notoriously erratic due to sanctions or possible armed conflicts arising due to Tehran's nuclear program. Additionally, Iran's outdated pumping stations often crash for days or weeks at a time.

On a completely unrelated matter, there are still bitter feelings stemming from the early 2012 arbitration hearings over Iranian short supplying a crude oil contract. With Ankara's energy needs increasing on a massive scale and Tehran's intransigence on its nuclear power creating tension in the region, Turkey is better off using the sanctions as a viable excuse to diversify away from its unpredictable partner.

Iraqi Energy Relations

However vindicated critics of Turkey's "zero problems" foreign policy must feel at the moment, the skill of those who shaped it should not be discounted. Davutoglu's unscheduled August 2nd trip to Kirkuk was seen as "inappropriate" in Baghdad, but was a stroke of diplomatic skill executed in a region riveted by shifting power dynamics. While Turkey has considerable issues with the PKK, it has continued to cement the most important ties a power can have in the region: that being an energy partnership.

But while officials in Ankara and Erbil exchange pleasantries and build up this relationship, it does remain at the mercy of Kurdish separatists. On August 27, a suspected PKK group attacked the Kirkuk-Yamurtalik pipeline, causing it to shut down operations for the day. The attack came the day after Energy Minister Taner Yildiz said that exploratory drilling would likely begin sometime next year in Hakkari, a known PKK stronghold bordering Iran and

Iraq. Given tensions with Baghdad, Tehran, and its own Kurdish population, Turkey is facing an extremely difficult proposition in satisfying its energy needs. PKK attacks on the Kirkuk-Yamurtalik, Kirkuk-Ceyhan and other pipelines have become commonplace, leading the government to increase troop levels to protect supplies. This has had a cyclical affect, with the Kurdish southeast resenting the large military presence, thus creating more potential for conflict and attacks.

Despite this, Turkish firms continue to invest in the KRG, exemplified in Turkey's Genel Enerji and Enland's Hermitage Oil purchase of a \$450 million share of the

Miran oil field. But such deals will always have the threat of violence and supply stoppages hanging over them. Until military leaders on both sides make a concerted effort to halt the reciprocal violence, economic uncertainty will be the norm.

Another angle to consider; Given Turkey's dynamism in foreign policy under the AKP, the good relations with Erbil may be a negotiation tactic for future price talks with Baghdad. If the Iraqi Oil Ministry can guarantee cheaper supplies than KRG, there is no long-term cultural relationship tying Ankara to Iraq's Kurds.

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