

Insights into Turkish Domestic and International Politics during October 16-31st 2013

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Key Points:

- *Turkey slowly changes tactics in Syria, pulling back support for Islamist fighters who have begun to turn on other opposition forces in the Free Syrian Army and Kurdish militias.*
- *The Syrian offshoot of the PKK, the PYD, continues to push back groups like Jabhat al Nusra and Islamic State of Iraq and Al Sham. Its leader has called on Turkey to halt its complicity in helping these groups.*
- *A ceasefire continues to hold between the PKK and Turkish Security Forces, but time is running out for the government to offer substantive next steps at reconciliation. Complicating Turkey's relations with its own Kurdish minority is the multiple breaks between Kurdish leaders throughout the region.*
- *Europe and Asia are now connected by rail via the Marmaray Tunnel, though the long term financial sustainability of the economy could be harmed by such projects. Turkey's economy has slowed considerably, and with the U.S. Federal Reserve set to raise interest rates in 2014, financing the growing budget deficit could be a problem.*

Syria

The civil war in Syria drags on with no resolution in sight. The rapid advances and fluid nature of the conflict has halted in large part as house-to-house fighting becomes the norm in major metropolitan areas like Damascus and Aleppo.

Turkey continues to host an ever-growing population of Syrian refugees, estimated to be around 500,000 at this point. It also continues its tit-for-tat military exchanges with Syria, most recently sending fighter jets to bomb the Syrian city of Ras al-Ain in retaliation for the killing of a civilian on the Turkish side of the border. These sorts of responses will continue for the foreseeable future as Ankara finds its way forward without the once-likely American military intervention.

Syria's chemical weapons stores continue to be identified and marked for destruction by the United Nations-Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW). On October 31, OPCW announced that the government had met its deadline of destroying 21 of its 23 chemical weapon production facilities. (Guterman, "Russia says better to remove most chemical weapons from Syria," Reuters, 1 November 2013.) As long as this process continues, there is little prospect of a Western intervention given low public support in Europe and the United States.

Given these circumstances, Turkish leaders look to be shifting the strategy of allowing porous borders for fighters taking up arms against al-Assad. Given Turkey's rapprochement with Iraqi Kurdistan and its own domestic reconciliation efforts with the PKK, political and military leaders have begun to openly criticize the actions of militant groups like Jabhat al Nusra and Islamic State of Iraq and Al Sham (ISIS). While a fissure with its own Kurdish population is always in danger of breaking, Turkey has apparently recognized danger these religiously-inspired groups pose to its own security. The ISIS storming of the Azaz border gate in mid-September was the last straw, and

since then a notable change in tone in remarks by Turkish leaders and the press have indemnified the al-Qaeda front group. Bank accounts affiliated with Al Qaeda have been frozen by Turkish authorities, and there have even been instances of Turkish artillery firing on ISIS positions in Syria. (Stein, "Turkey is in Trouble: Ankara's No-Win Syria Strategy," 18 October 2013, www.TurkeyWonk.wordpress.com.)

In this new front, Ankara is also edging towards an accord with the most potent Kurdish fighting force in Syria, the PYD. The group, which is a PKK-offshoot, already has parts of the Syrian northeast under its administration. While al-Assad forces have mainly left the region to focus on the fighting in the country's west, the PYD and other Kurdish groups have been in hotly contested exchanges with Islamist fighters.

PYD co-chair Salih Muslem, who recently visited Ankara, lost his youngest son during fighting with ISIS fighters at the Akcakale border crossing, has been the focal point of the rapprochement.

Muslem spoke with Al-Monitor following his son's funeral about the stance of Kurds in Syria and Turkey's acquiescence of Islamist fighters crossing the border to fight. (Zaman, "Syrian Kurdish Leader Discusses Son's Killing by Jihadists," Al-Monitor, 23 October 2013.)

"Certainly, Turkey's objective was not to kill my son. I don't know what its objective is. It must be acting according to its own political interests. But for me, it is hard to understand...They want to seize our homeland and establish a so-called Islamic emirate. How could Turkey deal with such people? They pose a great threat to all of us; they are an enemy to humanity."

"We have to join hands with Turkey and stand together against them," continued Muslem. "We are ready to do that. Let me repeat once again that we want friendly and brotherly relations with Turkey. It is out of the question for us to harm Turkey in any way. We have never resorted to any retaliation to date. As Kurds, we want to live freely in a united, democratic

Syria, with our language and culture. And that's all. We have no objective of independence or any federal structure."

The jihadists have funding and a tenacity that has benefitted them against worn-down foes like the undermanned Syrian army. Yet the Kurdish brigades they face in Syria are progenies of one of the most formidable fighting forces in the region. Indicative of these gains in the northeastern province of Hasakah where Kurds make up about 70 percent of the population, the PYD recently secured the Yarubiya border crossing with Iraq.

As in all foreign policy shifts, Ankara's move toward closer cooperation with the PYD will go slowly. The AKP government will gain no political advantage at alienating its own Kurdish population or that of its neighbors, and has found a reliable partner in the Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq. As chaos reigns in Syria, the need for strong, secular partners will be paramount to Turkey's interests at home and in the region.

PKK and Kurdish Rights

Cemil Bayik, the head of the PKK in the Kandil Mountains of Iraq has said that the AKP government's delay in moving forward with the peace deal will ultimately see the resumption of hostilities.

Bayik, as is his nature, spoke bluntly about the situation in an interview with Reuters, saying "The process has come to an end. Either they accept deep and meaningful negotiations with the Kurdish movement, or there will be a civil war in Turkey." (Coles, "Kurdish rebels threaten new fight in Turkey as Syria clashes intensify," Reuters, 22 October 2013).

He also complained of Turkey's hand in arming groups in Syria, alluding to a conspiracy between the government, the Fetullah Gulen movement and jihadist groups whose goal is the eradication of the Kurdish population. Bayik, one of the founding

members of the PKK, was also critical of the burgeoning relationship between the Kurdish Regional Government of Iraq and Ankara.

"Relations based on oil and gas and economy: we don't find such relations right and they don't serve a solution to the Kurdish question."

Relations between the PKK, largely made up of Turkish-based Kurds, and the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (KDP) of Iraq under Massoud Barzani have long been contentious. The PKK's stronghold in the Kandil Mountains technically sits in the KRG's territory, but a wide rift remains between the two leading Kurdish organizations. This schism was recently demonstrated following the death of PYD head Salih Muslem's son, when Muslem claimed he was restricted from crossing the border to Turkey by KDP militants.

In this morass of inter-Kurdish politics, the Turkish government must continue its efforts to keep the peace with the PKK. Its strong ties with the KRG and slow thaw with Muslem's PYD are a good start. Should Ocalan become disillusioned with the process, as some who have met with him are now reporting, Turkey's position across the region could be threatened.

As noted in this briefing's previous editions, the prime minister's democratization package was a step in the right direction. Yet the proposals offered to the country's large Kurdish minority were, by and large, cosmetic fixes to the underlying tensions. The onus was initially on the PKK to withdraw and adhere to a cessation of offensive activities. Though the former is disputed by Turkish Security Forces, the latter aspect has held. The AKP should take the next truly effectual step, and begin some form of negotiations with Ocalan and Kurdish BDP politicians. Turkish officials may feel that catering to Ocalan's demands for face-to-face negotiations as a negative, yet the alternative is more bloodshed and a vastly more complicated regional conflict

Economy and Infrastructure

In an engineering feat long in the making, the continents of Asia and Europe were officially connected by rail through the Marmaray Tunnel in late October. Running 60 meters underneath the Bosphorus Strait, the subway link will carry an estimated 1.5 million commuters daily throughout Istanbul. The largest European city with a population of 15 million, Istanbul has become a sprawling metropolis on both sides of the continental divide. Adding additional rail and infrastructure has been helpful, but the cost of the mammoth project has raised some concerns.

Financed through the Japan Bank of International Development, estimates are the project would add \$188 billion to the country's foreign debt. ("Turkey realizes 'Ottoman dream' with rail tunnel linking Europe to Asia," Al Jazeera America, 29 October 2013.)

The EU's progress report, issued in early October, mentioned the Turkish economy's fragility given current global economic developments and with political turmoil at home and abroad. The economy has slowed considerably as of late. The nearly double digit rates following the global recession when emerging markets performed so well in contrast to their Western counterparts are a thing of the past. According to the International Monetary Fund, this year's growth stands at 3.3 percent. Much of this

year's spending appears to have been financed by large scale projects like the Marmaray Tunnel, and the country's finances could be affected by a rise in interest rates. Though it hasn't happened yet, the flow of easy money from the U.S. Federal Reserve will eventually taper, and investors have begun to pull back from emerging markets that have benefited from low interest rates.

As of August, this expectation lead to a flight of cash from Turkey and a ballooning of its account deficit, around 7 percent of GDP in August. (Parker, "U.S. Impasse Finally Gives Turkey Benefit of the Doubt," The Wall Street Journal: MoneyBeat, 15 October 2013.) But the Turkish Central Bank and government have reassured investors thus far, saying their main focus is on cutting down the deficit. Under the guidance of Deputy Prime Minister for the Economy Ali Babacan, Turkey has made strident efforts to get its banking system in order following the country's economic crisis of 2001-02.

There is still time to firm up the fundamentals of the economy ahead of the lean times to come, as the U.S. Federal Reserve has said tapering will not begin until sometime in 2014. But the question remains, will the AKP be able to resist the temptation to expand its expensive public works projects. The Taksim Square protests were one manifestation with the negatives of such endeavors. Rising interest rates and an unsustainable account deficit may be the next indicator.

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EGF Turkey File

Published by European Geopolitical Forum SPRL

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