

## Insights into Turkish Domestic and International Politics during October 16-31<sup>st</sup> 2012

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### Key Points:

- *The Syrian civil war continues with Turkish public opinion largely opposed to an intervention. The Republican People's Party (CHP) has seized on the mood in an attempt to win back political ground from the AKP.*
- *A high-ranking U.S. military official tells Turkish academics that Washington will likely maintain its passive stance on Syria unless authorized by the UN Security Council or NATO.*
- *Turkey views Kurdish fighters in Syria as a threat amidst ongoing PKK-TSK violence. But a high-profile court case and international focus on Kurdish hunger strikers may provide an opportunity for new discourse between the government and the country's largest minority.*
- *Another oil export dispute between the Kurdish Regional Government and Baghdad threatens to further undermine the Turkey-Iraq relationship.*
- *South Stream continues to motor forward but the European Commission is not yet ready to offer special exemptions to the Moscow-led project. This may lead to further delays in its realization.*

## Syria

*Despite exchanges of sporadic artillery fire between Turkish and Syrian forces, public opinion in Turkey remains firmly opposed to an intervention. A late October EDAM poll found 51 percent of respondents thought Turkey should stay “uninvolved or impartial” in a post-al-Assad Syria. A meager eight percent supported the country’s role as a mediator in the conflict, while just seven percent were supportive of providing economic assistance to Syria. A late September Metropol survey found that opposition to intervention as part of a coalition, like NATO, was also high at 56 percent.*

After years in the political wilderness, the Republican People’s Party (CHP) may have finally found an issue to counteract the AKP’s popularity. Leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu has seized on the anti-war sentiment and may have some success in making gains with the Sunni voting bloc that is the core of the AKP’s support. CHP politicians have pointed to the increasingly sectarian divisions facing the Middle East, referring to Turkey’s loose coalition with Sunni powers Saudi Arabia and Qatar over Syria.

Turkish leaders have tried to quietly walk back from the Russian plane incident (EGF Turkey File, 1-15 October 2012). According to a spokesman from the Russian Foreign Ministry, the cargo was in line with international law but was stopped in Turkey due to processing issues. Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, admitted that the cargo – containing radar equipment - could be used for both military and civilian purposes. It seems Turkey made a mistake, and some unnamed government sources suggest that shoddy U.S. intelligence was behind the plane’s grounding.

High-profile American military personnel have been more visible in their visits to Turkey as of late. Vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral James Winnefeld, spoke with a roundtable of Turkish academics in late October. There to discuss the current security situation facing the region, Winnefeld confirmed that no military plans would be drawn up in

Washington before the November presidential elections. Pentagon chatter has gone quiet in the run up to the election so as not to be seen favouring one candidate over the other. Admiral Winnefeld attempted to limit expectations of American help in establishing safe zones inside Syria, saying that such actions would likely be undertaken only with a UN Security Council resolution. With China and Russia vetoing almost any Western sponsored resolution, the chances of this are remote, looking ahead.

Meanwhile, the ground war in Syria is for all intents and purposes a stalemate. Occasional opposition successes are immediately met with intense regime counterattacks through the use of artillery and air strikes. Arms continue to flow into the country for both sides, and Turkey is left to hope for an American-led intervention following the presidential election. However, the words of Admiral Winnefeld are likely prophetic as the American leadership will immediately be confronted by the country’s impending debt crisis which will need to be addressed in the lame duck session. Public opinion doesn’t allow for manoeuvre by Turkish leaders unless a major power – be it China, Russia or the United States – changes its position.

## The Kurds

*The substantial Kurdish minorities of Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria remain an uncertain variable for leaders in the region. In Syria, a resurgent Democratic Union Party (PYD) now controls swaths of territory in the north of the country along the Turkish and Iraqi borders. However, some Kurdish activists have complained the PKK-sympathetic PYD is restricting other Kurdish parties who wish to participate in their newfound autonomy.*

Kurdish leadership is split between followers of the PKK’s imprisoned leader, Abdullah Ocalan, and Iraqi Kurdish leader, Massoud Barzani. While Turkey enjoys good relations with Barzani, the spectre of an Ocalan sympathetic quasi-state in northern Syria is

viewed as a major threat by Ankara. This is exacerbated given the past year's escalation in violence between the Turkish Security Forces (TSK) and the PKK.

The PYD denies that it has reached an agreement with the al-Assad regime. Many Syrian Kurds are long-time opponents of the government, and Damascus is focused on ensuring its survival rather than trying to put down a slow moving Kurdish campaign. For al-Assad, allowing the country's Kurds semi-autonomy is a cost effective means of checking potential Turkish military interventions.

On the domestic front, the Turkish government continues to weather criticism from rights groups over its prosecution of 44 Kurdish members of the media. The defendants, who Prime Minister Erdogan said were not journalists, face stiff prison sentences for their alleged support of the PKK. A recent report by The Committee to Protect Journalist said, "When it comes to Kurdish journalists, newsgathering activities such as fielding tips, covering protests, and conducting interviews are evidence of a crime."

In separate case, an Istanbul court handed down a surprising decision on a 2008 trial in which four PKK members were prosecuted for referring to Ocalan as their leader. The stunning decision states that "Given that the defendants are imprisoned as members of a terrorist organization and the person they have written in favour of is the chief of the same organization, the expressions used by the suspects in reference to that person do not constitute the attributed crime." The ruling is groundbreaking in Turkey and may set a precedent in other freedom of speech/press prosecutions.

The fate of 680 Kurdish prisoners on hunger strike since mid-September has also garnered widespread domestic and international attention. The strikers are demanding the right to use Kurdish in courtrooms and schools, while also calling for an end to the isolated confinement of Ocalan. Although none have died yet, many are in increasingly poor health. Justice Minister Sadullah Ergin made a televised plea ahead of the

Muslim holiday of Kurban Bayrami, begging the prisoners to halt the protest "for the sake of your own body, your own health, the people who love you and whom you love."

Despite the tension between the government and Turkey's Kurds, the court case and Minister Ergin's plea could be potential catalysts for renewed dialogue. Such developments are a far cry from the more commonplace negative aspects of the relationship, and any change from those precedents is always positive.

### **Energy**

*Turkish gas supplies were temporarily disrupted after a suspected PKK attack on a pipeline running from Iran on October 19. At the request of state-owned BOTAS, Russia's Gazprom made up for the deficit in supplies by transferring 48 million cubic meters of natural gas per day.*

Iraqi Kurdistan's dispute with the Iraqi Oil Ministry in Baghdad flared once again as the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) went ahead with sales of light oil on international markets in late October. Despite the September agreement between Erbil and the oil ministry for payments to foreign companies operating in Iraqi Kurdistan, this latest rift is indicative of the highly fractured nature of Iraqi politics. The fact that the oil is trucked across Turkey threatens to drag down further an already tense Turkish-Iraqi relationship.

South Stream continues to motor forward but the European Commission is not yet ready to offer special exemptions to the Moscow-led project. When running at full capacity, the combined output of Nord Stream, South Stream and the Blue Stream pipelines will equal the amount of gas exported to European and Turkish markets in 2011. Appearing to realize that NABUCCO is now a non-starter, the European Commission has called on EU member states participating in the project to ensure that South Stream's operating

guidelines are in line with EU internal energy market legislation.

This may, in itself, be a means of slowing down the realisation of the project, since ensuring compliance of the Russian project with EU internal market legislation is likely to be an elongated process, which will not please Gazprom. The latter had hoped that

South Stream would be granted exemptions from aspects of internal EU energy market laws, as had been the case with Nord Stream. This has not yet happened, however, and the European Commission continues to show resilience in wake of Moscow's seeming determination to push the project through to its fruition.

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