

Insights into Turkish Domestic and International Politics during February 1-15th 2013

By John Van Pool, EGF Turkey and Black Sea Regional Analyst

Key Points:

- *Domestic politics heat up as the opposition CHP accuses Prime Minister Erdogan of authoritarianism in seeking the presidency after his term as prime minister is up.*
- *A judicial reform aimed at clarifying aspects of Turkish terrorism laws aims to placate EU critics and could lead to the release of hundreds of imprisoned activists.*
- *Turkey continues to try to avoid a direct military intervention into Syria's civil war, though fears of the sectarian conflict's spread has the country on edge.*
- *U.S. sanctions aimed at Iran's nuclear program necessitate Turkish efforts at diversifying its energy reliance away from Tehran.*
- *Israel makes overtures to Ankara regarding a natural gas pipeline in the eastern Mediterranean,*
- *....while construction is set to begin on the TANAP gas pipeline following ratification of the agreement by both Turkish and Azerbaijani parliaments.*

Constitution

Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan's recent announcement to pursue an accord with the Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) came as a surprise to many political observers. Despite the imprisonment of a significant number of BDP politicians and activists under the country's wide terrorism laws, BDP parliamentarian Pervin Buldan said that there is a possibility the party could reach an agreement with the ruling AKP. However, Buldan noted conditions such as redefining the country's rigid citizenship standards and ending restrictions on Kurdish in the public sphere were not negotiable.

Republican People's Party (CHP) head Kemal Kilicdaroglu said Erdogan's overtures were a cynical effort to curry favor with the country's largest minority ahead of the constitutional fight in parliament in March. Accusing the prime minister of authoritarianism, Kilicdaroglu said AKP efforts at creating an executive presidential office "is all about the concentration of power in a single hand." Erdogan has previously said that should a constitutional change allow for such an office, he would be open to running for president.

The Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) was predictably opposed to the BDP demands, with party leader Devlet Bahceli saying "This is a declaration of war against Turkishness."

The parliamentary fight over the drafting of a new constitution to replace the one imposed by the 1982 military coup is set to conclude in March. The AKP controlled legislative body believes it has enough seats to authorize a referendum should the parliamentary committee responsible for drafting the new constitution fail to agree by the end of March deadline. With 326 seats, the AKP would need an additional four opposition MPs' votes to authorize a national referendum. The chances of just four MPs crossing the aisle are good, meaning that Erdogan could be looking at another decade in power if his political fortunes are maintained.

EU Accession

Turkey's anti- terrorism laws are likely to be reviewed and updated in an effort to meet EU accession standards. Current laws make no distinction between being a member of a designated terrorist organization and sympathizing with one. The laws have been widely used against Kurdish activists over the course of the thirty year long conflict with the PKK. Instances of attendees carrying placards or clapping during the funerals of PKK fighters, while not the norm, exemplify the worst abuses which the laws currently allow for.

The legislative package, set to go to parliament at the time of writing, will also remove a 20 year statute of limitations on the prosecution of torturers. Aimed primarily at individuals involved with Turkey's now largely defunct "Deep State", the statute was alleged to have been used to delay prosecutions.

Meanwhile, the legislative fix does not specifically address the freedom of the press in Turkey, a main sticking point for many European countries holding up accession talks. Turkey currently incarcerates more journalists than any other nation according to Reporters Without Borders. While the reform could see some cases thrown out for Kurdish journalists currently being detained on terrorism related charges, the government's policy of prosecuting media critics is unlikely to stop.

Paris has moved forward in its efforts to thaw relations with Ankara under the government of socialist President Francois Hollande. His conservative predecessor, Nicholas Sarkozy, was openly hostile to Ankara's entry to the EU and had placed a veto on five chapters of Turkey's accession negotiations. Hollande's government, in seeking to distance itself from the anti-Turk perception, has said it will open the chapter on regional policy for negotiations.

Although the Hollande government's show of good faith is important, the major hold up to Turkey's EU accession will always revert back to the intractable Cyprus issue. Ankara's unwillingness to recognize Nicosia's sovereignty and Greek Cypriots rejection of U.N. backed reconciliation agreements indicates the status quo won't change. Enlargement isn't a priority in the dire financial atmosphere the Eurozone finds

itself in, and Turkey's motivation for membership has been drained after nearly a decade of being rebuffed.

Syria

On February 1, a suicide bomber killed himself and a Turkish guard at the U.S. embassy in Ankara. Suspicions immediately turned towards Syria, with many news outlets speculating that a supporter of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad was behind the attack. Other theories pointed the finger at anti-American jihadists – many of whom are fighting the Alawite Syrian regime – who might have taken a chance to strike at the U.S.

The truth was much less sensational when it became clear a member of the leftwing Revolutionary People's Liberation Party-Front was responsible. But the early reporting and conjecture it produced give an accurate read on the fears many Turkish citizens and politicians have that the forces at work in Syria may spill over the border. The fighting in Syria has taken on a largely ethnic/religious hue, with Sunni fighting Shia and Arab fighting Kurd. The demographic makeup of Turkey, largely Turkish and Sunni Muslim, has left many Turkish minorities fearful of the AKP's support of the Syrian rebels.

A bus bombing at the Turkey-Syria border on February 11 did little to abate this atmosphere. The explosion, which killed 14 passengers and injured several others exploded at a checkpoint near the Turkish town of Reyhanli. Erdogan alluded to the al-Assad regime, saying "If this happens within our borders, it is to get Turkey involved."

The Syrian National Council (SNC) is reported to have blamed al-Assad as well, saying that the bombing was targeting a SNC delegation travelling through the checkpoint that same day. On February 15, Turkish military forces again responded to errant Syrian artillery fire with return volleys in the areas bordering the Hatay province.

Turkey's leaders face a tough dilemma, but for now, maintaining the status quo would be the most prudent course of action. The military, despite being the second largest NATO member in terms of men in uniform, is hardly capable of the logistical and operational capacity necessary to end the Syrian civil

war. More so, the presence of pro-PKK Kurdish militias controlling sections of northern Syria would likely mean further inflaming already tense Turk-Kurdish relations in the region. Until the al-Assad regime decides that its best interests will be addressed at a negotiation table, Turkey is better off supporting the nascent opposition forces and hoping its security services can avoid major provocations that would lead to an intervention.

Iran

A U.S. sanction aimed at punishing Iran for its nuclear program went into effect on February 6. The sanction cuts off Turkey's ability to pay for Iranian gas shipments with gold payments. Turkish state owned Halkbank is also prohibited from processing oil payments from third countries that seek to purchase Iranian crude. Despite Turkish Economic Minister Zafer Caglayan's sentiment that the country would not bow to U.S. pressure, an unnamed Western diplomat recently said that "You could say that the United States has achieved its aim. If Turkey is going to continue energy imports from Iran, there is no other way to go than trading sanction-free goods," (Reuters, 15 February 2013).

Iranian revenue stuck in Halkbank and other financial institutions can only be used for food, medicine and industrial products. Banks and lenders are increasingly choosing not to chance dealing in monetary changes with Tehran, despite Turkey's need for energy resources, for fear of falling afoul of sanctions.

In further efforts to ease its reliance on its energy supplies, Turkey has gradually begun cutting back on shipments from Iran. To close out December 2012, Turkey trimmed imports of Iranian crude by almost 30 percent compared to November. While Ankara cannot afford to completely cut itself off from Iranian energy exports, the government has made sustained efforts at diversifying supplies. The two largest beneficiaries of this policy have been Saudi Arabia and Iraq, who have both ramped up supplies to make up for the lessening dependence on Iran.

Energy

Although the Turkish government has yet to comment, reports are circulating of an Israeli proposal to Energy Minister Taner Yildiz that foresees a pipeline running between each country and transporting gas to European markets. However, the ongoing disputes over the Mavi Mamara incident and the blockade of Gaza threaten to keep the plan from coming to fruition. Additionally, the proposed pipeline would have to traverse Syrian and Lebanese economic zones, another factor that questions the line's chances of success.

The line would run from the Israeli held Leviathan gas field in the eastern Mediterranean and would cost around \$2 billion to complete. If completed, it would

deliver between 8-10 billion square meters of gas per year. Israeli sources report that the Turkish Zorlu Group is behind the project and is also one of the country's largest consumers of natural gas due to its commercial holdings in textiles, communications, energy and real estate.

On February 6, Prime Minister Erdogan announced the approval of the TANAP pipeline project by both Turkish and Azerbaijani parliaments.

"With no obvious progress on NABUCCO, Turkey has taken steps towards securing its energy supply..." said Erdogan.

Construction is set to begin in 2013, and BP's recent addition to the project has added further weight to the \$7 billion dollar project.

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Director and Founder: Dr Marat Terterov

Email: Marat.Terterov@gpf-europe.com

Avenue Du Manoir D'Anjou 8

Brussels 1150 Belgium

Tel: +32496 45 40 49

info@gpf-europe.com

www.gpf-europe.com

www.gpf-europe.ru