

Insights into Turkish Domestic and International Politics during 16-28 February 2013

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Key Points:

- *Negotiations over constitutional reform continue, with an agreement over the Chief of the General staff having been reached.*
- *AKP negotiators continue to push for a more powerful presidency, but opposition parties fear a lack of legislative and judicial checks on the office.*
- *Talks continue between the government and PKK leader Ocalan, though decades of conflict make a political solution remote in the short-term.*
- *A tense standoff in northern Syria between Kurdish and Arab fighters resembles similar conflicts for Kurdish minorities in other countries around the region. Ankara hopes that an agreement can be reached to keep northern Syria from becoming a PKK safe haven.*
- *An Israel-Turkey pipeline is impossible without Erdogan's permission. Turkish energy firms specify their commitments in Iraq while trying to navigate the impasse between Erbil and Baghdad.*

New constitution

The work of the Parliamentary Constitution Conciliation Commission – the legislative body tasked with drafting the country’s next constitution – continues. As the month of February closed, word leaked that the four negotiating political parties (AKP, CHP, MHP and BDP) have reached an agreement on an important tenet. Unnamed sources have revealed to Turkish media that the role of Chief of the General Staff will revert to the Defense Ministry from the current control of the prime minister. The Chief of Staff has been under control of the prime minister since the first military coup against an elected government in 1960.

Politicking by the AKP and specifically Prime Minister Erdogan also continues, with opponents claiming the recent initiation of peace talks over the Kurdish issues are part of his plan to gain BDP support for a powerful presidency under the new constitution. While nothing has officially been unveiled, sources inside the negotiation process say many of the powers of the executive branch would be similar to those found in other democracies, specifically France. However opponents contend that the distinct difference between those comparisons is that Erdogan’s move foresees an imperial presidency with limited checks by the assembly and judiciary (which he would appoint without parliamentary oversight.)

As faith in the efficacy of democratic institutions wanes in the Eurozone, supporters of strong executive point to the lack of progress parliamentary democracy can make if encumbered by political infighting. But even in countries with strong presidential offices like the United States, political and judicial appointments are subject to the scrutiny of the elected assembly. The new constitution’s provisions for a more powerful presidency appear closer to the current Egyptian model.

Kurdish-Turkish ‘Peace Process’

Meetings have been ongoing between Turkish intelligence chief, Hakan Fidan, and PKK leader, Abdullah Ocalan, and as noted above, Erdogan’s government is reaching out to the country’s Kurdish population. Whether that outreach is based on good will or political expediency is not important, as long as there is an avenue for a political resolution.

The AKP government, no longer concerned about appeasing the nationalist “wolves” of the military, possesses the political room they need to explore such possibilities. The main opposition CHP is benignly supportive of the notion (with some Kemalist exceptions). The nationalist MHP’s poor showing in the last parliamentary election means it matters little to the AKP’s political fortunes whether a peace deal is reached with a supportive Kurdish BDP.

However, the chances seem likelier that peace won’t be a short-term prospect, evidenced in the prime minister’s comments in late February indemnifying the PKK’s supporters and sympathizers alike. More so, the element necessary for a peaceful political solution – that both sides are finally exhausted by the bloodshed - is not in place. Decades of fighting have left hardened attitudes on both sides of the conflict. And though the 900 dead in the last 18 months of violence is substantial in human costs, it is nowhere near a saturation point for both parties to think they cannot win by force of arms.

The best chance for peace is for the new constitution to allow Kurdish language in courts and schools, a decreased parliamentary threshold and revising the meaning of *Turkishness* in relation to the concept of citizenship. These seem like reasonable and attainable goals for both sides. But if rumours are true that a final Kurdish demand is that Ocalan be moved to house arrest, then the peace deal may never happen. The PKK leader’s power is unquestioned in both communities after his order ended a month long hunger strike by Kurdish prisoners in October 2012.

But to release him from his Imrali Island prison may be a step too far for the prime minister after the years of bloodshed. Should Ocalan put his own concerns above the overall goal of peace, an agreement may never be reached while he is alive.

Kurds and their role in Syria

Domestic concerns about the country's Kurds are also linked to the situation in Syria, where a tentative cease-fire holds in the northern Syrian province of Jazira. The PKK-sympathetic PYD has been in constant conflict with the Sunni-Arab opposition forces fighting President Bashar al-Assad since last November. Syrian opposition forces accuse the PYD of aiding al-Assad, while the PYD claims it is protecting Kurds and other minorities from the opposition and government forces alike.

What is truly at stake is the oil beneath the Jazira region, estimated to be about 7 billion barrels of discovered crude. Some projections say an additional 3.15 billion barrels are there. Opposition forces have long said that Syria's territorial integrity is of paramount importance once al-Assad is overthrown, and have refused to guarantee special rights to Kurds who have sat out much of the heavy fighting against the regime. Kurds, the region's largest minority, are demanding self-governance and autonomy similar to what their counterparts currently experience under the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) of Iraq.

Turkey's concern in the matter is that should its peace initiative with the PKK fail, a porous border from Iran to Syria would be open to the militants. Ankara is said to be lobbying Erbil to push the Syrian Kurds to reach a peaceful agreement with the Syrian opposition forces.

But what appears to be happening in northern Syrian eerily resembles the current political standoff between the government of Iraq and the KRG. Hopefully the cease-fire holds, but one suspects that

once al-Assad is dealt with, Arabs and Kurds will turn against one another.

Coup Cases

On February 28, two more high-ranking generals were sent to prison following their testimony regarding their actions during the 1997 coup. "The post modern coup" of 1997 unseated Welfare Party Prime Minister of the time, Necmettin Erbakan, and saw prominent politicians like the current Prime Minister, Tayyip Erdogan, imprisoned.

The probe by Ankara's prosecutor concluded a busy month for the AKP government, with 10 former generals arrested in February alone. Former General Staff Secretary, General Aslan Guner, and former land forces General, Erdal Ceylanoglu, were detained for their actions during the coup. Guner is infamous for commanding the tanks that were driven through Ankara on "maneuvers" during the coup, an act seen as an explicit threat to the elected civilian government.

The opposition CHP condemned the government's focus on coups, but Deputy Prime Minister, Bulent Arinc, fired back, saying he believed the party had been involved in the coup itself. He called on the CHP to fully support the investigations going forward.

Energy

Energy Minister Taner Yildiz has tampered expectations that Israel and Turkey would cooperate on an undersea pipeline project, saying the proposal would need the blessing of the prime minister. The chances of such an action seemed increasingly remote following Erdogan's accusation that Zionism was "a crime against humanity." The prime minister has demanded an official apology Mavi Marmara incident along with compensation to the families of nine Turks who were killed in the attack. He has also called for a lifting of the blockade on Gaza. While discussions of the pipeline running from the Leviathan field in the

eastern Mediterranean have taken place during business meetings and other informal gatherings, no official approach has been made by either government.

The Director General of the Turkish Petroleum Company (TPAO) spoke out on February 22, saying that his company would continue to work with the Iraqi Oil Ministry in Baghdad. TPAO is currently invested in four separate projects in Iraq worth \$20 billion in total. He did make an effort to say that while his company would continue with its relations with the oil ministry, this had no bearing on the work of

private Turkish firms and BOTAS' dealings with the KRG in Erbil.

Turkey also announced that while it would continue to ship oil from the KRG via the existing pipeline system, it would not extend the project without Baghdad's permission. The move is intended as a peace offering by Ankara. While the government is not keen to add another unfriendly neighbor, its need to have a Kurdish partner and guaranteed oil supplies have Turkish leaders in a bind.

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