

Insights into Turkish Domestic and International Politics during May 2012

Key Points:

- *Turkey expels Syrian diplomats after the massacre of over 100 people in Houla. Although Ankara is rumoured in some circles to be harbouring remnants of the Syrian opposition military forces, overt Turkish intervention in Syria remains unlikely at the time of writing.*
- *Ankara increases its cooperation with the Kurdish Regional Government in Erbil, while also harbouring a high level, fugitive Sunni Iraqi politician. Tensions between Baghdad and Turkey continue to deteriorate over the two issues.*
- *The ongoing coup and terrorist investigations roiling the country have Prime Minister Tayip Erdogan concerned. The prime minister urged for the probes to speed up for the good of the country.*
- *Erdogan sparks a fierce debate in Turkey over his remarks on abortion rights.*

Syria

A new round of killings in Syria took place in the village of Houla during May and sparked widespread and immediate outrage from the international community. Fingers were immediately pointed at the regime of President al-Assad, in actions possibly perpetrated by pro-government militias. Widespread condemnation, with the typical exceptions of Iran, China and Russia, led many Western nations to expel Syrian diplomats.

On May 30, Turkish Foreign Minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, issued a statement saying that Turkey "deplores and condemns in the strongest terms the massacre of at least 110 innocent civilians, including 50 children, as a result of the rocket and artillery bombardment carried out by the Syrian security forces on May 25 against the town of Houla and the mass murders committed by soldiers and 'shebbiha' militias who entered into the town afterwards." The statement followed with Turkey giving Syrian diplomats 72 hours to leave the country.

Reports of further mass killings following the Houla incident have drawn comparisons to the world's inaction in Bosnia in the 1990s. Turkey has been mentioned as a possible host for Syrian rebels, but the disorganized opposition movement has very little in common with protesters and fighters actually in the country. The Free Syrian Army, thought to be training in Turkish refugee camps along the country's southern border, is more an army in name than in reality. Turkey's position is fraught as it, like the United States, is one of the few countries with the military capabilities needed for a successful military intervention. However, given the lack of solidarity of the opposition movement and uncertainty over what may happen in the event that al-Assad's regime is overthrown, it is understandably hesitant to advocate the use of force.

An intervention or any large scale military support appears unlikely considering that neither Turkey nor its Western and Arab allies wish to act without UN

authorization. With Russia and China firmly blocking any such measure – including sanctions – at the Security Council, the Syrian fratricide is likely to continue. Condemnation and ominous warnings coming from Ankara and Western capitals appear increasingly hollow. The al-Assad regime will continue to crack down on dissidents at home in the harshest measures as it did in Houla while avoiding any potential conflict that could justify an intervention by Turkey or its Western allies. For its part, Turkey will likely continue its current stance of condemnation without action until a suitable option arises.

Iraq

Despite widely publicized shortcomings in its dealings with its own substantial Kurdish minority, Turkey's dealings with the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq are becoming increasingly close. The development of this relationship has drawn the ire of the government of Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki over two main issues.

The first is Turkey's sheltering of fugitive Iraqi Vice-President, Tariq al-Hashimi, who faces charges accusing him of running Sunni death squads. Al-Hashimi, who is Sunni, claims he is the victim of a sectarian power grab by al-Maliki, a Shiite. Since his arrival in April, Baghdad has sniped at Turkey saying it signals a lack of respect, although Ankara has made it clear in statements to the effect that "as a guest of Turkey al-Hashimi he would be allowed to stay".

The second issue is the KRG's efforts at freeing itself from the direct supervision of the Ministry of Oil in Baghdad. Feeling increasingly marginalized by the al-Maliki government, the KRG recently announced plans for the construction of an oil transportation network that could move one million barrels a day to Turkish refineries, bypassing the government controlled pipeline system. Eliminating the middle man – in this case the Iraqi Oil Ministry – could see a substantial decline in revenues for the government in Baghdad,

should the KRG be able to leverage control of the resource flow.

The AKP government is not intentionally antagonizing al-Maliki, however, but rather playing the long game – a game that it has shown it is quite adept at playing in the region. Iraq is the second largest export market for Turkey, while the largest portion of foreign investment in Kurdish northern Iraq are Turkish businesses and investors. In order to sustain its impressive economic growth, Turkey is reliant on carbon based energy supplies to power its electricity grid. If the KRG can become a large scale oil and gas supplier, this would ease Ankara's reliance on energy supplies from Iran. This need comes from Tehran's obstinate stance over its nuclear program, where pressures of renewed sanctions rounds continue to persist. There is also the ongoing arbitration between the two countries due to Iran's alleged short supplying of Ankara in previously contracted energy supply commitments.

Of coups and counter-coups

Arrests in coup conspiracy cases seem to be the prevailing norm in Turkey, with each week seeing more former military officers rounded up for their alleged participation in such activity. Separate investigations into support for the terrorist PKK group have also mirrored the coup cases, with members from the Kurdish BDP Party also facing imprisonment, as we have already referred to in previous editions of the EGF Turkey File. The wide swath that such prosecutions have cut across society has included the rounding up of journalists, academics and other opponents of the government.

Given the country's troubled history with military coups and the thirty year running conflict with the PKK, such charges aren't unrealistic. However, there is concern in various circles, both within and outside Turkey, that the arrests and prosecutions are a crackdown by the Islamist AKP on its secular as well as Kurdish opponents. That being said, such an

orchestrated crackdown seems unlikely. A top-down government controlled by Erdogan is not as uniform as its opponents describe it as being, while there is also evidence of increasing schisms between Erdogan and the movement of US-based Turkish Islamist, Fethullah Gulen. This is best exemplified in February's spat between Turkish prosecutors and the country's intelligence services, when the head of the latter organization was summoned for questioning.

Furthermore, investigations into the country's 1997 bloodless coup have drawn notable attention inside Turkey at present. In what has become dubbed as the 'post-modern coup', the higher authorities of the Turkish military establishment, who were never comfortable with Turkey's Islamist-secular coalition government of the time, applied increasing pressure on then Islamist Prime Minister, Necmettin Erbakan. Erbakan's government finally collapsed in May 1997 and his Islamist-leaning Refah (Welfare) Party was subsequently outlawed by the Turkish legal authorities. Current Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan and President Abdullah Gul were both members of Refah, with the former spending time in prison on what is now widely accepted as trumped up charges. Erdogan recently shocked many in the wider Turkish political establishment when he stated that the investigation and "waves" of prosecutions could overwhelm the country. He subsequently called for the investigations to be sped up. While it is unlikely that Erdogan has forgotten the stint he spent in Turkish prisons following the 'post-modern coup', interpreting his aforementioned comments as a new form of an omnipotent AKP government vertically controlled by the prime minister may also be somewhat premature.

A heated debate over abortion – not only in America

Worthy of note also is that during May Turkey has slipped into heated debate over abortion, following Erdogan's statement at the AKP's Women's Congress, where the prime minister likened the procedure to murder and the country's botched airstrikes on

Kurdish civilians in Uludere in December. Erdogan also described elective caesarean births as unnatural, and is now likely to publicly support a draft law forthcoming, that would restrict or ban abortions.

The debate will deepen the ideological divisions between the Islamist AKP and its secular opponents, including feminist groups and the Turkish Medical Association. Given the prime minister's widely perceived "respect for religion", his remarks were

likely spoken from the heart. That being said, as religiously conservative lawmakers in the United States have known for years, it never hurts to solidify your political base. Needless to say, a large part of Turkey's population is no less religiously conservative than in the United States. Political capital and debates over abortion rights – why should American politicians have all the fun?

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