

## Insights into Turkish Domestic and International Politics during February 1-18<sup>th</sup> 2014

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### Key Points:

- *The AKP-majority in parliament passes a restrictive Internet censorship bill despite opposition parties and international outcry.*
- *President Abdullah Gul declines to veto the measure, disappointing many who hoped he would be a moderating influence in the months to come.*
- *American President Barack Obama to skip Turkey in March trip to Europe and Saudi Arabia. The skip is indicative of the cooling relations between the president and Prime Minister Erdogan over a number of issues.*
- *TPAO declines investment in Iran for now, while talks on a pipeline deal in the Eastern Mediterranean and a détente between Turkey, Cyprus and Israel appears mutually beneficial.*
- *Iraqi Kurdistan connects pipeline to Turkish system, enraging a Baghdad already beset by a Sunni insurgency in Iraq's western province. Turkey is collecting the KRG's oil, but has refused to sell it on international markets until an accord is reached.*

**Freedom of speech in Turkey**

*Concerns about Turkey's Internet freedom deepen as the AKP used its parliamentary majority to pass a controversial draft law increasing the power of the government to censor websites or request users' history as far back as two years. The law also allows the Telecommunications Authority (TIB) to pull any "offensive" websites offline without a court order. Owners of the sites would, however, be forced to resort to legal action to have them unblocked.*

In a country with already strict Internet laws, highlighted by the 2008-10 block of Youtube, the government's lurch towards all-out censorship of outlets it cannot control moves worryingly forward. Just last year, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that the country's existing law stood in contrast to freedom of expression and the convention of human rights. (Albayrak, "Turkey Debates New Law to Control Internet Users," The Wall Street Journal Emerging Europe blog, 13 January 2014.)

Even more disturbing than the law's passage was the prime minister's reaction to an audiotape which indicated that his government, and he personally, had stepped in to demand edits to the productions of private news station Haberturk.

On a phone call with Haberturk during a state visit to Morocco, the prime minister personally ordered one of the stations to remove text from under a live speech from MHP opposition leader Devlet Bahçeli playing on the station.

When confronted with the accusation, which emerged after a recording of the phone conversation was released, Erdogan admitted his actions, saying "Yes, I made that call from Morocco. I just reminded them about the caption...the insults were directed at us...and they did what should be done." ("7 Deadly Things that the Public Learned about Turkish Media through wiretapping and confessions," [www.istanbulian.blogspot.com](http://www.istanbulian.blogspot.com), 12 February 2014.)

The pushback against government critics continued, as an Azerbaijani reporter for the Gulenist-affiliated Today's Zaman was deported after posting tweets

critical of the prime minister in January. In reports released by the daily, which runs Turkish and English-language versions, the Interior Ministry barred reporter Mahir Zeynalov from the country saying he "committed a crime by exceeding the limit of criticism." (Arsu and Mackey, "Turkey Deports Journalist for Criticizing Government on Twitter," The New York Times, 8 February 2014.) Though the punishment was harsh, Zeynalov escaped the fate of dozens of other journalists currently awaiting trial, as Turkey entered its second year as the globe's leading jailer of journalists.

The last hope for those opposed to the government's increasingly Orwellian stance on freedom of speech was a possible veto by President Abdullah Gul. The president had remained silent following the parliament's passage of the draft law, but on February 18 signed off on it. In an attempt to quell the outrage, Gul's office reported that though he signed the law, he understood the concerns.

"I am aware of the problems mainly on two points.... These concerns will be taken into account in the new law," he said. ("Turkey president signs controversial Internet law into force," AFP, 18 February 2014.)

Immediately following the decision, Communications Minister Lutfu Elvan met with opposition MPs to discuss amendments to the increased TIB authority and storage of user data laws. Elvan, on behalf of the government, agreed to amend the former by requiring a court order to continue blocking a site past the first 24 hours of it being denied. On the point of users' Internet history, Minister Elvan has agreed to only seek such information by a court order. ("Turkish president ratifies controversial Internet bill," Anadolu Agency, 18 February 2014.)

That said, until the amendments are passed, the law is in force in its current form.

By Western notions, the government's actions are worrying. As the corruption investigation simmers, the AKP continues to go on the offensive against all who oppose it. This strategy was effective over the past twelve years of its rule, but the ruling party under

Prime Minister Erdogan is taking an increasingly authoritarian bent. It is one thing to hold a majority in the parliament after free and fair elections, but it is another thing to push through legislation that vastly expands Internet censorship, or to expel or imprison journalists who write stories one finds insulting. The AKP leadership, which personally took part in bruising fights with the reactionary military and secular elites, is showing that while their direction was good for getting Turkey on track, they may not be qualified to lead a country in need of compromise.

### **Turkish-U.S. relations**

*Though President Barack Obama said Prime Minister Erdogan was one of the five world leaders he spoke to most during the early stages of the Arab Spring, relations between the NATO allies have deteriorated significantly. There is blame to go around, as Turkey certainly has felt left out in the cold by the Obama Administration's wavering on how involved it will get in the Syrian civil war. Meanwhile, it is estimated that Turkey will host 1.5 million Syrian refugees at year's end, largely paying for this population on its own. (McClelland, "How to Build a Perfect Refugee Camp," The New York Times, 13 February 2014.)*

Remarks by AKP officials alluding to the U.S. ambassador's role in the Gezi Park protests and ongoing corruption scandal have not helped, even if it consolidates AKP votes for the approaching election season. The two leaders, who once spoke so often, have apparently not talked on the phone since August 2013, having only briefly greeted one another at the latest G20 meeting.

In addition to the AKP's normal rhetoric about foreign conspiracies that tend to allude to the U.S., Israel and other Western powers, Turkey's September 2013 decision to go with a Chinese missile defense system perturbed NATO and Washington. Since that decision, Turkey has walked back the deal, saying nothing has been finalized. At the early-February Munich Defense Conference, Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu reiterated that a decision had not been made.

"Turkey did not decide yet which system should be bought...for us three criteria are important - joint

production, the time of delivery and price," said Davutoglu. ("Turkey says open to alternatives to Chinese missile defense system," Reuters, 2 February 2014.)

Western countries were alarmed that Turkey would choose a Chinese-made system that would be incompatible with NATO's existing missile defense infrastructure. American leaders were more irritated with Turkey's decision to go with the Chinese firm CPMIEC, which is on a U.S. sanctions list for weapons shipments to North Korea, Iran and Syria.

Indicative of the mood, President Obama will skip Turkey in an upcoming March trip to Europe and Saudi Arabia. As the American president enters the final stages of his last term, his patience for Erdogan's demagoguery has been worn thin. Though the countries' long-term strategic interests still remain connected – whether it is Turkish accession to the EU, a PKK-peace deal, or an end to the bloodshed in Syria – it is unlikely that Obama will continue to treat the insults and jabs with cool indifference.

### **Pipelines**

*In energy and pipeline news, Energy Minister Taner Yildiz announced on February 12 that state-owned TPAO declined to invest in Iran's South Pars gas field. The project had been discussed during the prime minister's visit to Tehran at the end of January, but Yildiz said that following further study, investment would be unfeasible. (O'Byrne, "Turkish government decides against TPAO investment in Iranian energy sector," Platts, 12 February 2014.)*

Talk of a pipeline between Israel, Cyprus and Turkey continues to be a popular topic in the energy and business press, and seems to have some potential. Aside from the obvious financial benefits for all three nations, a joint project producing from the aptly named Leviathan gas field could help solve two extremely contentious international standoffs. Estimates put the potential energy deposits at 510 billion cubic meters of gas.

Israel and Turkey are apparently closing in on a compensation deal over the Mavi Marmara incident.

A former U.S. ambassador to Azerbaijan wrote a Bloomberg op-ed reporting that “Turkish officials have quietly suggested that restoration of full relations with Israel could occur in tandem with an agreement to build an Israel-Turkey natural gas pipeline.” (Bryza, “Israel-Turkey Pipeline Can Fix Eastern Mediterranean,” Bloomberg, 20 January 2014.)

On February 10, Greek and Turkish Cypriot leaders met in the island’s U.N. patrolled neutral zone to announce the resumption of reconciliation talks. It has been two years since the last U.N.-sponsored peace talks failed, and the potential for profits from Eastern Mediterranean energy production are surely a unifying principal in getting people to the table.

Bids for steelmakers continue to go out for the TANAP pipeline project, as preparations ramp up ahead of the 2015 construction start. Six Turkish companies will bid to supply pipe for the 1,200-mile project that will eventually carry Azerbaijani gas to Turkey and European markets. (“Six Turkish pipe makers qualified for TANAP bid,” Anadolu Agency, 1 February 2014.)

## **Iraqi-KRG oil dispute**

*Oil has begun to flow between the Kurdish Regional Government of Iraq (KRG) and the Turkish port of Ceyhan, putting the government of Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in a tough position. Faced with elections in April where the Shia leader needs*

*Kurdish support, al-Maliki has apparently chosen the pen over the sword to deal with the matter. This is an understandable move considering Western portions of his country are in complete revolt under the banner of Sunni-Islamist insurgents.*

Turkey’s Genel completed the pipeline in late December and begun shipping oil in January, with CEO Tony Hayward predicting that it would be fully commissioned by the fourth quarter of 2014. (“Genel Energy completes pipeline from Kurdistan Region of Iraq to Turkey,” Oil Review Middle East, 14 February 2014.)

Baghdad has retained counsel, threatening to sue any company purchasing crude shipped via the pipeline. Turkey has gone out of its way to assure the Iraqis that, while the oil is flowing to Ceyhan, the 425,000 barrels there will be stored until an agreement can be reached between Erbil and the al-Maliki government.

It is a strange stand off, but the Iraqi prime minister is losing leverage as the insurgency in Anbar Province rages on and election season nears. Though the government has threatened to cut the KRG’s 17 percent of the budget, it seems unlikely in the short term. For now, Turkey can sit on the fence and wait for Iraq to sort it out.

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