

## Insights into Turkish Domestic and International Politics during February 18-28<sup>th</sup> 2014

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### Key Points:

- *Ukraine loses control of the Crimean Peninsula, to the dismay of the region's Muslim Tatar population.*
- *Turkey's historical and cultural ties to the Crimean Tatars increase the chance that the conflict escalates. However, its connections may also offer a path for Turkish diplomatic efforts to intercede in further confrontation between Russia and the West.*
- *Leaked audio tapes appear to implicate Prime Minister Tayip Erdogan and his son of wrongdoing in the corruption scandal, though their authenticity remains disputed.*
- *Erdogan hits back following the recordings release, claiming that the international media, the Gulen Movement and other outside powers are behind the investigations.*
- *The peace process with the Kurds remains frozen as Abdullah Ocalan appears to warn the Gulen Movement against undermining the country by attempting a coup.*

**Ukraine and the Crimean Tatars**

*The unrest in Ukraine has not gone unnoticed in Turkey, especially since the late-February takeover of the Crimean Peninsula by Russian forces and pro-Russian self-defense militias. The region's Tatars, with historic, religious and cultural ties to Turkey, are uneasy at the latest turn of events.*

The Muslim Tatars have a long history of mistrust of Moscow. They were deported by Joseph Stalin during the Second World War, having only returned *en masse* from the former Central Asian Soviet republics after the fall of the USSR. While the Crimea's Slav population still maintains strong cultural and historical ties to Russia, the Tatars, who make up around 12-14 percent of the population, have been strong supporters of the opposition and the government in Kiev. (Kim, "Relief And Fear In A Divided Crimea," *Buzzfeed.com*, 1 March 2014.)

Influential Crimean Tatar political leader Mustafa Dzhemilev told the *Washington Post's* Monkey Cage blog that he refused an offer from a highly placed Russian official to support Moscow's position in return for granting Crimean Tatars national autonomy status on the peninsula. Dzhemilev also said that the Tatars did not trust Russia, and wished to remain in Ukraine. (Shevel, "Who are the Crimean Tatars, and why are they important?" *The Washington Post*, 1 March 2014.)

The Crimean Tatars, who are politically organized under a body known as the Mejlis, have publicly refused to recognize the new pro-Kremlin Crimean government. ("Official statement of Mejlis on not recognizing Government of Crimea formed February 27, 2014," [www.QTMM.org](http://www.QTMM.org), 28 February 2014.) Dzhemilev followed this announcement by stating that the Tatars would begin organizing their own self-defense units if diplomacy failed.

Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu initially weighed in on the matter following the Russian incursion, saying that "For Turkey, Ukraine's territorial integrity, stability and prosperity are crucial. Crimea is of great importance to Turkey as it is the doorway to Ukraine. It is also important due to the presence of

Tatars [a Turkic ethnic group] and Turkey's cultural heritage. Our greatest wish is the maintenance of stability in Ukraine." (Cengiz, "Turkey says Crimea part of Ukraine," *Today's Zaman*, 27 February 2014.)

While Russian President Vladimir Putin says that it is his duty to ensure the safety and stability of Russian-speaking people in the near abroad, Turkey under Prime Minister Erdogan has espoused a similar vision. In fairness to Erdogan, he has not initiated nearly as many troop incursions as the Russian leader has in Ukraine, Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

There have reportedly been clashes between pro-Tatar and pro-Russian groups in the Crimea, though these were mainly street fights. Depending on how events unfold, Turkey could be drawn into a more prominent role in either unwinding or escalating the situation. Should Turkey end up in a standoff with Russia over the plight of the pro-Ukrainian Tatars, potential for NATO's involvement rises considerably.

The opportunity for dialogue still remains, especially given that any move by Ankara will be tempered by the country's strong economic and energy ties to Russia. Given Turkey's prominence in the Black Sea, now may be an opportune time for Ankara to get its diplomatic mojo back. Despite Prime Minister Erdogan's bombastic nature towards those he disagrees with, he has always been reserved in direct criticism of Russia. If that trend continues and outright confrontation is unlikely, the Crimean crisis may be a perfect time for Turkish diplomats to take a leading role in easing tensions.

**Erdogan hits back at critics**

*The approach of local elections on March 30 means that rhetoric is the rule of the day. As the most polarizing and well-known politician in the country, Prime Minister Erdogan is doing his part in getting out the vote for the AKP.*

Erdogan took on the international media during a party rally in the town of Afyonkarahisar, saying "These international media outlets have a nasty character."

One can imagine that French President Francois Hollande and other Western leaders subject to a free press could empathize.

The time honored Turkish tradition of leaking audiotapes continues, with the latest appearing to implicate the prime minister and his son of divesting money tied to the graft probes. The opposition quickly seized upon the disclosure, though the authenticity of the tapes remains questionable.

The nationalist MHP's Devlet Bahceli called the tapes' contents "mind blowing" and urged prosecutors to act. The Republican People's Party claimed it had verified their authenticity and issued a rather antagonistic statement calling on the prime minister to resign or "flee Turkey by helicopter." ("PM Erdogan investigated for corruption," *Today's Zaman*, 25 February.)

Expectedly, Erdogan struck back at the various forces he believes are arrayed against him: "The most confidential information of my country is being wiretapped by spies working for other countries and published while the prosecutors and judges of this country remain indifferent to that," said Erdogan during a political rally on February 27. "I am openly asking the prosecutor. For which country did you do these wiretappings? I am also asking the police, those who were involved in this case. For which country did you make these wiretappings?" ("Turkish PM accuses prosecutors and police of spying," *Hurriyet Daily News*, 27 February 2014.)

He went on to accuse the CHP and Gulen Movement of fabricating the tapes, which, while plausible, would make them strange bedfellows as the CHP has unquestionably been the biggest political loser resulting from the rise of political Islam in Turkey.

Erdogan also condemned Fethullah Gulen, calling on the reclusive America-based cleric to either return to Turkey to participate in politics or stay out altogether. The prime minister's attacks border on the ironic, considering that many secular-minded Turks have leveled the same accusations at the Gulen Movement.

As the corruption scandal widens, the U.S. State Department said in its annual human rights report that it has serious concerns about the country's rule of law and judicial independence. It was notably critical of the reaction to the December 17 corruption investigation, the heavy handed police response to the Gezi Park protests, and the government's moves to bring the judiciary under its control and oversight. ("Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2013," <http://www.state.gov>, 27 February 2014.)

Though the sentiment is not new, the bombast will only increase over the month of March as elections approach. Erdogan's ability to polarize the electorate for and against him does not bode well for reconciliation of any of these issues in the near future. The clear loser in that is the Turkish Republic itself.

### **The PKK in Turkey**

*Syria continues to burn, Ukraine awaits an escalation of Russian military action and the ruling AKP is in full campaign mode amidst an ever widening corruption probe extending to the prime minister. Yet one bright spot remains: the peace deal agreed to almost a year ago between Turkey and the PKK continues to hold.*

The PKK's two most important voices have weighed into the ongoing tension between the Gulen Movement and AKP. In January, imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan issued a declaration calling for a renewed push to move the peace process forward.

"Those who want to set our country ablaze once again with the fire of a coup should know that we will not throw gasoline on this fire," wrote Ocalan. "They will find us to be against every coup attempt just as we always have been. However those who are approaching the process of a democratic solution unwillingly or without intelligence also should know that a democratic peace, which is the only way to put out this fire, must be immediately established." ("Ocalan: We Will Not Throw Gasoline on this Fire," [www.RojavaReport.wordpress.com](http://www.RojavaReport.wordpress.com), 11 January 2014.)

It was a stark warning to both the government, which has dragged its feet since the cease fire was announced in March 2013, and also to the Gulen Movement, which is less than enthusiastic about the PKK's sincerity. The militant organization's leader in the field, Cemil Bayik, explicitly mirrored the prime minister's claims about a foreign conspiracy.

Saying the U.S. wanted an "Erdogan-less" Turkey, Bayik told a Turkish newspaper that the corruption probe was a Gulenist plot sponsored by the United States. ("US supports Gulen against Erdogan," [www.KurdPress.com](http://www.KurdPress.com), 4 February 2014.)

In an excellent analysis of the tensions between the normally moderate Gulen Movement and the PKK, Mustafa Aykol pointed out that much of the mistrust centers on the private schools run in the country's Kurdish southeast. (Aykol, "Why is the PKK siding with the AKP in the AKP-Gulen conflict?" [www.al-monitor.com](http://www.al-monitor.com), 3 February 2014.)

As Aykol writes, "The Gulen Movement considers the PKK a threat, specifically to the Movement's facilities in predominantly Kurdish southeastern Turkey, including a wide network of schools, dormitories and charities. The PKK has targeted these institutions over the years, saying they 'steal Kurdish children' from being PKK militants and make them followers of the pro-Turkish teachings of Gulen."

Citing a comment given during a January 2013 interview with the BBC, Aykol notes that Gulen himself acknowledged the mistrust, saying that the PKK leader did not want Kurdish youth being influenced in the Movement's *dershanes* as they spread into Kurdish populated areas.

"They didn't want our activities to prevent young people joining the militants in the mountains," Gulen said. "Their politics is to keep enmity between Kurdish and Turkish people." (Franks, "Fetullah Gulen: Powerful but reclusive Turkish cleric," *BBC*, 14 January 2014.)

It is difficult to see how such suspicion can be overcome in the short term, as both the PKK and the Gulen Movement represent starkly different yet influential power structures. Neither, as recent events indicate, appears willing to share or limit its influence for the greater good.

Though commendations should be made to the government and PKK for largely keeping to the peace agreement, another recent anniversary shows how close to the surface tensions are. On the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Ocalan's capture, peaceful protests, accompanied by minor outbreaks of violence, took place as Kurds demonstrated across the country.

Though each side accuses the other of intransigence, the onus is on the government to move forward. Ocalan has repeatedly expressed his desire to bring the PKK in to a more inclusive and democratic Turkey. Though this may be lip service for those watching at home, the fact remains that the group's fighters have not struck out across the Kandil Mountains since the cease fire was ordered from his prison cell. The AKP knows it needs Kurdish BDP votes in the campaigns to come, but its strategy of playing for time may end up costing them if Ocalan loses faith that progress is being made. If that occurs, the government will have another item to add to the list of problems in its near abroad.

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