

Insights into Turkish Domestic and International Politics during October 1-15th 2012

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Key Points:

- *Syria and Turkey exchange artillery fire throughout October, and a Syrian airliner thought to be carrying Russian military equipment is forced to land in Turkey.*
- *The plane incident could have implications for Turkey's vital Russian gas supplies, if the relationship between the two countries deteriorates.*
- *PKK violence continues unabated as the underlying issues facing Turkey's Kurdish population are ignored for short-term solutions.*

Syria

In an escalation of tensions between Turkey and Syria, on October 3, Syrian shells killed five Turkish civilians in the border town of Akcakale. Turkish military forces (TSK) responded almost immediately with their own artillery strikes aimed at military targets in Syria. Although Damascus issued an apology for the deaths, the shelling between the two countries has continued sporadically.

While NATO discussed the situation in an emergency meeting in Brussels, it declined to declare an Article 5 offense, which assigns any attack on an alliance nation as an attack on all members. According to undisclosed American sources in Brussels, the invocation of Article 5 is unlikely given the limited scale of the artillery exchange.

Unless the violence escalates and more Turkish lives are lost, the sporadic firing is likely to become the status quo, looking ahead. The U.S. – whose leadership is embroiled in a tight presidential election – has no stomach for an intervention into a civil war divided along ethnic and religious lines. More so, reports that Western arms are now being funneled to Islamic extremists and foreign fighters battling the al-Assad regime has given Washington second thoughts on backing the Syrian opposition. Memories of America's involvement in funneling arms to Islamic fighters in 1980s Afghanistan are still fresh in the minds of decision makers in the American capital. For the foreseeable future it will be Turkey, not the U.S. or NATO, that will continue to take the lead in confronting al-Assad.

But one critical aspect holding Prime Minister Erdogan back from acting on his verbal attacks on Damascus is a vivid lack of support in Turkey itself. Not solely relegated to religious and ethnic minorities, large swaths of Turkish society want no part in military action against the Syrian regime. A Metropol survey taken after the October 3 attack estimated that almost 75 percent of respondents were against a war with Syria.

Combined with weak domestic support and little chance of a Western intervention, another factor may also be at play. The past years' trials against senior officers of the TSK have had the positive effect of keeping the military out of domestic political affairs. That being said, it remains to be seen as to the level of impact these "pogroms" against the Turkish officer corps will have on the military capacity of the TSK. Aside from occasional ground operations against PKK fighters in the country's southeast, Turkey's present day army has little experience in large-scale warfare. This factor must weigh heavy on the minds of TSK officers as they contemplate scenarios in which their untested military would face a Syrian army that has spent the past two years fighting for its survival.

These factors have tempered any enthusiasm on part of Turkey's leaders to move militarily against al-Assad. But this has not meant that Ankara has been unable to manoeuvre. On October 10, Turkey forced a Syrian commercial airliner travelling from Moscow to Damascus to land on suspicions that it was carrying arms. Despite cries of illegality from Syria, Prime Minister Erdogan claimed, "Equipment and ammunitions that were being sent from a Russian agency (were bound for) ... the Syrian Defense Ministry."

Although Moscow was quick to say the incident would be unlikely to trouble the two Black Sea neighbors' relationship, the forced landing at Turkey's behest was a warning to Russian Prime Minister, Vladimir Putin. Only time will tell if Russian military shipments are more carefully routed on their way to Syria, but the move by Turkey has shown that its leaders are willing to draw attention to Moscow's material support of the al-Assad regime. A fall-out in relations between the two countries would be very troubling for Turkey, whose reliance on natural gas shipments is vital to its continued economic growth. But the implications of a Moscow-Ankara showdown could also affect a number of possible conflict areas aside from Syria, including Nagorno-Karabakh and Cyprus.

Russian Energy

Just hours after the plane incident, Turkish Energy Minister, Taner Yildiz, attempted to calm fears that Russia would respond by cutting gas supplies. Turkey's reliance on fossil fuel supplies to power its electricity grid and consequently its economy lead to concerns of Russian retribution by cutting off gas supplies. Yildiz, eager to prove that their positions on Syria were a separate matter from their business deals, stated shortly after the incident that Russian gas shipments had increased in order to make up for shortfalls in Azeri and Iranian supplies.

Good relations with Turkey best serve Russia's economic interests as well. In addition to supplying an estimated two thirds of Turkey's natural gas, Moscow's South Stream gas pipeline is due to cut across Turkish sovereign space in order to deliver supplies to European markets. Additionally, state-owned Rosatom is set to build Turkey's first nuclear power plant in the Mersin province at a substantial profit for the Russian side.

Despite assurances from Yildiz and positive words from Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, the cancelation of Prime Minister Putin's scheduled trip to Ankara due to "a suddenly busy domestic schedule" is a good indicator that the message was received in Moscow.

Given Russia's history of using gas supplies as a political cudgel, Turkey should hope for a mild winter if tensions further deteriorate with Moscow.

PKK Violence

Attacks by or blamed on the PKK have continued to increase, with many Turkish watchers citing the 1990s as the last time so many incidents have occurred. The early October pipeline explosion in eastern Turkey was blamed on the militants, as have been a number of deadly clashes across the country's southeast.

In his remarks at the AKP Congress in September, the prime minister seemed to indicate that after the party's "Kurdish Opening", the onus was on Kurdish leaders to help resolve the decades long impasse between the government and the country's largest minority group.

However, the imprisonment of scores of Kurdish legislators, journalists and students on arbitrary charges continues to detrimentally affect such a course of action. Instances of supporters being locked up for applauding at a PKK funeral or BDP deputies being denied their seats in the parliament do the government no favours in courting moderate Kurdish citizens.

The solution to the issues facing Turkey and its Kurdish citizens are long-term investments, and must be addressed in this manner. Decades of marginalization by nationalist Turkish governments were never going to be easily forgotten despite the AKP's noble intentions in its Kurdish Opening. Short-term solutions such as military operations and arrests will only further antagonize Kurds, and given the current instability to the country's south the violence between the PKK and TSK will only get worse.

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