

Insights into Turkish Domestic and International Politics during March 2012

Key Points:

- *Turkey closes its embassy in Syria and openly discusses establishing buffer zones inside its southern neighbour for refugees fleeing the conflict zones.*
- *There is discontent within Turkey's Shia Muslim minority about the AKP government's criticism of the Alawite Assad regime, raising concern about possible ethnic tension in areas near the Turkey-Syria border.*
- *Turkey releases two high profile journalists under investigation in the Ergenekon trial, but opens a second investigation into comments made by one of them to the press upon his release.*
- *Iraqi leaders envisage future export routes for the country's oil through Turkey in case of a closure of the Strait of Hormuz, while the two countries' economic ties grow as the Kurdish north becomes a prime export market for Turkish products.*
- *Turkey will go forward with its lawsuit against Iran for short-supplying on a natural gas contract.*

No let up in Syria turmoil

Syria remains in turmoil at the time of writing, with numerous clashes being reported in cities including Homs, Dera'a and Hama. As largely inconclusive efforts by the international community to bring a fighting to a halt continue, the security forces of the Syrian regime appear to maintain a position of strength, at times easily overcoming the fractured opposition forces marshalled by the Free Syrian Army. Turkey has largely continued with its policy of talking loudly and carrying a small stick, as its leverage in Syria is largely constrained by international and political considerations.

For one, Turkey's sizeable Alevi population has been largely quiet in terms of condemning the actions of the Alawite Assad regime. Some sources link Turkey's Alevis to Syria's Alewives, both of whom may be associated with the Shia sect within Islam, although such links are not always bound by clear sectarian ties. Religious minorities in countries throughout the Middle East, including Christian, Jewish and Shia, have watched the Arab Spring with trepidation following attacks on minorities in Sunni Muslim majority countries like Egypt and believe the AKP's condemnation of the crackdown by Damascus is also affected by (a Sunni) bias. Syria's Kurds, with ties to the PKK, have also stated that they would oppose any kind of intervention in Syria by Turkish military forces (TSK), while members of Turkey's Nusayri sect (not to be confused with Turkish Alevis) held a rally in support of Damascus near the Syrian border in February.

Syrian National Council seeking Turkish recognition

A meeting held in Istanbul by the opposition Syrian National Council (SNC) in the last week of March appeared to be a last attempt to coalesce the fractious Syrian opposition movement, which continued to take the fight to the Assad regime at the time of writing. Some analysts suggested that such activity represented further diplomatic jockeying by

Syrian opposition forces to have the SNC recognized as the legitimate representative of Syria at the recent "Friends of Syria" meeting, which was held in Istanbul on April 1. Such recognition is yet to take place, however.

On 26 March Turkey closed its embassy in Damascus and recalled its ambassador to Syria, citing a worsening security situation. The government, echoing US statements, has floated the idea of providing rebel groups with "non-lethal" aid like communications equipment. A number of speculative reports from the Turkey-Syria border allude to the fact that refugee camps have become staging grounds for opposition fighters and that 10 Syrian generals, 19 colonels and other low-ranking officers and soldiers, numbering in the low hundreds are reportedly coordinating armed opposition forces in Syria. It is difficult to confirm such reports with any credible evidence, however.

A number of Turkish sources are suggesting that Ankara is seriously considering the establishment of buffer zones inside Syria as a safe haven for refugees fleeing the Syrian army's crackdown. This was first mentioned by Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan on 16 March. While the leaking of such discussions may be a play by Ankara to show Assad that it is serious about stopping the violence, it should be recalled that Turkey has already participated in safe haven zones in Northern Iraq for Kurds fleeing violence waged against them by Saddam Hussein's regime in early 1991.

Turkey remains stuck, just like the West and the Arab states, in terms of offering a viable solution to the violence engulfing Syria. The Syrian opposition is apparently receiving arms channelled via Iraq and Lebanon, which some say led to the March bombing of a security building in the heart of Damascus that killed 27. The opposition was also recently criticised by Human Rights Watch for its own summary executions and torture of regime supporters. As Russia slowly turns up the pressure on Damascus to

cut back on the indiscriminate killing of civilians and opposition fighters, Turkey, the West and the Arab states are likely to continue their vocal condemnation of Assad while being able to do little of substance to stop the massacre taking place.

Dissenting journalists remain a domestic sticking point

On March 12, Ahmet Sik and Nedim Sener were among four journalists released from custody after over a year in detention while they await trial in the Ergenekon case. The hearings are due to begin in June. Less than a week later, a special prosecutor announced that he would launch another investigation into Sik for "threatening and identifying judges and prosecutors as targets for terror organizations" in his statement to journalists on the day of his release (Committee to Protect Journalists, 22 March 2012). Reading the full text of Sik's statement, it is difficult, from a point of view of someone living in the West, to see what specifics the journalist gave away when he said "those prosecutors and judges who wrongfully put us behind the bars shall receive the same treatment."

Western notions of free speech aside, Turkey's treatment of dissenting journalists continues to be a major issue holding back the flourishing democracy that Turkey is becoming. The AKP certainly has to balance the threats of internal threats to the state, with Turkish history giving plenty of examples of such dangers. Yet there are no shortage of anxious moments remaining for journalists in the country and as the Sik re-investigation is demonstrating, the state still appears to have a final say over how free (or un-free) speech should be.

A new lease of life for NABUCCO ?

NABUCCO's long decline appears to have reached a surprising conclusion, as the consortium in charge of the TANAP project agreed with its NABUCCO

counterparts to discuss joining the two pipelines at the Turkish-Bulgarian border. While noticeably smaller in scale than originally imagined by those in Brussels, NABUCCO appears to have gained a relatively new lease on life under the name NABUCCO West. NABUCCO has submitted a proposal along these lines to TANAP's leadership and transit country Turkey, with a decision likely to come in 2013 on the plan's viability. More importantly, the willingness of the BP-led Shah Deniz consortium, for Azerbaijan and Turkey to undertake a major portion of the transportation corridor might allow NABUCCO and other projects to redesign themselves on scalable terms. It will henceforth be up to other NABUCCO partners to do their part, readjust to the new conditions, and find a supply source, which remains the overarching challenge facing the project.

The one major obstacle to this is the status of the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TAP), which also has a claim to the same 10 billion cubic meters (bcm) per year supplied by Azerbaijan's Shah Deniz II gas deposit. However, TAP's viability may be up for scrutiny as the EU ratchets up support for NABUCCO West in an attempt to see some semblance of their former plan realized, especially considering that many of the destinations for TAP gas supplies aren't seen as vital to EU energy diversification away from Russia. Expect the lobbying to continue over the coming months as the leadership in Turkey and in Azerbaijan weigh the new attention they'll receive from the NABUCCO consortium.

Blossoming Turkish-Iraqi economic ties

The cabinet of Iraq's ruling government agreed to the recommendations of a parliamentary committee to diversify oil export routes in hopes of reducing the reliance on the Strait of Hormuz, which has always been subject to closure/disruption due to geopolitical tensions in the Gulf. The export-reliant Iraqi energy economy is in dire need of new transportation routes, and increasingly warm ties with Turkey – especially

between Ankara and the Kurdistan Regional Government in northern Iraq – are seen as one way of diversifying these transportation routes.

Turkish Petroleum International Company (TPIC) already has a presence in the country's oil industry, having signed a contract on oil field and drilling services in Iraq on 14 March 2010. The contract covered 45 wells worth an estimated \$310 million, according to local sources.. Turkey's economic ties with Iraq have boomed in recent years and the country has now become the second largest export market for Turkish products, worth an estimated \$8.27 billion in 2011. According to remarks by Mark Spelman, managing director of Accenture's strategy practice, "Northern Iraq will soon become the biggest trade partner of Turkey, surpassing Germany."

Ankara to pursue lawsuit against Teheran

Turkey's Energy Minister, Taner Yildiz, recently announced that Ankara would go forward with its

lawsuit against Iran for failing to meet its contract agreement in the supply of natural gas. Iran provides 20% of Turkey's natural gas supplies, but has continually short-supplied deliveries since the signing of a contract agreed in 1996 to guarantee supplies of at least 10 bcm a year for 25 years. At the end of March, as Prime Minister Erdogan visited Tehran to discuss the country's nuclear program, the situation in Syria, and the gas dispute, Turkish-Iranian ties look to be straining under the intense atmosphere currently engulfing the Middle East. While the gas dispute appears to be a small worry in the context of the other matters, it is yet another issue where Tehran and Ankara simply don't see eye to eye, thus leaving the potential for further conflict down the line. It is also not out of the question that Ankara may reduce oil imports from Iran in line with sanctions driven by Washington, possibly further straining ties between Turkey and the Islamic Republic.

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