

Insights into Turkish Domestic and International Politics during August 2011

Key developments:

- *Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan visits Mogadishu on a famine aid mission, the first visit by a non-African head of state in nearly 20 years. The trip is a huge boost to Turkey's international image.*
- *Violence in the south-east of the country continues, leading to Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) cross-border raids into Iraq.*
- *Following criticism from the US Secretary of State, the justice ministry contradicts the number of journalists said to be held by Turkish authorities.*
- *Ankara continues to condemn the Syrian regime despite not calling for the resignation of President Bashar al-Assad. The country wins a seat at the Paris meeting of the new Libyan government following the apparent collapse of the Gaddafi regime.*
- *Azerbaijan and Turkey continue to negotiate a gas transit agreement, while Turkey's reliance on foreign energy imports has reportedly increased 5 % since the AKP came to power.*

Erdogan visits Somalia

August 19, 2011 was a momentous day in the history of Somalia. Just weeks after a "tactical withdrawal" of Al-Shabab forces from Mogadishu back to their traditional power centres in the south of the country, the city hosted the first major head of state in more than twenty years. Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan travelled to the city with a delegation including his wife, daughter and five cabinet ministers – including foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu.

For those looking for signs of the maturing of Turkey's foreign policy, this was it. The prime minister and his entourage travelled throughout the city visiting refugee camps and hospitals, as well as meeting with Somalis, many of whom have recently flocked to the city by the thousands amidst an ongoing famine that has affected millions. As Turkish Foreign Minister Davutoglu pointed out, the trip was largely a humanitarian mission intended to show that Turkey could and would take the lead in easing the crisis. This followed upon Turkish efforts at raising \$350 million for famine relief in coordination with the Organization for Islamic Cooperation, \$115 million of which came directly from Turkey.

Various Turkish charities continue to run campaigns to raise donations for Somalia, coinciding with the holy month of Ramadan, which encourages donations to the less fortunate. According to Davutoglu, "There was a perception that nobody can go to Mogadishu; we tried to destroy this perception. We came. Many others can come." The Turkish prime minister elaborated on the need for help during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, calling the crisis "a test of humanity, human values, modernity and modern values. We're here to tell the world this test should be passed successfully to prove that Western values are more than empty rhetoric."

Erdogan's trip is remarkable for the sheer reason that the Turkish leader seems to be fulfilling a role that many in the West have long sought – that of a moderate Muslim leader who takes the lead in one of the world's most dangerous situations without vilifying the West or Israel in the process. Although he chided Western nations for failing to send adequate famine relief, due in part to their demands for security guarantees for aid workers, bringing his family and high ranking members of his cabinet to the epitome of a failed state was a dramatic risk.

It remains to be seen what the domestic implications will be back in Turkey if Turkish citizens become caught in the crossfire should Al-Shabab renew its push to conquer Mogadishu or if the interim government there collapses due to infighting between its members. Regardless, Turkey has taken a big step in the right direction in its assertion that its foreign policy should be shaped by moral authority rather than military and economic clout. Moreover, the main opposition party leader's decision to pay a visit to Mogadishu during the Eid-ul Fitr Muslim festival shows the wide approval Erdogan's policy received at home.

The newly installed Turkish ambassador to Somalia, living at the recently reopened Turkish embassy, will oversee the construction of the road connecting the city to its airport, a hospital restoration, the building of schools and drilling of new wells. As the prime minister put it, "the tragedy going on here is a test for civilization and contemporary values". For his part, Erdogan has taken a big first step at passing that test.

Domestic Issues

Following last month's abrupt resignation of several leading members of the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK), the pendulum of power continues to creep towards civilian control over the military. While in the past such tension between the civilian government and the generals inexorably led to a fear amongst some Turks that another military coup was just around the corner, it appears that the decade of AKP work at containing the military has paid off.

The major news concerning government-military relations during August was largely symbolic. In late August, President Abdullah Gul announced that newly appointed Chief of General Staff, Necdet Ozel, had proposed that as president, Gul should receive greetings from the country's highest military and civilian authorities in recognition of the country's Victory Day celebrations. Typically, the congratulations have gone to the head of the military to commemorate the final battle of the Turkish War of Independence in 1922, but the change will be tradition from now on.

This follows on the heels of the prime minister's largely symbolic cessation of his boycott of the Gulhane Military Academy of Medicine that ended four years of acrimony following his attendance at a graduation ceremony there. Erdogan originally began the boycott after its hospital barred his wife from visiting a friend at the Academy, due to the fact that she was wearing a headscarf – a violation of the ban on headscarves worn by women in universities and government run facilities.

Freedom Of The Press

In other domestic political developments, Turkey's justice ministry released a report saying that 59 out of 63 journalists currently imprisoned in the country are facing prosecution or detention on charges unrelated to their work as members of the press. The ministry's release came as a result of what it claimed were inaccurate reports of

the number of journalists currently in jail that were sourced from a list provided by the Turkish Journalists Union. According to the justice ministry, only four reporters are currently charged with 'making propaganda for a terror organization' which can be attributed to their journalism work. However, the large number being held in connection with the Ergenekon and Sledgehammer coup cases continue to be held under vague and opaque charges that in many cases have yet to be publicly clarified.

The timing of the ministry's rebuttal follows on the heels of remarks by US Secretary of State, Hilary Clinton, to CNN Turk in which she criticized the country's recent issues surrounding the freedom of the press. "People say or do things in my country that personally I find offensive...but we know that, over time that basically gets overwhelmed by other opinion."

Criticism from outside and inside the country has resulted in the government's postponement of its planned roll-out of Internet filters which was due to take effect in August. The program would have seen the government make consumers choose from a list of available filters that would block certain websites with adult content, although the exact specifications of what that would consist of was never addressed. Furthermore, many Turkish citizens criticized the plan as another way of the conservative AKP government to consolidate control over the Internet and free speech.

Match fixing allegations

On the sporting scene, the country continues to be roiled by match fixing allegations while coaches, executives and players remain locked up on charges of damaging the integrity of the game. Amidst pressure from UEFA for the club's role in the match fixing scandal, Turkish football club Fenerbahce was replaced by Trabzonspor for its place in the UEFA Champions League by the Turkish Football Federation (TFF).

In the midst of the investigation, the TFF has implemented a new playoff system for the Turkish Super League in an attempt to boost parity between the country's clubs and show the public that the results are based on fair play and not back room deals.

Turkey in the Middle East

Although, Ankara has yet to come out and call for the resignation of Syrian President, Bashar al-Assad, two of Turkey's leading politicians have levelled their harshest criticism yet at the Syrian leader. Following continued violence by Syrian security and military forces against protestors in the country, President Gul stated on August 28 that: "In today's world, there is no place for single-party governments, [for] authoritarian administrations. The leaders of these countries will take the initiative or they will be changed by force."

Referring to Syria's Assad regime, Gul elaborated saying "Clearly we have reached a point [in Syria] where anything would be too little, too late. We have lost our confidence."

The Turkish prime minister, equally terse with his condemnation of the excessive violence against Syrian civilians, remarked that, "No regime that uses heavy weapons and brutal force to kill unarmed people who take to the streets

can stand. The only way is to end military operations and heed people's demands. We are sadly observing the fates of those who have not chosen this way in the last few months in Tunisia, Egypt and currently in Libya."

However, Turkey has tempered calls that it to demand Assad's resignation out of fear of a country on its southern flank that has no future leadership readily visible. The only thing worse than the continued massacre of Syrian civilians in the minds of the Turkish leadership, is the country's implosion and descent into chaos as seen in Iraq following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. With Kurdish violence flaring up again and large-scale cross border TSK operations taking place on the ground and in the air over Iraq, closure of Syria's border with Turkey has helped to seal off PKK safe havens in northern Syria. This issue remains paramount on the minds of decision makers in Ankara. Despite a credible organized opposition movement presently existing in Syria, Turkey seems to be hedging its bets in case events there take a different turn. Syrian opposition groups have been meeting in Turkey during the summer, the latest meeting taking place in August in Istanbul where talk was of forming a "national council" along the lines of what is now the widely recognized government in Libya.

Although the Gaddafi regime in Libya appears to have fallen, Turkey's leaders are still waiting to see if the country emerges as a relatively stable political framework suitable for investment opportunities or whether it turns into another Iraq-style quagmire. Turkey was invited to participate in the "friends of Libya" meeting in Paris at the end of August, following the collapse of Gaddafi forces and the fall of Tripoli. Although Ankara was slow to support the rebel Libyan National Transitional Council, Turkey's emergence as a vocal critic of Gaddafi appears to have paid dividends upon his demise. Turkey's acceptance of the new balance of forces in Libya was reflected by Foreign Minister Davutoglu's visit to Benghazi during the capture of Tripoli. Turkey further signed off on an aid package of nearly \$300 million bound for the Libyan rebels, while funds originally frozen on account of the previous regime are being unlocked. The original motivation that caused the Turkish delay in giving full backing to the revolution earlier this year – concern over the millions it had invested in Libya – still rings true as the country attempts to secure compensation and extensions in those ventures.

But make no mistake, Turkey's policies towards both Libya and Syria remain extremely pragmatic, less "neo-Ottoman" and more "wait and see" in nature.

Energy and Pipeline Geopolitics

With Brussels having largely cleared out during the summer holiday months and progress hard to come by until EU officials return to the offices, Nabucco has remained on the backburner amidst the furor of the EU financial crisis. However, on August 29, EU Energy Commissioner, Günter Oettinger, expressed his continuing support for the Nabucco pipeline during Handelsblatt's Renewable Energy conference in Germany. Oettinger added that the feasibility of the project has improved after the nuclear disaster in Japan and the German decision to withdraw from nuclear energy by 2022. The energy commissioner further explained that he expects German RWE will stay a partner in Nabucco, despite plans for a joint venture in power production in Europe with Gazprom.

Azerbaijan's recent decision to invest in the construction of a natural gas storage terminal in the Black Sea has some experts questioning whether the venture on Georgian soil is a conflict of interest due to the Azeri state oil company's role in the AGRI consortium (one of the four projects which compose the Southern Energy Corridor). The other projects which include Nabucco, ITGI, and TAP are said to be threatened by the expansion of LNG projects which would have to compete for gas supplies from the Azeri Shah Deniz reserve.

Meanwhile, according to Turkish Ambassador Hulusi Kilic, Azerbaijan and Turkey continue to negotiate a gas transit package which would see Azerbaijani energy supplies move from Shah Deniz to European markets. According to the ambassador, negotiations are planned to be completed in September. The discussions follow the high profile visit of Erdogan to Baku on July 27 who, despite the chance to denounce the leadership in Armenia for what the prime minister took as Yerevan's claims on Turkish territory, accomplished little in the way of progress on the energy negotiations.

Turkey remains at the forefront of nuclear energy expansion in relation to its own domestic energy strategy. Its nuclear power plant projects with Russia continue to progress in addition to the fact that the country has been in talks with Japan about collaboration on further nuclear energy projects. Although a key corridor for energy supplies, Turkey itself is increasingly reliant on oil and natural gas imports for its own economic growth, which according to energy expert Necdet Pamir has grown five percent in the AKP's time in office. But unlike its European counterparts who remain largely at the mercy of markets and suppliers like Russia, Turkey's strong position as a transit nation gives it greater flexibility in negotiations than most energy importers.

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