

Insights into Turkish Domestic and International Politics during November 2011

Key Points:

- *A second quake hits the Van area, killing 40 and leaving more citizens living out of tents as winter sets in. Meanwhile, unrest in Kurdish areas continues to remain in the headlines as more BDP deputies and supporters are arrested on terrorism related charges.*
- *Ankara cranks up the heat on Syria, setting unilateral sanctions on the country. This follows Turkish support for an Arab League vote suspending Syrian membership which led to pro-Assad crowds attacking the Turkish embassy in Damascus. The president, prime minister, foreign minister and energy minister continue to criticize the Assad regime as tensions increase and Syrian opposition figures meet in Turkey.*
- *The head of BOTAS hints that NABUCCO could not only be beneficial to Europe but also Turkey in light of its future energy needs, while a former-EU high level energy official tries to underline the Brussels-endorsed energy pipeline's viability for Turkey.*

The Van Earthquake

Following the earthquake on October 23, 2011, a second powerful tremor struck eastern Turkey on November 9, killing 40 people including a Japanese rescue worker and two Turkish journalists who were covering the aftermath of the October quake.

The strong quake came on top of a severe cold snap that left much of the province of Van covered in snow, as refugees in the stricken city of Ecris continued to live out of tents.

Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan visited the area, telling those affected that the government would begin building homes to replace those destroyed or too damaged to be habitable, by August 2012.

Additionally, the government announced that it would accept donations of tents or pre-fabricated shelters from all nations who offered aid in response to the October 23 quake.

In a scathing article in Hurriyet Daily News on November 14, unnamed sources from the Turkish Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD) severely criticized the agency's response to the earthquakes. One source said rescue workers were forced to arrange their own transportation to Van from their home base in Anatolia immediately after the quake, which took nearly 30 hours of driving. The article also criticized the makeup of the agency, saying that AFAD directors were not trained in disaster response but were rather bureaucrats who were overwhelmed by the sheer scale of the disaster.

Continued unrest in Kurdish areas

For his part, Erdogan has been out in front on the issue, unafraid to take on critics of the government response, which he readily admitted was slow at first. Some AKP critics have taken potshots at the government, saying the tardy response to the disaster

was due in large part to recent Kurdish unrest in the country. This criticism seems unsubstantiated, as the more likely reasons for the lack of preparation were bureaucratic incompetence and the very large number of those affected. However, persisting Kurdish unrest has not helped the situation.

Arrests of leading Kurdish activists and politicians continued throughout the month, with more high profile figures being rounded up. On November 8, BDP member and Diyarbakir mayor Osman Baedemir was charged with spreading terrorist propaganda and committing a crime on behalf of a terrorist organization. The charges stem from his presence at the funeral of seven PKK fighters killed in April. Baedemir is also alleged to have attended a rally on the tenth anniversary of the capture of PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan by which, the prosecutors say, the mayor "showed solidarity with Ocalan and spread propaganda for the PKK."

To protest the arrest of Baedemir and others, BDP deputies Selahattin Demirtas and Sebahat Tuncel submitted complaints against themselves to an Istanbul court on November 16 saying they have had similar affiliations with the Kurdish Communities Union (KCU) – whose armed wing is the outlawed PKK.

Erdogan fired back at the move by Demirtas and Tuncel, specifically referring to Tuncel's presence at the funeral of a Kurdish hijacker who took control of an Istanbul ferry in November. "The female BDP deputies' hearts have turned to stones, as they are trying to take advantage of the grief of mothers. They keep quiet when five female terrorists are killed by the PKK in caves. However they become loud and violent when a terrorist tries to detonate a bomb after hijacking a ferry."

It is difficult to qualify the situation in Turkey with regard to the Kurdish issue and the government's latest crackdown on politicians and activists affiliated to the BDP and the KCU. At first glance, the dubious charges that have been used to justify the detention

of Kurds are not what one would call prudent by Western notions of habeas corpus. Attending funerals, openly speaking in support of groups like the PKK or simply holding a sign at a political rally seem unlikely to warrant detention. However, many of those critical of rule of law standards in Turkey should realize the difficulty in gauging where the battlefield begins when dealing with armed terrorism. This is not an excuse offered in defense of the government's recent actions against BDP supporters, but rather an admission that such calls sometimes depend on where one stands. The breadth of punishable offenses appears to be extraordinarily arbitrary and Orwellian in nature. It is a slippery slope the government is negotiating with continued prosecutions, one which should be guarded against in case of further curbs on fundamental rights guaranteed in any democracy.

Turkey and Syria: towards a full divorce ?

At the time of writing, Turkish Foreign Minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, had just concluded a press conference announcing Turkey's unilateral sanctions on the Assad regime in Syria. After months of patience, Ankara announced four concrete actions aimed at further punishing Damascus for its continuing crackdown on the protests in the country. Davutoglu announced that Turkey would:

- Immediately halt all arms and military shipments between the two countries
- Implement a travel ban and asset freeze on Syrian citizens believed to be involved in the government-sponsored violence against protestors
- Freeze the business assets of Syrian citizens believed to be supporting Assad
- Suspend all new work with the Syrian Trade Bank, although it would continue to honour existing agreements

The unprecedented actions taken by Turkey are a watershed moment in relations between the two countries which just months ago were so close that Erdogan and Bashar al Assad vacationed together, accompanied with their wives.

On November 8, President Abdullah Gul gave an explicit warning to Syria to avoid aiding the PKK or allowing the terrorist organization to use Syrian territory to stage attacks on Turkish Security Forces (TSK). In remarks to the Financial Times, Gul said, "I would strongly suggest and would expect (Damascus) would not get involved in such a dangerous game."

Energy Minister Taner Yildiz chipped in as well, saying that if the violence on behalf of the government continued unabated, Turkey would consider cutting off electricity supplies to Syria. The statement gained increased significance when Turkey's largest oil company, TPAO, withdrew from a planned joint venture with a Syrian enterprise to explore that country's oil resources.

The nations moved further apart following an attack by Syrian crowds on the Turkish embassy in Damascus and two consulates in smaller towns in the country. In response, Ankara lodged a diplomatic protest with Damascus for the November 12 attack. Although the Syrian government apologized, the attacks were seen as retaliation by the Assad regime for Turkish support of the suspension of Syria from the Arab League. The day after the protest was lodged, the opposition group, the Syrian National Council, requested permission to open a representative office in Turkey. Foreign minister Davutoglu apparently met with some of its members but remained non-committal on the office request.

Erdogan addressed AKP deputies the Tuesday following the embassy assault and addressed the Syrian leader by name saying, "Bashar, you who have thousands of people in jail must find those who attacked the Turkish flag and punish them."

He severely criticized the crackdown by Syrian security forces, saying "Those who fire on their own people will go down in history as leaders who feed on blood." Erdogan added: "We no longer expect the Assad government to show honest, persuasive and determined leadership. No one expects him to respond to the demands of the international community anymore."

The prime minister also criticized the international community, saying, "The world may not be following Syria with sufficient care and sensitivity because it is not a wealthy country in terms of energy resources. Syria may not be drawing attention as much as Libya because it does not have sufficient oil resources."

While his criticism may have been off the mark as the global community has been largely united in calling for an end to the violence in Syria, the Turkish position on Syria and the ruling regime has hardened by the week. This has also generated an interesting debate in Turkey, with some critics of Ankara's position seeing the increasingly heated rhetoric as being an unintentional admission of failure of the "Zero problems with neighbors" foreign policy so well crafted by the AKP. Still others think that any support for the Syrian opposition, and the affiliated groups of armed protestors and army deserters, is a violation of the country's long standing tradition of not harboring neighbor's resistance movements. The typically pro-Western CHP seized this opportunity to criticize Erdogan by insinuating that the government's condemnation of Syria's actions is tantamount to allowing the country to be used by the West to tilt the balance of power in the region.

More likely, the truth is that genuine democracies may find it difficult to ignore state perpetrated violence so close to their borders. Erdogan is often accused of being power hungry and increasingly authoritarian. These charges, however, pale when he is compared to the Syrian ruler. Ankara's increasingly harsh criticism of the Baathist regime is part and parcel of a concerted effort to be in the forefront of

the universal condemnation of the widespread violence in Syria, having learned the lesson from having been slow in asking Muammar Gaddafi to give up power in Libya earlier this year.

Pipeline geopolitics

The general manager of Turkey's state-owned gas pipelines operator, BOTAS, Fazil Şenel, recently stated that while no firm investment decisions have been made regarding Turkey's participation in NABUCCO, the project is seen as feasible and attractive. He added that NABUCCO may yet be one of the few gas pipeline projects that may yet meet European energy demands. Noting that NABUCCO's route and capacity may change, he said the projected volume of gas which will transit through Turkey will reach around 120 billion cubic meters (bcm) within a decade. He added that Turkey's gas consumption will reach 60bcm in five years, hinting at the country's own possible need for the project to move forward.

However, it is reported that the trans-Anatolian Pipeline project, recently proposed by Azeri oil and gas champion, SOCAR, could surpass NABUCCO, since this pipeline may be easier to connect with present south-east European pipelines and the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP). Turkey's representative to TAP, Cenk Pala, noted that the EU-endorsed NABUCCO pipeline has already lost its significance due to lack of European leadership and lack of resources to secure needed supplies. On the other hand, Heinz Hilbrecht, a former senior official at DG Energy at the European Commission, pointed out that the EU continues to back NABUCCO in order to reduce energy dependence on Russia. "Through Gazprom, Russia puts pressure on Caspian countries not to build pipelines but to sell the gas to Russia. This should be perceived normal as natural gas remains a competitive fuel. Not only Azeri gas, but Turkmen and Iraqi gas will be needed in the

future. Everybody keeps complaining about the delay in NABUCCO, but not about the delay in Russia's South Stream (gas pipeline) project. The Southern Gas Corridor concept is strategically important for both Turkey and the EU and is a win-win for all parties."

Hilbrecht may have a point. Despite the recently successful opening of Nord Stream in Germany, which has shown Russia's efficiency in gas delivery to European markets, its South Stream project has been duly plagued by delays. Both the South Stream and

NABUCCO projects, largely in part to their incredible scale, experience delays on a regular basis. The distinct difference, however, is in perception. While Russia appears to have its decision-making process streamlined from Moscow, the execution of NABUCCO is perceived as being tardy and mired in indecision that is the Brussels way of deriving consensus. As constant market turbulence in the Eurozone graphically demonstrates, perception can be a very important matter.

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EGF Turkey File
Published by European Geopolitical Forum SPRL
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