



# THE EUROPEAN GEOPOLITICAL FORUM

## EGF Turkey File December 2010

### Key positions:

- In recent months Turkey has witnessed harsh prison sentences and threats of litigation by Turkish authorities in response to Kurdish protests and unfavourable press respectively in the past months. This is a worrying sign in that after nearly a decade in power, AKP authorities have become just as reactionary as the military backed governments of previous decades, only this time with an Islamic tinge.
- At the NATO Lisbon Summit on November 19-20, Ankara claimed victory for swaying its allies away from designating Iran as the main threat facing the alliance with regards to a proposed missile defence system which NATO is currently considering. While Turkish government officials indicated prior to the conference that they would demand command and control of the system if based on their territory, in Lisbon, that decision was put off for future discussion.
- Wikileaks' release of American diplomatic cables have detailed the gossip and personalities of leading AKP politicians, but offered little else that could be described as damaging.
- In regional energy developments, Russia and its energy subsidiary, Gazprom, have been opting for pragmatism over threats in recent months by signing deals throughout the region with Bulgaria, Serbia, and Ukraine in order to strengthen prospects of realising the South Stream gas pipeline. Brussels and Sofia, for their part, have reached an agreement on bank guarantees for Nabucco (the EU's rival to South Stream).

### Free Speech in Turkey

Though few can argue that the atmosphere in Turkey is as restricted when compared with previous times in the Republic's history, the harsh prison sentences recently imposed on those who are critical of the government is a worrying factor heading into 2011. The resignation of journalist Oktay Eksi from Hurriyet Daily after he penned a column critical of Prime Minister Tayip Erdogan drew attention to the charged atmosphere regarding freedom of expression in Turkey. Erdogan vowed to "fight back" with threats of litigation. It is widely known in Turkey, however, that the paper's owner, The Dogan Group, is locked in a bitter tax dispute with the government that could potentially see the company lose billions.

Furthermore, according to the International Press Institute, there are over 50 press workers currently in prison in Turkey on various charges of anti-government activity. In one particular example, journalist Ismail Saymaz is facing 95 years in prison on 12 different offences that range from violation of state secrecy to influencing judicial processes. He has also been charged with insulting a prosecutor when referring to the official as 'post modern' in an illustration in the book *Postmodern Cihat (Jihad)*. The keynote speaker at this year's Istanbul based European Parliament of Writers event was forced to



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withdraw after conservative media and press called for a boycott of the event. Citing V.S. Naipaul's criticism of Islam in his writings, the boycott gained momentum and the Nobel Prize winner withdrew from his speaking engagement.

The crackdown on Kurdish protestors in the country's southeast is equally noticeable. The Turkish judiciary has handed out severe sentences to those attending protests if deemed to be organised or promoted by the PKK. In one example, a Kurdish woman was given a six year prison sentence for holding a sign stating "The approach to peace lies through Ocalan", while a Kurdish university student is currently serving a seven year prison term when he was seen flashing a 'Victory' sign with his hands at the funeral procession of a slain PKK fighter, and was later seen clapping at a protest taking place at his college.

This is a notable trend in Turkey which will only exacerbate fears of an increasingly heavy handed government by many who have applauded the AKP's aversion to such tactics employed by the 'Deep State'.

## **NATO Lisbon Summit**

Turkish leaders exerted the increasing power the country holds in terms of the NATO view of the Middle East when Ankara successfully lobbied against having the alliance designate Iran as the reason behind the planned European missile shield. In Turkey it was seen as yet another example of the impressive clout that the nation has developed under AKP leadership in the realm of foreign policy. In the West, however, the development was interpreted more as a compromise of interests that kept Ankara's feet firmly in the alliance, with its focus on European security, while also being a pragmatic envoy to Tehran.

The one notable exception to such praise was French President Nicolas Sarkozy who quipped "We call a cat as a cat. The threat here is Iran". Prime Minister Erdogan did not share the view of the French leader and responded that in Turkey "We also call a cat as a cat. However, even if there is no target, he states what he has in his memory. We never thought in that way and we still don't."

## **Wikileaks Impact Low on Substance, High on gossip**

The release of thousands of diplomatic cables from the US State Department appears to have had little impact on Turkey's domestic politics or on the country's relations with the US. While the cables did reveal inside information from some named and unnamed sources regarding the past eight years under the AKP, no smoking gun has emerged to upset the political balance within the ruling party. The disclosed information is said to have provided accurate information relating to prominent Turkish government figures. Although the cables have provided interesting reading for those following the day to day political situation in Turkey, very little new substantive information has surfaced from the disclosures thus far.