

Insights into Turkish Domestic and International Politics

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Key Points:

- *Prime Minister Erdogan claims Iran is attempting to divide and conquer the Middle East, but tempers his criticisms following a visit to Tehran.*
- *Turkish journalist Emre Kizilkaya notes the aftereffects of the Gezi Park protests and their resulting impact on the opposition's electoral processes.*
- *A Cold War relic reappears in a terrorist attack by a far left group, though the lack of support for the group's actions indicate maturing Turkish political attitudes.*
- *The geostrategic implications of the Turkish Stream Pipeline expand as two EU-member states sign on and Turkish energy importers seek to lower rising Russian gas prices.*

Erdogan visits Iran

In recent months, a growing focus of Middle East observers is the ongoing proxy battles between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Whether in Syria, Lebanon or Yemen, the region is becoming caught up in the standoff between two powerful theocratic regimes and regional heavyweights. Yet Turkey, a regional heavyweight in its own right, also has a role to play in the region's future.

Turkey and Iran have been at odds in recent years over Tehran's unequivocal support for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. As late as March, the Turkish president accused Iran of trying to dominate the region, citing its support for Shiite Houthi fighters in Yemen and Alawite forces under al-Assad in Syria as examples of Tehran's exacerbation of sectarian tensions in the region. Notably, the president did not mention Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf monarchies' similar roles in support of largely Sunni militias, some of them extremists.

Ever the astute politician, Erdogan made a concerted effort to downplay this dispute on his early April visit to Tehran. He met with his Iranian counterpart Hassan Rouhani and Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, insisting that the two countries work on fostering economic ties.

Days after his return to Turkey, Erdogan reiterated his view that Turkey would try to avoid the sectarian strife that has pulled the region asunder:

Sectarianism is tearing the Islamic world apart today...We see this in Iraq, Syria and Yemen, where Muslims are mercilessly killing Muslims...We do not have a religion called Sunni. We do not have a religion called Shiite. We have a religion called Islam. This is how it must be known. (Idiz, "Erdogan rethinks sectarian politics," www.al-monitor.com, 14 April 2015.)

With little hope of Tehran and Riyadh easing relations, the time is right for Erdogan's cautious path forward with Iran. With a tentative agreement reached in Iran's nuclear deal with the U.S., Europe, China and Russia, increased access to Iran's energy supplies will

benefit Turkish politicians keen on keeping the energy hungry economy humming along. Turkey is also keen to avoid continuing to pay for oil with gold supplies to its second largest supplier. (PEKER, "Turkish President Seeks Closer Economic Ties on State Visit to Iran," *The Wall Street Journal*, 7 April 2015.)

In a less cynical view, Iranian-Turkish cooperation in pushing combatants to the negotiating table in Syria might be a viable way forward, if not now, sometime in the future. Much of this will depend on President Erdogan holding off on public outbursts slamming the Islamic Republic like he did in March. If he is able to accomplish this, it might mean the slow resurrection of the 'Zero Problems' foreign policy that served the country so well in the years before the Arab Spring.

Electoral impacts of Gezi

Turkish journalist Emre Kizilkaya provided his take on the after effects of the Gezi Park protests that roiled Turkey in the summer of the 2013. Specifically, Kizilkaya argues that the long-term impact on Turkey's electoral and political climate would ultimately improve the country's democracy.

Kizilkaya notes that many of the participants of the protests, like those in other student and youth movements before them, have begun to organize and impact the country's opposition electoral processes.

Wrote Kizilkaya:

What I mean by saying 'long-term effects' of the Gezi protests, I mean the creation of more inclusive, transparent, participatory, grassroots-based, bottom-up, non-hierarchical, egalitarian political parties with more women and more young people as their leaders.

The two parties most benefitting from the influx and experience of what Kizilkaya describes as the "Gezi Park spirit" have been the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) and the Kurdish People's Democracy Party (HDP). Unlike the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and opposition Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), the CHP and HDP's diverse constituencies allow for more inclusion and changes

necessary to push back on more than a decade of AKP electoral successes.

The CHP, whose leader is a member of the minority Alevi sect, selected Selina Ozuzun Dogan through its primary system as a final candidate for the June 7, 2015 parliamentary elections. Dogan, who is of Armenian descent, was selected after party leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu met with minority groups who requested a representative familiar with their issues be put on the ballot.

The HDP is also making an effort to diversify its constituency away from just focusing on the Kurdish issue. It nominated German-born, Kurdish politician Feleknas Uca, a former member of the European Parliament, on its roles. Feleknas is Yazidi nominated in the HDP heartland of Diyarbakir, and is easily expected to win election.

HDP party leader and former presidential candidate Selahattin Demirtas said the group's aim was to diversify its voters and cross the 10 percent parliamentary threshold to officially take a seat in the country's highest legislative body. "Our target is 100 seats in the parliament and 15 percent of the votes," said Demirtas.

For some time, this author has insisted that the opposition parties would have to reinvent their political goals in order to cut into the AKP electoral juggernaut. In this regard, the MHP-CHP alliance had a failed top-down approach in nominating Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu as a joint presidential candidate. Just as the AKP did back when its members were in the political wilderness, a grass roots push from below, over the long-term, is the best way to capture political gains against a powerful incumbent. The opposition may fall short of its goals in June, but as Kizilkaya points out, that may an outlier in future elections to come.

Terrorism in many forms

For all the concerns about terrorism in Turkey, from fears of renewed violence with the PKK to Islamic extremists infiltrating the porous borders with Iraq and Syria, an older form of terrorism reared its ugly head in Istanbul in late March.

Two members of the Revolutionary People's Liberation Party-Front (DHKP/C) took Istanbul prosecutor Mehmet Selim Kiraz hostage in the city's courthouse. After hours of negotiations, Turkish security forces stormed the offices where the hostage takers were holed up. Both terrorists and their one hostage died.

The group's origins stem from the Cold War. Marxist in orthodoxy, it is opposed to Turkey's partnership with the United States and its membership in NATO. It is suspected to be responsible for the 2013 suicide bombing of the U.S. embassy. (Arango, "Raid to Rescue Hostage in Istanbul Ends in Death," *The New York Times*, 31 March 2015.)

The hostage takers claimed they took their action on behalf of the case of Berkin Elvan, the youth protester killed during the 2013 Gezi Park demonstrations by a police tear gas canister.

Though spectacular in its wide media coverage, the incident likely did little to gain the DHKP/C support. Like their Marxist ideology, public exhibitions of terrorist attacks are not in vogue in a Turkey that, for all its tensions and polarizations, is a country of laws. The appeal of such groups depended on the time of heightened Cold War tensions. Today, Turkey is nowhere near the levels of political violence experienced during the 1970s when right and leftwing terrorist groups waged a proxy wars against one another.

The loss of Mehmet Kiraz' life is a tragedy, but the lack of mass appeal for groups like the DHKP/C indicates that attitudes in Turkey are maturing to the extent necessary to move beyond its violent past.

Turkish Stream

The global glut in oil and gas resulted in falling prices across the globe. Despite the Russian price cut on gas sales to Turkish state-owned enterprises in December, private importers of Russian gas continue to pay higher prices on their gas imports. (Manzeva and Ersoy, "Gazprom Pressured to Cut Prices as Putin Eyes Turkish Link," www.Bloomberg.com, 15 April 2015.) Turkey's publicly-owned company received a price cut

following Russia and Turkey's agreement to build the Turkish Stream Pipeline in December 2014. However, due to contracts negotiated prior to the oil and gas price downturn, Turkey's purchase contracts are not linked to the global costs of oil or the spot market, meaning many Turkish importers pay a set rate regardless.

These companies, with the support of the Turkish government, are also seeking to use the Turkish Stream negotiations to ensure lower prices on their imports.

Progress continues on the project, that is set to replace the cancelled South Stream pipeline. For Turkey, the project is a positive if it remains feasible and on track for its 2020 completion date. Turkish Stream gives Turkish leaders increased geopolitical leverage with its largest gas supplier, Russia, and the wider Eurasian gas market.

Already support is growing in some European circles, as Italian-controlled Saipem looks set to win contracts for construction of the first section of the undersea portion of the pipeline. ("Italian group 'in pole position to win Turkish Stream contracts'," Reuters, 16 April 2015.) EU-member Greece has confirmed it would likely participate in the project, and Hungary is likely not far behind.

Adding European partners like Greece and Hungary, as well as Balkan nations like Serbia and Macedonia, would be a boost for the project and a political coup for the Kremlin. To adhere to EU rules Russia has disavowed all claims to ownership of the pipeline, yet Greece's ongoing need for capital as another Eurozone crisis lurches forward may give Russia an 'in' in terms of shaping the path forward. At the time of writing, Greece and Germany remain deadlocked over another bailout package, and the left-leaning Greek government has made several overtures to a Kremlin eager to divide European countries ahead of the planned EU Energy Union. Recent history suggests that Germany and Greece will come to an accord at the last minute to kick the Eurozone issue into the long grass, slightly lessening Russia's hand. Yet if the debt crisis drags on and Greece moves closer to Turkish Stream and Russian financing, other countries in the region may begin looking to Moscow, rather than Brussels, for leadership.

For now, however, it remains to be seen if Russia's ongoing capital crisis will impact the long-term outlook for funding of the gargantuan project. If finances become tight and the project looks to be in doubt, Turkey may look to influence its Western partners, notably Washington D.C., to relent on sanctions that have wrought havoc on the Russian economy since its seizure of Crimea.

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