

Key Points:

- *In the Ergenekon case, arrests by the government on vague charges reappear, this time targeting journalists and authors. Recently two journalists were detained based on secret evidence that security officials say cannot be revealed at this time.*
- *Ankara continues to practice 'Strategic Depth' foreign policy but has largely been left behind in the Western intervention in Libya. As Syria is rocked by protests and consequent crackdowns, Turkey is largely silent, preaching stability as the top priority for the region.*
- *Turkey rebuffs Russian demands on a South Stream guarantee while the EU's head of Energy, Günther Oettinger, warns Russia against intimidating Central Asian suppliers of Nabucco.*

Press Freedom in Turkey

In Turkey, the debate on freedom of speech appears alive and well as the Ergenekon case came into focus once again after police raided the offices of Radikal newspaper in search of copies of 'The Imam's Army', an unpublished book written by Ahmet Sik. Both Sik and Nedim Sener, known best for his novel based on the murder of Hrant Dink, have been imprisoned for more than a month on allegations that they are part of the vast Ergenekon coup conspiracy.

The arrests are the latest in a series of government actions that have seriously undermined the validity of the arguments of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) that the country is moving away from the reactive secular regimes that have controlled the republic in the past. Several journalists, along with dozens if not hundreds of Kurdish activists, are in jail for breaching laws that limit expressions of free speech. Three journalists from OdaTV were arrested during a police raid and accused of inciting a coup, while former police chief and author of a book critical of the Gulenists, Hanefi Avci, was recently held on similar charges. Many have been detained by the security services on undisclosed evidence, rendering their defence impossible while they remain in detention.

President Abdullah Gul recently spoke out on the book seizure by the police, saying that "I do not believe that is right. I am concerned that it will cast a shadow on Turkey's image". But Gul's assertion that Sik's arrest was part of some intentional publicity stunt on the part of the author and other journalists currently in Turkish prisons astounded some observers and is disingenuous at best.

The legitimacy of the Ergenekon investigation has been questioned by many outside Turkey who had until recently given the AKP-led government the benefit of the doubt in its claims that it was fighting a military coup. Certainly, Turkey's political history in the 20th century warranted such a view.

However, the arbitrary arrests of Kurdish activists engaged in peaceful protests and the prosecution of journalists on the orders of senior members of the government appear more and more to be the actions of an administration attempting to stifle criticism through "legal" means.

As Sik was led away by the police last month he was heard to scream “whoever touches them (Gulenists) burns”. Though the availability of literature critical of the AKP and its Gulenist allies seems to contradict this allegation, it does not seem to be far off the mark. President Gul’s claims that Turkey has fulfilled the EU’s Copenhagen criteria in the areas of freedom of speech and fundamental rights appear hollow as well. While the debate continues with each successive arrest, it may be stated that the true degree of freedom of speech in Turkey lies somewhere in between.

Turkey in the Middle East

As the leading Muslim democracy in the region, Turkey has not been in an easy position over the past two months as grassroots protests swept across many countries in North Africa and the Middle East. Ankara has been largely drowned out in recent weeks as it quickly changed course on the situation in Libya. Prime Minister Erdogan first stated that the West should keep out of the internal conflict of its Mediterranean neighbour, insinuating that the UN sanctions against the Gaddafi regime were mainly concerned with Libya’s oil reserves and not its people.

As reports of atrocities committed by the regime began to filter out of Libya, Erdogan slowly began to backtrack, asking Gaddafi to step down. However, at the same time, unnamed sources from the AKP were insinuating that the UN sanctions were part of an imperial plan to carve up Libya’s oil-rich region. Such proclamations resulted in Ankara being completely left out of the Paris conference in mid-March that decided on the no-fly zone to be implemented by Western powers in order to stop pro-Gaddafi forces from attacking the rebels.

In attempting to justify its change of course on intervention in Libya, Ankara maintained that Arab League’s endorsement of a no-fly zone over Libya provided the international legitimacy for the action that the UN ultimately took. Turkey’s position on the matter, while certainly influenced by Western nations’ sidelining of Ankara in the decision-making process, is hardly as black and white as its leadership would have people believe.

Over the course of the past two decades, Turkey has seen two Western interventions in its neighbouring country, Iraq, nearly gone to war with Greece and Syria, and witnessed the ethnic conflicts that wrecked the Balkans during the 1990s. Therefore, Turkey’s cautious position on any sort of military intervention in the immediate neighbourhood is both understandable and practical, especially given the important economic and diplomatic role it retains in the region. However, with elections approaching and Western popularity touching an all-time low on the Turkish street, it cannot be ruled out that the AKP attempted to play its anti-Western card to drum up support, even if its action was in defence of an Arab “strong-man” who vowed to kill all who reside in rebel-held areas.

Much nearer home, Syria has been rocked by street protests, leading Ankara to turn its attention towards its southern neighbour. Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu called Syria the most vital country in the Middle East because of its geopolitical situation and said that reforms must press forward while also maintaining stability. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s speech to his country’s parliament merely paid lip service to reforming the system, since any substantive reforms such as the expected lifting of the country’s long-term state of emergency failed to materialize. The lack of action in Damascus is expected to lead to further protests in that country, but the reaction of the Turkish leaders has remained notably muted.

While the current wave of unrest sweeping across the Middle East is not something that can easily be managed, Turkey seems intent on maintaining its current foreign policy of ‘Strategic Depth’ by staying neutral and awaiting the outcome in each individual nation. While the policy may be adequate for navigating through the tumultuous period safely, it is also an indication that despite all of Ankara’s claims to the contrary, Turkey still remains just another player in the region rather than the region’s leader.

Pipeline News

Prime Minister Erdogan's recent visit to Moscow resulted in tense negotiations on South Stream as Russian Deputy Prime Minister Igor Sechin was unable to get an agreement with Turkey on the routing of the pipeline through Turkish Black Sea waters. Sources report that the closed door discussions hit a roadblock after the Turkish delegation refused to agree with Russian leaders on the pipeline's proposed route through the shared body of water.

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin quashed such suggestions, saying that, "We don't think that there is any threat to the project from our Turkish partners". The Kremlin announced that it would supply further documentation on the ecological impact of the pipeline on Turkish waters in the coming months in order to reach an agreement.

As Turkey is a partner in South Stream's EU competitor pipeline project, Nabucco, the public rejection of the agreement was significant in the relationship between Moscow and Ankara. While many in the West lament that Turkey is turning away from the West towards its northern and eastern neighbours, it appears that Ankara is signalling that it is still subservient to no one, but rather looks out for its own self interest.

Speaking at the Austrian embassy in Berlin recently, EU Energy Commissioner Günther Oettinger called on Russia not to pressure Central Asian countries by blocking the Nabucco pipeline, saying that Europe "does not want to block South Stream, a Gazprom project" and that it expects Russia not to pressure Nabucco countries.

Oettinger went further, saying that "Nabucco isn't a direct competitor of South Stream," and that "Nabucco is new gas, South Stream is existing gas via a new route". Brussels continues express concern over the competing pipeline projects, as the construction date for South Stream nears and Nabucco still remains in the planning stages. In the meantime, Germany's Wintershall – an oil and gas production unit of German chemicals giant BASF SE – said it intends to acquire a 15 per cent stake in South Stream, a move that the partners in the Russian-backed pipeline project hope will increase its chances of gaining EU backing.

With economic troubles enveloping some of its members and the EU's prominent members being split over the intervention in Libya, it is difficult to see how those in Brussels' ivory towers can garner the political capital to move Nabucco ahead at the pace required to keep up with South Stream.

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