

Insights into Turkish Domestic and International Politics during September 2011

Key developments:

- *Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan's September is filled with tumultuous foreign policy issues, coalescing disputes with Israel, Cyprus and the world's stance towards Somalia in his statement to the UN General Assembly.*
- *The prime minister visited Libya, Egypt and Tunisia in a quick tour of countries touched by the Arab Spring while continuing his condemnation of Syrian repression of civilians and rebuffing Iranian and Russian anger at Ankara's participation in NATO's missile shield.*
- *Kurdish-related violence seizes the country through terrorist attacks and military operations between PKK fighters and the Turkish military. BDP Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party parliamentary deputies end their boycott of the parliament in order to end the hostilities.*
- *The European Commission instigates raids on Gazprom subsidiaries on suspected competition violations, with many calling it a political move to garner support for Nabucco and undermine South Stream and Nord Stream.*
- *Energy major BP announces a planned pipeline from the Shah Deniz II field in Azerbaijan traversing Turkey, Romania, Bulgaria and Hungary.*

Foreign Affairs

September proved to be one of the more exhausting months for Turkey watchers, with the country's various domestic and international obligations all seeming to come to a head in the span of thirty odd days. Most notable, a qualification that is certainly debatable considering the month's comings and goings was Prime Minister Erdogan's address to the UN General Assembly in mid-September.

The speech, while not entirely groundbreaking, was a culmination of the past weeks' campaign by Erdogan in the foreign policy sector, decrying the world's lack of support for aid in Somalia, personally attacking Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, for the continued impasse on the Palestinian statehood issue, and warning of Cyprus' intention to explore for energy reserves off its coasts.

Erdogan, as bombastic as in any AKP rally, blasted the UN's stance on Somalia, calling the organization's policy towards the country "a disgrace", while touting Turkey's recently reopened embassy in Mogadishu that is heading Ankara's relief efforts there.

Commenting on the hottest topic at this year's general assembly, Erdogan further weighed in against Israel's Netanyahu-led government for the current state of affairs between Turkey, Israel and the Palestinians. He again demanded that the Israelis apologize for last year's Mavi Marmara incident as well as calling for an end of the cordon sanitaire on Gaza. He went on saying "If we as the international community believe in the ideal of establishing international peace and security as the founding principle of the United Nations, it is necessary to put pressure on Israel to achieve peace despite what those who govern this country do, and show them they are not above the law."

Relations between Jerusalem and Ankara continued to deteriorate following the early leak to The New York Times on Thursday September 1, of the UN's Palmer Report on the incident a day prior to its official release. Although the report, drawn up by former New Zealand Prime Minister, Geoffrey Palmer, and former Columbian President, Alvaro Uribe, found the blockade to be legal by international standards, it was pointed in its criticism towards the Israeli handling of the situation. It called for Israel to compensate the

families of the nine Turkish activists killed during the boarding by commandoes.

However, Turkish leaders, incensed at the early leak and conclusions of the document which failed to support Turkey's theses on the Gaza blockage and Turkey's demand for an official apology, stated they would not recognize its findings and would suspend all ties with Israel until the prime minister's demands had been met. Turkish Foreign Minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, stated that "All military agreements have been suspended", while "Turkey will take legal actions against Israeli soldiers and all other officials responsible for the crimes committed and pursue the matter resolutely." On the day of the report's release on September 2, the Israeli ambassador and all diplomats above the rank of second secretary were expelled from Turkey. Erdogan said that normal relations, both military and diplomatic, would resume once Israel met his demands of ending the blockade, compensating the victims' families, and officially apologizing for the killings. He also reiterated his earlier claim that Turkish warships would now escort all further convoys in the eastern Mediterranean. Calmer heads in Ankara and Jerusalem have since chosen to avoid any hostile exchanges between the two countries' navies in the area, however.

Regarding news that Cyprus would go ahead with its own offshore energy explorations, the prime minister called Cypriot leaders "extremely irresponsible" (given that Ankara feels that such acts would hinder efforts aiming at the resolution of the Cyprus issue) and said that Turkey will do what is necessary to address the situation. Following the statement, Turkish naval vessels accompanied the Piri Reis exploratory vessel in its survey of the area near where Cyprus has been drilling. The Piri Reis' journey follows an accord reached by the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus with Ankara regarding the delineation of possible drilling areas. However, Turkish officials were direct in stating that the vessel's course would remain away from the exact Cypriot drilling site off the coast of the disputed island, indicating caution on Ankara's part out of fear of escalating the situation too far. The reaction by Erdogan comes despite EU and US calls for dialogue between Ankara and Nicosia to prevent an escalation in tensions, with US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton telling her counterpart, Ahmet Davutoglu, that Washington supports the Cypriots'

rights to explore for energy reserves in their own coastal waters.

All these topics were overshadowed by the mild controversy surrounding the prime minister, in effect topping himself, when his personal guards became embroiled in a fight with UN security guards in the middle of Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas' September 23 address to the General Assembly. According to most reports, Erdogan and his entourage tried to enter the hall through the wrong door, leading to UN guards blocking their way which kicked off a scuffle that was the talk of the UN for the following days. Although it remains unclear exactly what started the melee, (both groups involved have remained tight lipped), UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon apparently apologized to the prime minister for the incident that left one UN guard hospitalized with a broken rib.

Whether it's on stage at Davos, in a hallway at the UN building in New York City, or on the streets of Istanbul, the prime minister always seems to be the center of attention regardless of the setting. If that is his intention, it is hard to discern, but he is becoming one of the world's most talked about politicians regardless.

The Middle East

Erdogan's UN trip was the culmination of a whirlwind tour of the countries most affected by the "Arab Spring", stopping off in Libya, Egypt and Tunisia to much fanfare and a continuation of his fiery oratory directed at Israel, a tactic that always plays well on the Arab street.

In his remarks in Cairo, Erdogan drummed up support for Palestine's statehood bid at the UN, calling it "an obligation" of the entire global community. During his stopover in Tunisia he again harangued Israel, saying it "cannot do as it pleases in the Mediterranean," referring to the Mavi Marmara incident and the Gaza blockade. Explaining his government's severance of high level diplomatic and military cooperation with the Jewish state, Erdogan went further telling the crowd "relations with Israel cannot normalize if Israel does not apologize over the flotilla raid." Yet not all Arab parties are convinced by the charismatic Turkish prime minister. His frequent "panacea-like" references to the secular principles of Turkish

democracy do not always go down well amongst segments of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, for example.

His reception in Libya, while warm, was perhaps tempered by many of those who recall that just a few months prior Erdogan was hesitant to criticize the now deposed Muammar Gaddafi, before Western support helped the now recognized National Transitional Council establish itself as the new regime in Tripoli.

On Syria, the prime minister's statements continue to grow harsher by the week with regards to the continued crackdown by the military of Bashar al-Assad. Erdogan recently implied that he believed that Assad would likely face the same fate of those dictators in the countries he was visiting, stating that "This process might be extended a little more, but sooner or later in Syria if people take a different position, that decision is going to be catered to, just as in Egypt, as in Tunisia and as in Libya. People want to be free."

He was pointedly scathing of the Syrian government's justification of the violence by claiming militant Islamic terrorists were mainly responsible for the violence in the country. Erdogan asserted "You bomb the entire city of Latakia from the sea and call the people terrorists. How come an entire city is filled with terrorists?"

Despite his denunciations of the government and the violence taking place in Turkey's southern neighbor, Erdogan still has not called on Assad to step down. His harsh criticism of Israeli policies, bordering on jingoism at home and fanning anger in the Arab world have led some Western commentators to question why he doesn't direct such vivid antagonism to a regime that is blatantly setting its military loose on peaceful civilians.

Missile Defense

Turkey's move to allow NATO's missile shield system in the country's southeast is going ahead, much to the irritation of both Russia and Iran. This development should dispel the continued speculation that Turkey has turned away from its long time Western allies. The early warning radar systems are to be installed in the Malatya province and are intended to counter ballistic missile threats.

The system's placement in Turkey was agreed upon at the NATO conference in Lisbon in November of 2010, though the one caveat Ankara pushed for was that there would be no explicit mention of Iran regarding countries that the system is to defend against. Both Iran and Russia spoke out against the deal, with Russia's Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, saying the placement of a missile shield so close to its Black Sea borders impinged on Moscow's nuclear deterrent abilities. For his part, foreign minister Davutoglu brushed off the criticism, saying other countries had nothing to be concerned about as there was no explicit mention in the agreement regarding who the shield would defend against. Turkish opposition parties were critical of the agreement, however, arguing that Ankara was now turning back towards a position of embracing Jerusalem.

Opposition CHP Party head, Kemal Kilicdaroglu, stated that the shield accomplishes one thing: the protection of Israel. Apparently trying to outflank AKP leader Erdogan amongst his Islamist constituency, which is highly critical of current Israeli policies, Kilicdaroglu has circulated a petition via the CHP which called for "No to the Israeli shield."

Domestic Politics

After a month of deadly attacks throughout the country by a renewed PKK offensive against civilian and military targets, the Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) agreed to end its boycott of the swearing in ceremony for parliamentary deputies.

Over the past month, teachers have been kidnapped from schools in the country's southeast, bombs have maimed in Istanbul, and Turkish military installations have been attacked. In the most heinous of the incidents, a roadside checkpoint was attacked by PKK militants that left a pregnant mother and her young son killed in the crossfire.

The Turkish military (TSK) responded with the continuation of cross border raids into northern Iraq, so far in the form of airstrikes.

It seems that the violence was becoming an almost daily occurrence when the BDP announced the end of their boycott on September 28, with parliamentary deputy, Ertugrul Kurkcu, saying they had given up to stop the violence, having failed in their desired intent. "The boycott did not have the expected impact on the government. So it attracted the public attention; it

conveyed the message for the unjust attitude of the government and judiciary over our deputies, but staying outside of parliament began to bring more advantages to the government than to our cause."

Although it is a sad state of affairs that a month's worth of bloodshed is the catalyst for Kurdish and Turkish dialogue, it is a positive sign that the BDP will participate in the upcoming session of parliament – especially given that body's responsibility with drawing up a new constitution.

The lull in violence comes despite the release of a nearly hour long recording of a meeting between Turkish intelligence officers (MIT) and PKK representatives. Despite the overtures on behalf of the government, the AKP is still head of a strong centralized state that while in transition, cannot allow the autonomy demanded by the PKK at the current time. While some AKP critics have claimed that the government never truly engaged in earnest negotiations with the PKK representatives, that hardly seems the case at present. Despite the positive evolution of many aspects of Turkey's nationalist domestic political culture, the country's demographic and ethnic issues are not completely settled. Efforts at reconciliation by Ankara, especially with religious minorities like Christians and Jews have been a step in the right direction. But expecting the government to grant concessions in the face of terrorist attacks on civilians is likely a step too far even for the most ardent advocates of dialogue. .

In notable financial sector developments, the Turkish Lira continued to lag behind the dollar, the world's reserve currency gaining 3.3 percent against the Lira since the start of the year and having gained nearly 35 percent against it since the start of 2008. According to a statement by Martin Blum, head of emerging-markets strategy at UniCredit MIB, the Turkish economy will shrink this year, offsetting the positive impact of the shrinking current-account deficit on the currency.

Pipeline Geopolitics

On Tuesday September 27, EU authorities in coordination with law enforcement agencies at member state levels instigated raids on Gazprom subsidiary offices, Gazprom Germania (Germany) and Vemex (Czech Republic).

The raids stem from months of investigations at the behest of the European Commission's DG Competition to find out if there were violations in destination clauses, abuse of market position, and illegal division of markets.

It remains to be seen what this means for South Stream and Nord Stream, both Gazprom backed projects, but some in Brussels are quietly questioning the timing of the raids, just ahead of the latter project's official opening on November 8.

These attention grabbing developments follow BP's announcement that it has proposed constructing its own pipeline to the Shah Deniz consortium of Azerbaijan. The pipeline is envisaged to be 1,300 kilometers long, running from western Turkey to Hungary via Bulgaria and Romania, seemingly mirroring Nabucco's planned route. However, spokesmen for the project said that at peak usage the

line could only carry 10bcm of gas per year, in comparison with Nabucco's 31bcm.

Dubbed the "South-East Europe" pipeline by BP, it would be the fourth proposed pipeline in the area along with ITGI and TAP, signifying the significance of the overall region in future energy imports. For its part as a key transit country for both East and West, Turkey remains on the fence, apparently willing to go ahead with whichever project can be completed first and benefit its own increasing energy needs at the same time.

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