

Key Points:

- *Former Turkish Prime Minister, Necmettin Erbakan, passed away Sunday 27 February. He was 84. Erbakan, the first Islamist prime minister of the Turkish Republic, was forced to resign after only a year into his reign by the military, in what is called the first 'post-modern coup'.*
- *Under the guidance of current Prime Minister Erdogan, Turkey has stayed on the sidelines throughout much of the past weeks while protests raged throughout the Middle East. Ankara is finding its new position as a dominant regional actor as having less impact than previously thought, but has been forced to act pragmatically due to the proximity of its own citizens and financial interests in the affected nations.*
- *Prime Minister Erdogan recently spoke in Dusseldorf, Germany, telling Turks there that while they should learn the (German) language and participate in wider culture of their new homeland; assimilation would be an affront to their human rights. The prime minister also spoke positively about Turkey's accession to the EU, surprising some for the positive manner in which the AKP leader addressed the issue after years of European rejection.*
- *The Nabucco gas pipeline still appears to be up in the air as none of the participating companies have yet signed any construction agreements, while a Russian delegation has put pressure on the Brussels-EU whilst addressing its own energy security concerns.*

Necmettin Erbakan

Former Turkish Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan passed away on Sunday 27 February. Erbakan, who was 87, is best known as the first Islamist leader of the Turkish Republic, as well as being the main victim of the 1997 'post-modern coup'. None the less, up until his passing, he was reportedly working towards gaining new allies amongst smaller parties for his Felicity Party in preparation for the 12 June elections.

The former prime minister led a coalition government from 1996-97, but was forced to resign after the military pushed for his ouster. The military gave Erbakan little choice but to step down, citing anti-secular sentiments of some of his supporters at the 1997 Jerusalem Day festival. His forced resignation is now viewed by many as the last action of the powerful Deep State's hold over the civilian government, while Erbakan's influence as a trailblazing Islamist politician is now seen as a forerunner to the AKP and Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan.

Middle East protests

The past two years have seen many in the West claim Turkey is in the midst of a turn eastwards, moving away from the influence extended upon Ankara by its long time European and American allies. Ankara, for its part, has done little to put such fears to rest by trumpeting its renewed profile in the region's affairs. However, the events underway across the breadth of the Middle East over the course of the last month indicate that Turkish decision makers realize that their own influence on the regions is extremely limited.

Ankara's decision makers, much like their counterparts in Washington, have chosen a pragmatic line in response to the massive street demonstrations that rocked a number of countries in the Arab world over the past weeks. Prime Minister Erdogan did not speak out until the second week of protests in Egypt, long after many leaders across the globe had called for the resignation of President Hosni Mubarak. Although tensions between Cairo and Ankara have been tense since the AKP came to power, Erdogan appears to have been reluctant to call for the resignation of another Middle Eastern head of state.

Now as the situation in Libya has gone from domestic street protests to something resembling a civil war, Turkey is again at the forefront of public pressure to admonish the regime of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi. Turkey was one of the dissenters that voted against Security Council sanctions aimed at the Gaddafi regime in late February.

While Turkey's prime minister and President Barak Obama spoke prior to the UN vote, Erdogan stated publicly that sanctions would only harm the Libyan people rather than those they persons they intended to harm. He urged the international community to act with "conscience, justice, law and universal human values – not out of oil concerns".

Some viewed Erdogan's words as disingenuous considering Turkey has an estimated \$15 billion invested in various sectors of the Libyan economy. However, the prime minister's statement should be taken in the context that Turkey has a large number of citizens living and working in Libya, of whom fifteen thousand have already been evacuated, with thousands more still stranded.

While the events on the Arab street have proven to be most unpredictable and hard to manage for a super power like the US, the same principle applies to Turkey and its efforts to manage the ongoing crises throughout the Middle East. Pragmatism and caution appear to be the wisest, if not the most popular method for navigating the maelstrom at the present time and in the forthcoming weeks.

Turks abroad / EU accession

Prime Minister Erdogan further weighed in on domestic issues inside Germany during a speech in Dusseldorf in which he warned of rising xenophobia in Europe. "Islamaphobia," Erdogan told the Turkish crowd in Dusseldorf, "is a crime against humanity as much as anti-Semitism".

The AKP leader encouraged Turks living in Germany to integrate by learning the German language and participating in wider society, although he added that assimilation was an affront to basic human rights of honouring one's own cultural heritage. In this context he also addressed Turkey's accession to the European Union, saying, "There is a lot we can give to the EU, and the EU has a lot to give Turkey".

These statements, important considering the speaker's location, are hardly profound in their overall effect on policy. That said, Erdogan's comments should be taken as a positive, quelling some fears that the AKP has turned Ankara away from Europe.

Dam issues

As the Turkish economy continues to develop and more citizens swell the ranks of the growing middle classes, the government is scrambling to meet the basic needs of its people. A massive dam building project is underway to provide hydroelectric power and irrigation sources, but the expanding reservoirs are drawing criticism from inside and outside Turkey. The loss of historical sites to the encroaching waters is a difficult problem to address, as Turkey has been a historical crossroads of cultures traversing the millennia. The country is littered with relics and archaeological sites from Ottoman, to Greek and Roman periods to name a few.

The Turkish government, however, must operate in the present. Much like the highly criticized actions of the Chinese government during the Three Gorges Dam project, Ankara has decided history must cede to progress. Although highly unpopular with academics and archaeologists, the government's decision is an understandable one. As those decision makers have likely considered, a person who is forced to live with electricity shortages likely gives little thought to the Roman ruins down the street.

Pipeline News

Nabucco's various participants have yet to sign any binding contracts for the EU backed pipeline's construction, leaving the initial construction date further in doubt. EU Energy Commissioner, Gunther Oettinger, alluded to this in his comments following the visit of a Russian Ministerial delegation to Brussels led by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin in late February. The energy commissioner urged that documents

need to be signed to facilitate the start of construction. As the deadline for the start of construction of Nabucco fast approaches, sceptics in both Brussels and Ankara are questioning as to how solid the resolve of the consortium partners really is in terms of codifying an agreement.

Former German Foreign Minister, Joschka Fischer, floated a plan to combine Nabucco, the Turkey-Greece-Italy-Interconnector (ITGI) and the Trans-Adriatic pipelines, calling it the Southern Gas Corridor. The corridor, which does not include Russia's South Stream gas pipeline, also called for the further diversification of energy supplies and means of distribution amongst EU companies. Turkish Energy Minister, Taner Yildiz, has voiced his support for such a measure, but Russia's Vladimir Putin dismissed the plan in his recent visit to Brussels. Prime Minister Putin even went on record to state clearly that further diversification of the energy transmission would amount to theft of Russian property.

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