



Turkey: recent developments

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Turkey in the first half of 2012 has perhaps taken one step forward and two steps back. It is shifting towards a more “normal” foreign policy; but it has made little progress towards EU accession; there has been a resurgence of violence around the Kurdish issue; and human rights seem to be slipping.

Turkey is facing serious challenges to its policy of “zero problems with neighbours”. The Arab Spring has forced Turkey to set aside its attempts to build influence slowly. Relations with Syria’s leaders continue to worsen, damaged ties with Israel have not yet been mended, and there is no sign of progress over Cyprus. However, Turkey’s interests in other areas, for example the Balkans, appear to be growing. The House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee suggests that this shows the Turkish foreign policy “focusing on Turkey’s region, pursuing national security and economic interests, and better reflecting Turkish public attitudes”.

Turkey’s long-drawn-out bid for EU membership has made little progress in recent years, blocked by disputes over Cyprus and a general lack of support from some EU member states. Turkish enthusiasm for the project has waned, and Cyprus’s upcoming EU presidency is likely to stall things yet further despite a possibly less hostile France. However, one sign of movement is a recent agreement on visa-free travel.

Levels of violence have increased again in the decades-long conflict between the Turkish government and Turkey’s Kurdish community that has claimed around 45,000 lives on both sides over the past 30 years. There are however some small signs that there could be negotiations and greater recognition of Kurdish rights.

Turkey’s AK Party Government has reformed and modernised the country faster and more effectively than most of its predecessors, and introduced important human rights reforms. These have moved the country away from a statist approach towards a greater recognition of individual freedom. However, the military-era constitution has still not been re-written (although drafting has finally started) and there are continuing (even growing) concerns about human rights in practice.

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1 Regional relations

1.1 Introduction

Turkey is facing serious challenges to its policy of “zero problems with neighbours”. The Arab Spring has forced Turkey to set aside its attempts to build influence slowly through using soft power and cultivating close ties with the region's rulers. Relations with Syria's leaders continue to worsen, damaged ties with Israel have not yet been mended, and there is no sign of progress over Cyprus. However, Turkey's interests in other areas, for example the Balkans, appear to be growing.

The House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee suggests that this shows the Turkish foreign policy “becoming more 'normal', in the sense of focusing on Turkey's region, pursuing national security and economic interests, and better reflecting Turkish public attitudes”.¹

1.2 Turkey turns against Syria

Once an ally of Syria, Turkey has turned against the Syrian government since the uprising there.

Turkey now sees Syria as a “clear threat”, after Syria shot down a Turkish fighter jet on 22 June 2012 in contested circumstances.² Turkey took a measured response, consulting with NATO rather than ordering military reprisals. The UK, France, the EU and NATO have supported its position, and NATO is not considering an armed response.³ Turkey's Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has however warned that any Syrian forces approaching the border would now be regarded as a threat and treated as a military target.⁴ Backing this up, Turkey has begun deploying rocket launchers and anti-aircraft guns along its border with Syria.⁵

In a speech to his party in parliament on relations with Syria following the incident, Erdoğan placed Turkey as a regional hegemon, supporting peoples rather than regimes:

We have no territorial ambitions in neighbouring countries but we will always raise our voice on behalf of brothers whose blood is being shed - we will be a torment for those who hurt the innocent. No-one should fear a stronger Turkey that is re-embracing its historic friends.⁶

As well as sheltering thousands of Syrian refugees, Turkey hosts the Syrian National Council, and some commanders of the Free Syrian Army who have defected from the Syria forces.⁷ But it has until now blocked or restricted arms supplies to Syrian insurgents over its border, and banned attacks on Syrian forces from Turkish territory. There has been some speculation that air force defections may have led Syria to shoot down the Turkish plane, to send a message to Turkey.⁸

Turkey has expelled all Syria's diplomats, and no longer has any representatives in Damascus, severely limiting its scope for negotiation. Its options include direct military

¹ Foreign Affairs Select Committee, *UK-Turkey relations and Turkey's regional role*, 20 March 2012, para 103

² See “[Turkish aircraft shot down 'over international waters', minister insists](#)”, *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 25 June 2012

³ “[NAC Statement on the shooting down of a Turkish aircraft by Syria](#)”, *NATO news*, 26 June 2012

⁴ “[Turkey talks tough over Syria](#)”, *BBC news online*, 26 June 2012

⁵ “[Turkey sends anti-aircraft guns to Syrian border](#)”, *BBC news online*, 28 June 2012

⁶ “[Turkey talks tough over Syria](#)”, *BBC news online*, 26 June 2012

⁷ “[Latest Syrian Defectors Are From Higher Ranks](#)”, *New York Times*, 25 June 2012

⁸ “[Latest Syrian Defectors Are From Higher Ranks](#)”, *New York Times*, 25 June 2012

intervention, support for Syrian opposition forces, protecting safe havens inside Syria, continuing the current policies, or doing nothing. A recent survey suggests that most Turks (57%) are against direct intervention.⁹

1.3 No improvement in relations with Israel

Turkey-Israel relations were further damaged by reports in May 2012 that Turkey is charging four senior Israeli military officials with ordering their soldiers to intentionally kill, wound and abduct Turkish citizens.¹⁰ Turkey holds them responsible for the deaths of nine Turkish activists during an Israeli military raid on a flotilla bound for Gaza.

Israel and Turkey were formerly close allies, with Turkey positioning itself as a neutral party in Middle East negotiations. However, relations were strained by Israel's military offensive in Gaza in 2008, and almost ruptured by the flotilla incident on 31 May 2010.

1.4 Heightened tensions over Cyprus

Tensions between Turkey, the 'Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus' (TRNC), and the Republic of Cyprus increased in recent months as talks over the island's reunification stalled, and oil and gas exploration gathered pace.

The UN Special Adviser Alexander Downer held a press conference in Cyprus's buffer zone on 27 April 2012, saying: "It is clear to me and to both leaders that the negotiations have recently come to something of a standstill". No leaders' meetings will be scheduled "unless there is a clear indication from both sides that there is something substantial to be concluded".¹¹

In April 2012 the state-run Turkish Petroleum Corporation began onshore oil and gas drilling in northern Cyprus, to protests from the Republic of Cyprus. This followed the Republic of Cyprus confirming a major gas find 115 miles south of Cyprus in December 2011. The UK "recognises the Republic of Cyprus' sovereign right to exploit its Exclusive Economic Zone" but wants to see President Christofias's pledge that any revenue from that exploitation should benefit all Cypriots become a reality before they are realised.¹²

1.5 Broadening interests in the Balkans

Turkey's economic and political interests in its neighbours in south-eastern Europe are strong and growing.¹³ There are many reasons for this – for instance it could give Turkey a stronger negotiating position within NATO and with the EU¹⁴ – but there are also sensitivities to suggestions that Turkey might be trying to build a new Ottoman empire in the Balkans.¹⁵

Meetings between Turkey, Serbia and Bosnia to foster Turkey's role in the Balkans continue since the three countries' presidents signed the Istanbul Declaration in April 2010. In April 2012 the Turkish Foreign Minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, received an award from International

⁹ "Turks give little support to a direct intervention against Syria", EDAM, June 2012

¹⁰ "Turkey to charge Israeli military officials involved in Gaza flotilla raid", *Telegraph*, 24 May 2012

¹¹ UN Good Offices Mission, "Transcript of Remarks by Special Advisor of the Secretary-General Alexander Downer following his meeting with the Secretary-General. Ledra Palace Hotel, Nicosia 27 April 2012"

¹² *Government Response to the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee Report of Session 2010-12: UK-Turkey relations and Turkey's regional role*, June 2012, para 79

¹³ See Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Balkans* [undated; viewed 28 June 2012]; and for example "Analysts stress Turkey's key role in Balkans and beyond", *SE Times*, 24 April 2012

¹⁴ "Analysts stress Turkey's key role in Balkans and beyond", *SE Times*, 24 April 2012

¹⁵ "Turkey's influence on BiH, Balkans is growing", *SE Times*, 8 May 2012

League of Humanists in Sarajevo for his outstanding contribution to the reconciliation of the Balkan peoples.

Bosnia is one example of a Balkan country that has seen a marked increase in Turkish trade. Turkey's exports to Bosnia reached \$270m in 2011 (six times the 2002 level) and Bosnia's exports to Turkey have also increased enormously, reaching €90m euros in 2011 (14 times more than in 2010).¹⁶

Albania has also strengthened ties with Turkey, signing diplomatic agreements and agreeing to boost Turkish investment in Albania.¹⁷

A Turkish firm whose CEO is Prime Minister Erdoğan's son-in-law, Berat Albayrak, has bought Kosovo's energy distribution network.¹⁸ The government defends the deal, but some have called the sale price of €26.3m¹⁹ "ridiculous".²⁰

2 Continuing stalemate on EU accession

2.1 Introduction

Turkey's long-drawn-out bid for EU membership has made little progress in recent years, blocked by disputes over Cyprus and a general lack of support from some EU member states. Turkish enthusiasm for the project has waned, and Cyprus's upcoming EU presidency is likely to stall things yet further despite a possibly less hostile France. However, one sign of movement is a recent agreement on visa-free travel.

2.2 No negotiations during Cyprus's EU presidency?

Turkey has threatened to abstain from any discussions over EU membership while Cyprus holds the rotating EU Council presidency from 1 July to 31 December 2012. Ankara said it will not freeze its relations totally with the EU for those six months, but Turkish officials say they will not attend any event presided over by Greek Cypriots.²¹ Major progress during the Cypriot presidency was in any case unlikely.

MEPs debating the Commission's latest progress report on Turkey in March 2012 took different views on Turkey's stance and the next steps to take.²² The EU Enlargement Commissioner is trying to move things forward with a new "positive agenda in EU-Turkey relations" which he says is intended to complement rather than replace the accession process.²³

The decades-long dispute over Cyprus is one of the main issues holding up Turkey's membership application.²⁴

¹⁶ Turkish Statistical Institute, *Foreign Trade Statistics* [accessed 28 June 2011]

¹⁷ "Albania's Berisha Courts Turkish Alliance", *Balkan Insight*, 9 April 2012

¹⁸ Limak Insaat AS and Calik Holding AS put in the highest bid: "Turkey's Calik, Limak Place Highest Joint Bid For Kosovo's KEK", *Bloomberg*, 8 June 2012

¹⁹ "The Kosovo electric power distribution tender has been won by the Limak-Çalik consortium", Çalik holding [undated; viewed 28 June 2012]

²⁰ "Turkish PM's Son-in-Law Clinches Kosovo Power Deal", *Balkan Insight*, 22 June 2012

²¹ "Turkey remains tough against Greek Cypriots' EU presidency", *SE Times*, 11 June 2012

²² "MEPs split over Turkish EU membership prospects", *BBC Democracy Live*, 28 March 2012

²³ "EU-Turkey: Commissioner Š. Füle to launch positive agenda", European Commission, May 2012

²⁴ For the EU's latest assessment of Turkey's progress, see *EU-Turkey Association Council 50th meeting*, 22 June 2012

2.3 A less hostile France?

The change of government in France might see official opposition to Turkish accession reduced. Nicolas Sarkozy, who did not see Turkey as part of Europe, put an informal block on several of Turkey's negotiating chapters, but his successor as President, François Hollande, might take a different approach. Hollande said before his election that the conditions for Turkish membership were unlikely to be met for several years;²⁵ but since then he has agreed to visit Turkey and the two countries say they have opened "a new chapter" in bilateral relations.²⁶

2.4 Visa-free travel by 2014/15

In June 2012, EU Member States agreed to allow Turkish citizens to travel to the EU without visas by 2014 or 2015, in return for a 'readmission agreement' (extra measures for stopping migrants from Turkey or beyond entering the EU illegally). The readmission agreement was finalised just before Cyprus took over the EU presidency.²⁷

Neither the UK nor Ireland are taking part in this decision. The House of Commons Foreign Affairs Select Committee has called on the UK government to make it easier for Turkish citizens to travel to the UK,²⁸ and new fast-track procedures have been introduced for certain categories of visitor.²⁹

Turkey's European Affairs minister, Egemen Bağış, said that visa-free travel would work well because Turks now simply want to visit the EU and return home, rather than wanting to live in the EU. He added that Turkey will create a 50,000-man-strong civilian border police, humane detention centres and new fences.³⁰

Turkey is currently the only EU candidate country without a visa-free travel regime with the EU.³¹

3 Mixed messages on the Kurdish issue

3.1 Introduction

Levels of violence have increased again in the decades-long conflict between the Turkish government and Turkey's Kurdish community that has claimed around 45,000 lives on both sides over the past 30 years. There are however some small signs that there could be negotiations and greater recognition of Kurdish rights.

²⁵ "Hollande also says "No" to Turkey's membership to the EU", *Eurotribune*, 13 April 2012

²⁶ "'Hollande Spring' in Turkish-EU relations", *Hurriyet*, 22 June 2012. See also "How Hollande could help Turkey's EU bid", *Euractiv*, 19 June 2012

²⁷ *Proposal for a Council Decision concerning the conclusion of the Agreement between the European Union and the Republic of Turkey on the readmission of persons residing without authorisation*, COM(2012) 239 final, 22 June 2012

²⁸ Foreign Affairs Select Committee, *UK-Turkey relations and Turkey's regional role*, 20 March 2012, para 30

²⁹ *Government Response to the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee Report of Session 2010-12: UK-Turkey relations and Turkey's regional role*, June 2012, para 15

³⁰ "Turks do not want to live in the EU any more", *EU observer*, 23 June 2012

³¹ "Why a visa liberalisation roadmap for Turkey is in the EU's interest", European Stability Initiative [undated; viewed 27 June 2012]

3.2 Renewed violence...

The number of clashes between the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the Turkish armed forces in south-east Turkey has risen over the past year. In the latest clash, at least 34 people were killed in a fighting at military border posts on 19 June 2012; the following day Turkish warplanes bombed Kurdish hideouts in northern Iraq. Selahattin Demirtas, chairman of Turkey's pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), unexpectedly called for the PKK to end the violent attacks and instead seek a political solution to the conflict.³²

Meanwhile Turkey continues to arrest Kurdish journalists and politicians. The Kurdish MP Leyla Zana was sentenced to 10 years imprisonment in May 2012 for nine speeches she gave in 2007-8 (although parliamentary immunity means that the sentence will not take effect until she leaves parliament).

3.3 ... but signs of possible negotiations

There have recently been signs that Turkey's two main parties might be looking for new ways to collaborate on solving the Kurdish problem.³³ A recent interview with Leyla Zana – who is seen as a rival to the imprisoned Abdullah Ocalan as leader of the PKK – indicates that dialogue may be possible.³⁴

One contributory factor is the unexpected collaboration between the Turkish government and the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq, partly through the economic prospects for Turkish businesses in northern Iraq. In May 2012 Turkey and the KRG unveiled plans to build an oil pipeline between Turkey and northern Iraq and there are also plans for a second pipeline (although the Iraqi government's opposition to these plans is likely to be problematic).³⁵ The PKK is facing growing Kurdish opposition, at least from Iraqi Kurds.³⁶

3.4 Kurdish language teaching to be allowed in schools

On 12 June 2012, shortly before the border attacks, Erdoğan announced in parliament that the Kurdish language could be taught as an elective subject.³⁷ He described this as a historic step, but it was not enough for many Kurds who demand much wider autonomy.

Some progress has been made in recent years, for example on the language issue and the economic development of Kurdish-populated areas, but the issue of Kurdish rights remains highly contested, and is one of the areas that needs dramatic improvement for Turkey's EU membership bid to succeed.

³² "Turkey escalates clashes with Kurdish rebels in Iraq", *Jane's Intelligence Weekly*, 21 June 2012

³³ "Two moves to reshape Turkish politics", *Hurriyet*, 16 June 2012; "Will the Kurdish issue be solved?", *Today's Zaman*, 17 June 2012

³⁴ "Leyla Zana: the end", *Today's Zaman*, 15 June 2012

³⁵ "Iraq warns Turkey over Kurdistan pipeline deal", *BBC news online*, 22 May 2012

³⁶ "Turkey escalates clashes with Kurdish rebels in Iraq", *Jane's Intelligence Weekly*, 21 June 2012

³⁷ "Kurdish can be taught in Turkey's schools, Erdogan says", *BBC news online*, 12 June 2012

4 Constitution and human rights

4.1 Introduction

Turkey's AK Party Government has reformed and modernised the country faster and more effectively than most of its predecessors, and introduced important human rights reforms. These have moved the country away from a statist approach towards a greater recognition of individual freedom. For example, there is now a constitutional principal that international human rights treaties have supremacy over domestic law.³⁸

However, the military-era constitution has still not been re-written (although drafting has finally started) and there are continuing (even growing) concerns about human rights in practice.³⁹

4.2 Progress towards a new constitution

A parliamentary committee has finally started drafting a new constitution for Turkey, after years of intermittent progress on the issue.⁴⁰ Turkey's 1982 constitution, although much amended, still bears the marks of its military birth, and the AK Party has been committed to redrafting it since coming to power.

The drafting will be contentious, particularly around minority rights and the powers of the presidency.

Prime Minister Erdoğan wants to introduce a more powerful US- or French-style executive presidency, and given the Turkish Supreme Court's ruling that the next Presidential election will not now take place until 2014 he has more time to galvanise support for this.⁴¹ There is considerable speculation that Erdoğan, who cannot under his party's rules stand for a third term as prime minister, wants the expanded post for himself. He may also look for ways to pull back from secularism in the new constitution. On the other hand traditional 'Kemalists' are committed to secularism, statism and the military; and further pressures come from the EU-supported demands for greater individual rights and freedoms. It will be a test of statesmanship to produce a draft that sufficiently satisfies all these parties.

4.3 Human rights setbacks

Limits to freedom of expression in Turkey are of particular concern to observers. A main focus of these concerns is Article 301 of the Turkish Penal Code, on "public denigration of Turkishness", and the way it has been applied by the courts against critical journalists, Kurdish political activists, and others who speak out on the situation of Kurds in Turkey, or criticise the armed forces. In April 2012 there were apparently 95 journalists in prison in Turkey.⁴² These numbers had reportedly gone up from 57 a year earlier, perhaps as a result of a Constitutional Court decision on 2 May 2011 to amend the Press Law to allow

³⁸ Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly Monitoring Committee, *The functioning of democratic institutions in Turkey: recent developments*, Doc. 11660, 24 June 2008

³⁹ See for example Amnesty International, *Annual Report 2012: The state of the world's human rights - Turkey*, May 2012; European Commission, *Turkey 2011 Progress Report*, SEC(2011) 1201 final, 12 October 2011

⁴⁰ "Turkey to write first fully civilian constitution", *BBC news online*, 1 May 2012

⁴¹ "Turkey court ruling boosts prime minister", *Financial Times*, 15 June 2012

⁴² "OSCE media freedom representative calls for legal reforms after study shows 95 journalists imprisoned in Turkey", OSCE press release, 2 April 2012. But see "Trying to get at the truth of Turkey's jailed journalists", Greenslade blog, *Guardian*, 9 January 2012

prosecutors to file criminal cases against journalists years after their articles were published.⁴³

Many journalists and women's organisations criticised Prime Minister Erdoğan for equating abortion with murder, at meeting of his party's women's branches in Ankara on 26 May 2012. A few days later, Turkey's health minister said that a bill was being prepared which would limit the period in which abortions can be performed.⁴⁴

5 Some questions to consider

- Could the heightened tensions between Turkey and Syria flare up?
- Is Turkey's hostility to Israel now irreparable, and what would that mean for the Middle East peace process?
- Will hydrocarbons re-ignite the Cyprus dispute?
- Would President Hollande lift French hostility to Turkish membership of the EU?
- Will the current violence snuff out signs of possible progress on the Kurdish question?
- What will happen if parliamentary drafters fail to come up with a new constitution that satisfies all sides?

⁴³ "Internet filtering and changes to press law further limit media freedom in Turkey, says OSCE media freedom representative", *OSCE press release*, 17 May 2011

⁴⁴ "Turkey: What's Behind the AKP's New Anti-Abortion Agenda?", *eurasianet.org*, 4 June 2012