TURKEY REPORT

No 6

What results American elections can yield for Turkey?

Like many other countries of the world, Ankara closely watches the race for the US presidential elections as the outcome will inevitably affect Turkish-American relations and, hence Turkey's security concerns.

It is a fact that the Turkish-American relations during Obama's first term improved significantly after they experienced a major setback in the Bush era. This does not mean that mutual relations between America and Turkey were perfect. On the contrary, in the first two years of Obama administration, the American side was particularly frustrated with Turkey's unwillingness to support the sanctions on Iran, the worsened Turkish-Israel relations, and the faltering stance about the early stage of NATO-led intervention in Libya. On the other hand, Turkey was not pleased with the reluctance of the American side to provide intelligence, drones and attack helicopters for its war against the separatist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Nevertheless, changed balances in the Middle East after the American withdrawal from Iraq, and the Arab Spring forced these two countries to put the differences aside and focus on the mutual interests.

The Syrian issue, however, stays on top of the agenda. While it is clear that both countries agree that the Assad regime must go, they differ on the methods that will force Assad to leave and on the shaping of post-Assad Syria. Worried about a delayed collapse of Assad regime and a power vacuum in Kurdish-populated Northern Syria, Turkey tried to convince America to impose no-fly zone in Syria and accelerate the arms supply to the Free Syrian Army. So far America has done nothing to satisfy Turkey's demands.

Public opinion polls indicate that the vast majority of Turks would vote for Obama if they could. It seems that the Turkish government would also like to see Obama re-elected. This is quite normal providing that Romney is strongly pro-Israel and supported by neo- conservative circles which heavily criticise the Erdogan government. Turkey hopes that Obama will win the elections and focus on the Syrian issue after the election. Yet, whoever wins the election on November 6 will also have to tackle important problems such fighting the high unemployment rates, curbing China in the Pacific and developing a strategy about Iran's nuclear programmes. So even the re-election of Obama might not satisfy Turkey and, may create new 'frustrations' in the Turkish side.

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Research: Efpraxia Nerantzaki
Ahmet Gencturk

The Kurdish issue in the light of the hunger strike

The Kurdish issue remains highly topical. In an attempt to take a step forward Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan said that he was ready to send the chief of the intelligence service MIT to Imrali prison island where PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan is jailed. CHP leader Kilicdaroglu however criticised Erdogan's suggestion as helpless and meaningless.

Statements by the Diyarbakir police chief Recep Guven, who said that "you are not a human being if you don't cry for terrorists killed in the mountains," and that "everybody is responsible if youths go to the mountains to join the terrorists," fuelled a heated debate. The Deputy Prime Minister Arinc and other AKP officials extended support to the police chief. The Prime Minister stressed that "we will never cry for the death of terrorists who killed our sons." The Interior Minister initiated investigation against Guven. CHP leader said the words of Guven were dividing Turkey, and MHP leader asked for the chief's removal from his post.

Hundreds of Kurdish inmates (the current number is around 700) have been on hunger strike since mid-September in several jails throughout the country, demanding the end of the isolation of Ocalan, the right to defend themselves in their mother tongue and the right to education in Kurdish. The condition of some of the hunger strikers is considered highly critical, while deaths may occur even if the hunger strike ends. President Gul has highlighted the necessity of solving the problem before the crisis escalates further. The Minister of Justice Sadullah Ergin held a meeting with BDP officials to discuss possibilities for ending the hunger strikes. The Prime Minister, on the contrary, has until now adopted a rather indifferent and condescending stance towards the problem.

In his meeting with two BDP deputies and a BDP-backed independent MP at the end October, Abdullah Gul urged upon the BDP officials that they have to act on their own, without the PKK, while the BDP officials declared that they were ready to work to end the fighting. According to media reports after the latest meeting of the President and the Kurdish lawmakers, there was a visible decrease in the intensity of terror attacks. A change in the attitudes of the judges can be listed among the positive developments. Recently suspects in KESK and KCK trial were allowed to defend themselves in Kurdish. A new regulation that would permit suspects to defend themselves in different languages in the court is reportedly being prepared by the Justice Ministry. Finally, sources from the same Ministry have said that family members of Ocalan will be given the permission to visit him.

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Mixed signals from Turkish Economy

The state of the Turkish economy remains one of the most popular topics under the light of the latest global and local developments. While the Turkish impressive economic growth that was recorded in 2010 and 2011 seems to have slowed down, the expected growth rate for 2012, which is around 3%, is still enviable for many European countries. The ongoing recession in the EU, which is the biggest market for Turkish exporters, and the turmoil in Arab Spring countries influenced negatively the growth of the Turkish exports and therefore the overall growth rate of the country.

In the recent years Turkish exporters have diversified their range of products and markets in order to limit the effects of recession in the EU market. The Turkish government, however, still had to react against widened foreign trade deficit with measures such as hiking the tax rate on imported motor-vehicles and electronic devices as well as letting the Turkish lira to lose value against major foreign currencies, considering slowing of the exports and booming of the imports.

The latest estimations and revealed figures affirm the situation as it is summed above. According to the official figures, export sees a slight improvement, around 14% while import shrunk by around 3% as of September 2012. Overall, there is a significant improvement of the foreign trade balance of the country. This improvement, however, came with the cost of an aggravated budget figure.

Making the things worse for Turkish economy, the instability of oil and natural gas prices and the escalating cost of the war against the separatist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) has put extra pressure on the Turkish economy.

Despite these negative trends, the general outlook of the Turkish economy looks promising. Last month, Moody's and Standard Poor's, the two biggest international rating agencies, stated that they can upgrade the Turkish credit rating if Turkey can reduce its current structural account deficit, and if it can make progress in decreasing external vulnerabilities, by increasing its currency reserves or decreasing private-sector debts. Economists argue that such upgrade would give a huge boost to the Turkish economy by decreasing the cost of Turkey's borrowing and by increasing the foreign direct investments that the country attracts.

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Turkey-EU: A never-ending love story

On October 10 the 2012 Progress Report on Turkey was released by the European Commission. The Report recognised the positive developments of the past year, but at the same time it is one of the most critical progress reports, outlining a bunch of serious deficiencies in the judicial, social and political domains. It received a mixed welcome in Turkey. In fact it was welcomed with reduced enthusiasm and without being the front page topic as it used to be in the past.

The Minister for EU Affairs and Chief Negotiator Egemen Bagis gave sharp response to the Commission's report, blaming the Cypriot Presidency for the harshness of the report. "Progress reports have never been a grade card for us and will never be," he has also stated. One of the most blatant reactions was the one by Burhan Kuzu, head of parliament's commission for constitutional affairs, who threw the report into the trash bin. The Foreign Minister, who adopted a more moderate stance, said that like in previous years, the report focused on negative issues, instead of giving priority to positive developments. Government-friendly media remark that it is unfair to criticise Turkey for its shortcomings while chapters remain blocked by EU member states. Commenting on the report, the opposition leader, Kemal Kilicdaroglu stated that the report was reflecting the truth and in fact was not covering all the problems in Turkey, noting that the AKP was deceiving the EU.

The debate on the importance of the EU in Turkey's agenda and the strength of EU's soft power came to the fore again. Many focused on the fact that during the AKP congress, EU entry was not included in the government's strategic plans. In the light of speculations about the government's plummeting commitment to the accession process the Prime Minister, the EU Affairs Minister, as well as the President, stressed that the government had not given up the ambition to achieve EU standards and to join the Union. Ireland's assuming of the EU Presidency in 2013 has raised hopes for the opening of a new chapter.

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