



The Turkish Military's March Toward Europe

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Abstract (Document Summary)

Turkey's accession to the European Union has long been an issue of great debate. Some have questioned the EU's willingness to welcome such a large, poor, and culturally distant country as a member; others have wondered whether Turkey can transform itself enough to meet the EU's demands. Yet much of this talk has overlooked the Turkish army, even though it is a key player in the process thanks to its critical role in founding modern Turkey, its continued popularity within Turkish society, and its uniquely powerful voice in politics. None of the reforms the EU still requires of the Turkish government can be achieved without the military's backing. Recent changes have already dramatically curbed the power of the Turkish military in several of its traditional areas of influence and reduced its long-standing authority in some civilian institutions. Not all of these adjustments have been greeted with open arms, but the Turkish General Staff (TGS) has largely complied with the EU's demands even though doing so has forced it to let go of power it had felt necessary to build up and carefully guard for decades.

Full Text (4704 words)

WILL COOPERATION LAST?

Turkey's accession to the European Union has long been an issue of great debate. Some have questioned the EU's willingness to welcome such a large, poor, and culturally distant country as a member; others have wondered whether Turkey can transform itself enough to meet the EU's demands. Yet much of this talk has overlooked the Turkish army, even though it is a key player in the process thanks to its critical role in founding modern Turkey, its continued popularity within Turkish society, and its uniquely powerful voice in politics. None of the reforms the EU still requires of the Turkish government can be achieved without the military's backing.

Recent changes have already dramatically curbed the power of the Turkish military in several of its traditional areas of influence and reduced its long-standing authority in some civilian institutions. Not all of these adjustments have been greeted with open arms, but the Turkish General Staff (TGS) has largely complied with the EU's demands even though doing so has forced it to let go of power it had felt necessary to build up and

carefully guard for decades. The explanation for this sacrifice is twofold. Turkey's generals have adapted because they see EU membership as the final stage of a modernization process they have supported for nearly a century. They also believe that the process leading to EU membership is the best means to confront key domestic challenges with which they have long struggled, such as Islamism and Kurdish separatism. So far, the deal has been worth their while. But with the EU's decision in October to begin membership negotiations with Ankara, the need for reform, especially regarding the military's policies on Kurdish secessionism and the status of Cyprus, will only intensify. And it remains to be seen how much further the Turkish military leadership will be willing to retreat.

A MILITARY LIKE NO OTHER

The Turkish armed forces have an unusual relationship with both the country's civilian leadership and Turkish society. Despite its record of tampering with civilian politics and ousting democratically elected governments, the military remains extremely popular. A poll published in the daily newspaper *Hürriyet* last September found that the military was Turkey's most trusted institution. The relationship between the Turkish military and Turkey's civilian authorities may be an "exception to the 'standardized' civil-military relationship," Chief of the General Staff of the Army Hilmi Zkk said in a speech in August, but every country has "different needs, conditions, values, histories, societal concerns, and dynamics."

This popularity is largely a result of Turkey's modern history. As the Ottoman Empire was collapsing after World War I and the ruling aristocracy was dithering in the face of invading foreign powers, the armed forces, under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal (later known as Atatürk), struggled side by side with the people of Anatolia to protect the homeland. "While saving the very country, these soldiers also destroyed the political structure that had been based on the sultanate and caliphate," Zkk said last August. "They built up a new, modern system based on societal power. This change was as important for Turkey as was the Renaissance for those in the West, and it was led by the soldiers."

In the early 1960s, the military went through a difficult period. An overthrow of the civilian regime by a group of military officers in 1960 led to other coup attempts, revealing the military leadership's lack of control over lower officers. But one renegade colonel was hanged to set an example, and the leadership began to consolidate the military's hierarchy. In the end, the military came out of these hectic years looking like the most serious, well-organized, and effective institution around—the only one capable of stepping in when civilian authorities failed to perform adequately. This perceived competence, coupled with the Turks' long-standing fear of invasions, war, and state collapse, helped elevate the military, in the minds of many, to the status of Turkey's all-around protector, from both external and internal threats. The brief military coups of 1970 and 1980, both of which were followed by a rapid return to civilian leadership, only confirmed the public's impression that the military generally seizes civilian power to protect it.

True, the Turkish military's popularity has suffered a few blows in recent years, partly because of debates spawned by liberalization, greater scrutiny of military activities, and the emergence of a new powerful economic elite. The so-called February 28 process of 1997, during which the military-dominated National Security Council (NSC) pressured the democratically elected Islamist government of Necmettin Erbakan to step down, left some Turks with the uneasy perception that the armed forces were no longer just going after radical Islamists but also targeting the simply pious.

Still, the military remains more popular than any other institution in Turkey. Military service is compulsory; nonetheless, every troop sendoff prompts spontaneous public celebrations, with music and parades and honking cars. Many Turks today still think of Turkey as *asker millet*, "an army nation," reflecting their perception that a symbiotic relationship binds the state to the armed forces that founded it and now protect it. For the Turkish public, the military is inseparable from the idea of the nation.

ESPRIT DE CORPS

The military shares the public's perception of its role, seeing itself as the guardian of Turkey's stability. And because the generals perceive the country's integrity to be a corollary of the military's own, they view the survival of Turkey as hinging on maintaining the internal cohesion of the corps. As a result, the Turkish military has adopted two strategies: it has tried to shield itself from threats posed by the divisions within mainstream society, and it has projected its power back into civilian life.

To keep itself strong, the TGS has tried hard to insulate its ranks from the fault lines that run through the rest of the country. The TGS considers Turkey's religious, sectarian, and ethnic fragmentation—pitting Islamists against secularists, Sunnis against Alevis (who are members of a branch of Islam related to Shiism), and Turks against Kurds—to be a danger that must be kept at bay. Were these differences allowed to penetrate the military, the thinking goes, they might threaten it and, by extension, the nation as a whole. The top military brass believe Turkey has not yet developed into a cohesive society. The introduction of multiparty politics in the late 1940s magnified the country's social fragmentation by allowing sectarian, ethnic, and religious differences to find an expression in political life. Now, the military fears that various lobbies can unduly influence voters' political choices as well as public appointments and the allocation of government resources. It is willing to tolerate these social divisions only if a guard such as itself is tasked with monitoring them. But in no case can they be allowed to undermine the guard itself.

The military has also sought to centralize its power by maintaining a strong hierarchy and limiting the channels of civilian-military interaction. The chief of staff is the key figure in this centralization, along with the High Military Council, an advisory body that consists of all of the active four-star generals. The HMC's principal role is to regularly present to the government the National Military Strategic Concept, which describes the military's

ability to meet Turkey's security objectives. These top generals are the only direct link between the Turkish military and the government.

To preserve its cohesion, the military has tried to permeate the entire corps with a shared sense of purpose and imbue it with absolute loyalty. Below the four-star generals on the HMC, the Turkish army is organized along a three-layer pyramid-shaped structure. In the top tier are lower-ranking generals, outstanding officers who have consistently distinguished themselves and thus been anointed as guardians of the status quo. Below them, in the middle tier, is an advanced corps of special staff officers (known as Kurmay officers) who have attended the elite Turkish Military Academy, a university-level program with a rigorous entrance examination, and are deemed, thanks to their skills and loyalty, to have the potential for further promotion. At the bottom are all the other officers.

The TGS has also created an elaborate system of promotions, sanctions, and training. (In the 1970s, after civilian courts were said to interfere with military discipline, the Turkish military set up a parallel court system to manage its ranks on its own.) Rewards such as foreign assignments, additional social benefits, and services provided by the Armed Forces Pension Fund are also used to cultivate loyalty. Military schools are designed to build a unitary mindset. Laxity at the Army War College was blamed for recurrent coup attempts in the early 1960s; a relaxing of the curriculum and the hiring of visiting civilian faculty were thought to have caused ideological polarization in the early 1970s. Since then, the military has kept a tight leash on young trainees to prevent, at the earliest stage possible, the officer class from being influenced by external ideologies that could upset the military's homogeneous worldview.

These strategies are not unique to the Turkish military, at least not in form. But they play an unusually significant role in maintaining the corps' hierarchy and so, the TGS believes, in allowing it to fulfill its historical role of holding together this inherently heterogeneous nation. The result is a singular, self-replicating class of generals, towering over an institution with a single mindset. Although the military elite is sometimes said to be split between hard-liners and moderates, these factions disagree less about the substance of the military's core policies than about communication styles. Despite slight divergences of opinion among some of its generals, the Turkish military basically makes decisions as a unitary, rational actor and speaks with one voice.

In addition to shielding itself from what it perceives to be threats from within Turkish society, the Turkish military tries to maintain its power by projecting that power into civilian governance. Until the 1990s, after conducting various coups to restore national order, it set up footholds in institutions that in most democratic countries would be entirely run by civilians. These were often established at the expense and without the approval of the politicians.

The most important of these is the NSC, which sets Turkey's national security policies. The NSC's mission and membership were determined by the post-coup constitution of 1961 and adjusted during subsequent overthrows. Over time, the military increased its

dominance on the NSC because it believed that the council was the most effective—and most legitimate—venue in which to shape security-related policies. (In the military’s view, civilian politicians, held back by populist concerns, often failed to respond promptly to security challenges.) The NSC was initially designed to have seven civilian members (or eight in some special circumstances) and four military representatives, but the number of military representatives later rose steadily. With the 1982 constitution, the NSC’s composition changed to five military members and five civilians, and the council’s civilian president often voted with the military. The NSC’s mandate also expanded. Originally an advisory body, the council became an “instructing” body, whose ideas were given priority over those of all the other government agencies. And as military officers also gained control of the NSC’s secretariat, they increasingly set the council’s agenda.

In the 1980s, the Turkish military also created the Council of Higher Education (YK) and placed on it a supervisory military representative. The rationale behind creating the YK and subjecting it to permanent military oversight was to bring order to the universities, which had been the epicenter of the ideological warfare and street violence that led the country to the brink of civil war in the 1970s and brought about the 1980 coup. Similarly, the Radio and Television High Council was created to monitor the media; it, too, had one military representative.

By the middle of the decade, with the empowering provisions of the 1982 constitution in effect, the Turkish military had a firm hand in politics. It had achieved considerable internal cohesion. Although domestic security was still very much a problem, the leadership had set up enough listening posts in civilian institutions to be able to sense and monitor emerging dangers. And thanks to the NSC, it could place its concerns on the public agenda and force the government to deal with them.

THE GRAND CONSENSUS

At the end of the 1990s, the civilian and military elites found a common cause behind which to rally and in the pursuit of which they could both play their proper roles: preparing Turkey for EU membership. After four decades of bumpy progress, Turkey’s advance toward EU membership was momentarily frozen at the 1997 Luxembourg summit, when the Europeans displayed uncertainty about Turkey’s eligibility for accession. But at the Helsinki summit of December 1999, EU leaders finally certified Turkey’s “full eligibility” for membership, elevating it to the level of other candidate countries.

Although the Europeans, both in informal and formal documents and negotiations, had consistently criticized the role of the military in Turkish politics, talk of actually curbing it did not begin in earnest until after 1999. Until that time, the EU had interpreted civilian-military relations in Turkey as a general expression of the country’s low democratic standards and so had made broad recommendations that Ankara promote democratization, expand minority rights, and push economic liberalization. But in the

1990s, Brussels started actively demanding compliance with the so-called Copenhagen criteria, the economic and political conditions (including respect for democratic principles and human rights) required for EU membership. EU leaders asked, for example, that the Turkish military's unusual prerogatives in civilian institutions, and especially its power over the NSC, be substantially curbed. Since then, they have come to expect of the Turkish military not only that it reform its institutional functions, but also that it relax its opposition to ethnic diversity and allow the corps' own composition to better reflect Turkey's multicultural character.

EU demands have mostly centered on giving civilian authorities greater control over the military. They have included shifting the balance of power on the NSC in favor of civilian members; allowing civilians to lead the drafting of the NSC papers that define the threats facing the country; giving civilian authorities supervisory power over military expenses, promotions, and dismissals; removing military representatives from nonmilitary councils; and subjecting military judicial institutions to civilian oversight. More broadly, the EU reforms have called for a virtual revolution of the military's mindset, requiring that the military's traditionally expansive interpretation of its mission to protect the country be redefined in a much more narrow way. Particularly challenging is the EU's demand that Turkey, and thus indirectly the military, recognize and accommodate the country's many layers of diversity—the very fault lines that the TGS has long feared. The EU requirements mean that the military will eventually have to open its ranks to religious, ethnic, and sectarian diversity, threatening the cohesion it has perfected over the years.

For the Turkish political elite, the Helsinki summit seemed to be the rebirth of a great opportunity. In 1999, the most prominent Turkish politicians were President Sleyman Demirel, Prime Minister Blent Ecevit, and the leader of the Motherland Party, Mesut Yilmaz. They realized that some radical changes would be needed to successfully revitalize relations with the EU and pave Turkey's way to accession—specifically, changes in the government's struggle against the Kurdistan Workers' Party, the violent Kurdish separatist group known as the PKK; in the government's relations with Greece; and within the power structure of the Turkish state. And they knew that achieving any progress on these issues would require the support of the Turkish armed forces.

Fortunately, like the civilian authorities, the Turkish military supported EU membership. Not only would accession be the crowning achievement of Turkey's modernization, but the process leading to it would also offer a way to respond to several challenges facing the country. It was not one of many grand strategies, but rather the best choice on an extremely short list of imperfect options. In fact, for the Turkish military, the only true alternative to seeking EU membership was to confront these challenges alone—an unsavory proposition that might have led to failure or, at best, reversals of the country's impressive social, economic, and political progress. The prospect of EU membership, it was hoped, would galvanize Turkish elites and society around a great opportunity, creating a grand consensus that might transcend the nation's deep fractures.

Shortly after the Helsinki decision, then Chief of Staff Hseyin Kivrikoglu announced the TGS's support for the EU membership process: "We view the EU decision for Turkey to be for the full benefit of the Turkish nation. We support it wholeheartedly." Turkish-EU relations soon became one of the most discussed items at NSC meetings, and the council's press releases declared EU membership a national goal and official "state policy."

A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE

This resolve nonetheless left the Turkish armed forces in a difficult position. On the one hand, the military's support for EU membership was consistent with its historical role as the country's pioneer of modernization. Long devoted to the secular values of Turkey's first president, Atatürk, the military has been the driving force behind reform movements ever since the declining years of the Ottoman Empire. The prospect of heading a truly European army appealed to it. On the other hand, to meet Brussels' requirements the military would have to fundamentally alter the way it performed its mission of stabilizing Turkey and keeping it secure. It was left walking a tightrope. Whatever resistance it may have occasionally displayed since then has stemmed not from any fundamental ambivalence about EU membership, but from these internal tensions, which have been magnified by a significant degree of mistrust toward some EU policies.

Still, pragmatism has proved a powerful motivator and so far has convinced the military to comply with the reforms. A major argument for promoting EU-driven reform has been the TGS's understanding that the road to EU membership, although treacherous, could provide solutions to some of Turkey's main problems: the Kurdish question, rising Islamism, worsening relations with Greece, chronic economic difficulties, internal disagreement about U.S. policies in Iraq, and the possibility that Turkey might be left out of the European Security and Defence Policy, the EU's planned independent military force.

Above all, by 1999, the Turkish military was growing weary and discouraged by its inability to eradicate, after decades of efforts, various internal threats, such as Kurdish separatism, Marxist activism, radical Islamism, and ultranationalism. Its attempts had not only exhausted the Turkish military but also begun to endanger its institutional integrity. As a result, by the end of the 1990s, the TGS was growing more ready to consider civilian responses to these threats. The military's struggle against the PKK over the previous quarter century, in particular, had convinced the generals that it was time to adopt a different approach. In this low-intensity conflict, soldiers had been forced into direct contact with people in the remote countryside along the Turkish frontiers. Indoctrinated since the early days of military dormitory school by slogans of unity, some 80,000 officers based in Turkey's southeastern region confronted the realities of their linguistically, ideologically, and culturally heterogeneous country. It was becoming increasingly difficult for the TGS to promote the idea of homogeneity, even within the military's ranks.

The prospect of EU membership offered something of an answer to these problems. First, joining the EU would bring Turkey economic benefits, which would indirectly help Ankara battle terrorism and maintain the country's territorial and political integrity. Second, as Turkey progressed toward EU membership, European nations might grow less supportive of the PKK, in particular its armed wing. Without legitimacy and significant external support, it would be harder for the PKK to continue its armed struggle. Third, and perhaps most important, the EU membership process would provide a framework to deal with the Kurdish issue. Because the EU required that Turkish politicians be primarily responsible for dealing with the PKK, it effectively absolved the TGS from handling that thorny task and from officially endorsing a policy of accommodation toward the secessionists whom the military had long fought. The prospect of EU membership, which was extremely popular within Turkish society, thus allowed the TGS to go along with reforms for Kurdish rights without being accused of betraying those who had died fighting the separatists.

By 1999, the time seemed ripe for dramatic changes on other matters as well. The ever-disturbing issue of rising Islamism, the military's long-held convictions about balancing Greece's EU-derived power, the military's increasing fears of falling into strategic isolation, and pressing economic crises—all forced the TGS toward realism. The military's decision to address all these concerns through the EU membership process was the consequence of a simple cost-benefit analysis: the costs of tackling these major problems alone seemed to surpass those of meeting European demands, even though compliance would inevitably transform the Turkish armed forces. And so the NSC's national security policy document for 2001 recorded not only Turkey's goal of gaining membership in the EU but also a major concession by the TGS on one of the most complicated issues in Turkish politics. Addressing the Kurdish question and multiculturalism, the document stated, "Our citizens, who are united under the banner of Turkish national identity, should have their cultural and local linguistic characteristics be considered as individual rights and freedoms."

At the end of 2002, following the parliamentary victory of the Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP), led by Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and the selection of zkk as chief of staff, some worried that Turkey's new leaders would be unable to work together. But the grand consensus held. For Erdogan and his party, the decision to endorse reform was easy. Committing to economic liberalization and privatization, as demanded by the EU, would ingratiate the party with the Turkish public, especially the business elite and a growing Muslim bourgeoisie. Deeper engagement with Europe would allow the AKP to shift away from a U.S.-centric foreign policy. For zkk and the armed forces, the calculus remained the same. And so, as long as the new politicians remained loyal to the grand consensus, their Islamism would be an irritant but not a deal breaker.

Reforms continued. The military representatives on the boards of the Council of Higher Education and the Radio and Television High Council were removed. The Kurds were granted broadcasting rights. In 2003, the ratio of civilians to military officers on the NSC was increased, and a civilian was elected to head the NSC's secretariat. The military leadership continued to discuss changes on a variety of other issues, such as introducing

civilian supervision of military expenses, removing laws that had strengthened the military's autonomy (such as the prohibition on appealing military court decisions), and revising the role of soldiers in state protocol.

In addition to helping Turkey's military and civilian authorities manage their relations with each other, pressure from Brussels has sometimes also helped them avoid conflicts with some of their respective constituencies. The AKP, for example, can quiet its hard-core religious supporters who advocate removing the law banning women from wearing head scarves in universities and other public institutions by saying that the issue will have to be resolved in the context of EU negotiations. Likewise, the military can avoid negative reactions to its policy of accommodating Kurdish demands for reform by claiming that it must take such steps to satisfy the Copenhagen criteria. The prospect of EU membership has had the indirect effect, therefore, of mollifying radical constituents in both the civilian and military camps who might have encouraged more confrontational relations between the two groups.

IN THE EU'S COURT

There is little reason to think that the Turkish military will retreat from this pattern of reform anytime soon. Even moderate progress toward addressing the Kurdish question, the threat of political Islamism, and Turkey's economic problems will provide additional motivation for the Turkish military to continue its reforms—so long, that is, as those reforms do not challenge its internal integrity or that of Turkey at large. As the country's ultimate guardian, the military will carefully balance the EU's demands for reform, especially those regarding cultural diversity, with national security. And although so far it has relinquished some of its footholds in civilian institutions, the military may need to see more evidence that Turkey's march toward membership in the EU—a new guardian for stability—is irreversible before it gives up more of its traditional prerogatives.

There is within the Turkish military no inherent block to further progress. Despite its staunch commitment to Kemalism, the army has proved remarkably flexible over the years. Although the ideology has sometimes been considered an obstacle to EU membership because it promotes sovereignty, statism, and nationalism, it has in fact been adapted very well to suit new situations. The Turkish military has repeatedly redefined Kemalism to synchronize itself with—or, if necessary, to counterbalance—its environment. If the EU process reaches a level at which the military no longer feels the need to preserve the ideology in its current form in order to meet Turkey's security challenges, the TGS will redefine Kemalism again.

At this point, the EU itself may be the main threat to further reform. If it fails to show as great a commitment to Turkey's accession as Turkey has shown so far, the EU could jeopardize the grand consensus that brought Turkey's military and civilian authorities together. Like the TGS, AKP leaders have a great interest in seeing accession through. But they may have as great a stake in dragging out the process itself: the prospect of EU accession is so popular that as long as the AKP remains actively committed to the

negotiations, it can present itself as a centrist party, appeal to large segments of the population, and thus stay in power. The process also helps it keep the military's influence in check. For the military, however, the real prize is membership proper. If, despite all the reforms, full membership does not materialize, it is Turkey's military, not its politicians, that will be left trying to hold together an even more fragmented country.

The EU's decision last October to start membership negotiations with Turkey appears to be a positive sign. But problems are never far off, and Ankara's refusal to recognize Cyprus, the rise of the Islamists' power in Turkey, and Kurdish secessionism could prove to be obstacles to accession. If Kurdish separatists, failing to see a future for themselves in a European Turkey, continue to resort to violence, the Turkish military might hang on to its remaining prerogatives in the name of national security. Should the Islamists begin to fill in the gaps in state institutions created by the military's retreat, the TGS could decide to cling on to its power.

The key to further reform thus appears to be timing. The EU must bear in mind that it should not hasten to ask for the removal of the military's remaining footholds in Turkish civilian society. As it attempts to navigate the treacherous and destabilizing process of EU membership, the TGS is likely to hold on to the tools and methods it has long used to keep soldiers in line. And that might be just fine. Much like captains trying to dock an oil tanker in a new port, Turkey's top generals are impelled to steer Turkey's reform with the strategies they have developed over the years. Understandably, they will not relinquish their proven methods until they are confident that the port's onshore docking systems—the institutions, the policies, and, ultimately, the promises of the EU—are viable and will keep the tanker from crashing.

Seeing Turkey through a safe transformation is in everyone's best interest. For the Europeans, avoiding the Balkanization of their newest candidate member has obvious benefits. For the United States, a stable and democratic Turkey is a crucial asset for the prospect of regime change in the greater Middle East. And for the Turks, seeing further evidence that Turkey's military can still project national confidence during a time of radical change will ease the final stage of the country's historic journey toward modernization.
