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The Turkish Armed Forces in politics

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THE TURKISH ARMED FORCES IN POLITICS

THE END OF GUARDIANSHIP?

On 6 January 2012, General Ilker Basbug, one of Turkey's former Chiefs of Staff (2008–2010), was arrested on charges of founding and leading a terrorist group with the aim of toppling the government (HDN 2012). Basbug is the only former Chief of Staff in Turkey to be arrested in connection with ongoing investigations into alleged conspiracies against the government, but he is not alone. So far, more than 200 retired and active duty officers have been arrested on conspiracy charges, more than forty of them with the rank of general.

Six months earlier, on 31 July 2011, General Isik Kosaner, at the time Chief of Staff and Basbug's successor in the job, had resigned. The commanders of the country's Land, Air and Naval forces did likewise. General Necdet Özel, commander of the paramilitary Gendermerie, was subsequently appointed new Chief of Staff.

The immediate reason for the joint resignation of Kosaner and the other generals was a disagreement between the Turkish General Staff (TGS) and the government over the promotion of a number of senior officers under investigation for allegedly planning to topple the government. However, behind the decision to resign was a growing sense of frustration in the military leadership over the continued attempts of the government to curb the autonomy of the Armed Forces.

The resignation of a serving Chief of Staff and three of his force commanders in the face of political pressure, and the arrest of a former Chief of Staff on charges of terrorism, are unprecedented and would have been almost unthinkable in Turkey a decade ago. They can be taken as indications of the weakening political power of the Turkish Armed Forces, and the ongoing shift in the country towards civilianisation of civil–military ties.

Over the last ten years, relations between the religious-conservative AKP government (Adalet ve

Kalkinma Partisi (Justice and Development Party) – AKP) and the military leadership have varied from tense to confrontational. Government policies on religion and the Kurdish question have been viewed with great suspicion by the military leadership which fears for the secularist identity and national integrity of the Turkish state – the very principles they see themselves as responsible for guarding. The government for its part has managed to curb the autonomy of the military and its political influence by a variety of means, ranging from formal restrictions on military representation in civilian bodies, to allowing a number of conspiracy investigations against former and serving military officers.

In this article an attempt is made to outline the main changes in civil–military relations in Turkey during the last decade, present some of the explanations for these changes and, finally, discuss whether the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) will permanently withdraw from politics, or if it can retain its guardianship role in some form or another.

Turkey's importance in the international community is growing. As a strategic fulcrum between Europe, Asia and the Middle East, Turkey is important for the maintenance of security and stability in neighbouring regions, and for securing Western interests in the Middle East and Asia. Turkey has a large and growing population of 72 million, and would be the second largest country in the European Union if admitted as a member state. Turkey has also positioned itself as a main corridor for energy supplies to Europe, tying the question of political stability in the country to future developments in global energy markets. Politically, Turkey is a rare example of democracy in a country with a Muslim majority, and political developments in the country are followed with interest by other states in the Muslim world. Under the current AKP government, Ankara has pursued a more active and independent foreign policy towards countries such as China and Russia, and sought a role as facilitator and mediator in international con-

flicts and conflict areas such as Afghanistan, Iran, Syria and the Israel-Palestinian conflict. The Turkish Armed Forces are the second largest in NATO in terms of personnel, and Turkish forces participate in

NATO and UN-led operations far beyond the country's borders – for example in Afghanistan and the Bay of Aden.

CHANGES IN CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS IN TURKEY SINCE 2000

The military has been an important political actor in Turkey since the founding of the republic in 1923. Entrusted by law¹ with the dual task of protecting the state and guarding its founding principles, the military has played a decisive role in shaping the political course of the country – both from behind the scenes and by direct intervention in government. Since the first military coup in 1960, the role of TAF in politics has by and large been one of guardians. Nordlinger defines this guardian role as one in which the military seeks governmental control with the objective to preserve status quo and correct what they perceive as malpractices and deficiencies (1977, 22). According to Nilüfer Narli, “the military built what A. Robin Luckham defines as a ‘covert guardianship model’ that permitted it to use various forms of intervention, ranging from a coup to controlling and influencing the civilian political process through formal and informal mechanisms” (2011, 215). One could say that civilian governments during much of the republican period shared power with the military. Through its role as guardian of the Constitution, the military has had a powerful position in the affairs of state, and been able to decide the fate of governments and politicians. On four occasions (1960, 1971, 1980, 1997), the military has intervened directly to change the government. All were successful in the sense that the military was able to change the course of events in their own favour. Directly placed under the Prime Minister’s Office rather than the Ministry of Defence, the military has enjoyed sufficient autonomy to influence decisions by the political leadership on budgetary allocations to the Armed Forces (Bayramoglu and Insel 2009). The requirements of the military have also driven the rapid development of Turkey’s military industry. The Armed Forces Trust and Pension Fund (OYAK) long enjoyed special privileges in the markets, and is still one of the largest investment companies in Turkey with business interests in the manufacturing, com-

mercial, services and financial sectors (Akca 2010). The officer corps has been a privileged group in Turkish society, respected and trusted by the population and enjoying special privileges in the form of high quality education, secure employment, housing, and various other welfare benefits. Generally, the ties between the military and the population have been good and strong. Known for its adherence to law and order and incorrupt ways, the military has been the most trusted institution in the country, scoring much better in opinion polls than any civil-political organisation. Military interventions in politics were also, by and large, accepted by the population as a necessity in times of political unrest.

However, since the turn of the millennium, and in particular after 2002 when the religious-conservative AKP came to power, the character of civil-military relations in Turkey changed. Political, institutional and constitutional reforms have curbed the powers of the military to influence government decision-making process. The National Security Council, traditionally controlled by the military, is now dominated by civilians, and has also lost some of its ability to influence government decision-making. The military is no longer represented in institutions that oversee higher education and the media (Legendijk 2010, 12), and military judges no longer serve on the benches of the State Security Courts (Jenkins 2007, 347). Defence budgeting and procurement, largely exempt from accountability to elected representatives in the past, are now at least partly under parliamentary oversight and can be subjected to auditing (Narli 2009, 67–71). With a few notable exceptions, the General Staff has also been more restrained in issuing statements on political issues during the last decade compared to previous decades. The civilian government has also demonstrated great will and capability to influence matters of military importance, such as the appointment of

top military leaders – matters that used to considered internal matters for the military to decide and the government to approve. With a new constitution in the making, the Armed Forces will likely be organisationally placed under a strengthened Ministry of Defence, rather than the PM's office, with the government attempting to change the constitutional

articles and laws legitimising the guardianship role of the military

In sum, one can say that, until the turn of the millennium, civil–military relations in Turkey were characterised by relatively weak civil-political institutions, on the one hand, and a strong military institution on the other. However, during the last decade, power relations have changed in favour of the civilian institutions.

FACTORS PROMOTING THE CIVILIANISATION OF CIVIL–MILITARY TIES

Two external and four internal factors are often cited as explanations of the diminishing political role of the TAF over the last decade. (1) The EU harmonisation process has required reforms to secure civilian supremacy over the Armed Forces and greater transparency in its affairs; (2) changes in national threat perceptions since the 1990s have meant that many issues that were formerly seen as matters of security to be handled by the TGS, are now defined as matters of policy to be handled by the civilian government; (3) since 2001 Turkey has enjoyed a decade of almost unprecedented political stability, with majority governments with both the intent and capability to curb the political power of the military; (4) a new elite with more conservative religious values has become prominent within political institutions, the state bureaucracy, education and business, marginalising the traditional Kemalist elite, an important segment of which comprises high-ranking officers; (5) there has been an apparent change of perception within the officer corps regarding the military's guardianship role, making some senior officers more receptive to the idea of civilian supremacy; and (6) public opinion, while still supportive of a strong military, has grown less positive to the idea of military intervention in politics.

The first and most important external factor is Turkey's bid for membership of the European Union. After four decades of starting and stopping, the door to Turkish membership negotiations was finally opened in 1999. However, the process of EU accession required Turkey to enact certain political reforms. Among these reforms was the establishment of civilian supremacy and oversight over the coun-

try's Armed Forces. To comply with EU demands, Turkey reduced or terminated military representation in civilian government bodies, introduced greater transparency in defence spending and defence policy making, and improved parliamentary oversight of the military (Sarigil 2011, 272; Narli 2009, 57). These reforms were the result of a grand compromise between the major political forces in Turkey which saw them as necessary concessions for future membership in the Union. The reforms were also accepted by the General Staff – even if they meant the military lost autonomy and political influence. The TAF have always supported modernisation of Turkey and democratisation of the country's political system, and perceived EU membership as an important step forward for Turkey to become a democratic European country with a strong economy and a modern army. The military also believed that the process leading to EU membership offered the best options to confront domestic challenges such as Islamism and Kurdish separatism (Aydinli et al. 1986, 84-85).

Second, changes in Turkey's national threat perceptions during the 1990s resulted in a reduced role for the Armed Forces in politics. Traditional security issues were gradually re-defined as political matters to be dealt with by the government rather than the general staff. Communism, Kurdish separatism and Islamism had long been perceived as principal challenges to the integrity of the Turkish state. In addition, there was the long-lasting dispute with Greece – mainly over the question of Cyprus – and a tense relationship with many of Turkey's neighbours to the East: Iran, Iraq and Syria. However, the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of the

Cold War in 1991; the shutting down of the Islamist Welfare Party after the so-called “soft” military coup in 1997; the capture and sentencing of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan in 1999; and the rapprochement between Greece and Turkey from the late 1990s, all led to a reassessment in Turkey of national security challenges and how best to respond to them. In particular, after the 1999 capture of Öcalan and a reduction in violence after years of armed struggle against Kurdish militants, a new and more political approach to the whole Kurdish question gained traction. This new approach was also supported by the military, which, by the turn of the millennium, had grown weary of its inability to eradicate the threat posed by political extremism, and therefore more willing to consider a political response to security questions (Aydinli et al. 2006, 86). The relationship with Syria improved markedly after the expulsion of Öcalan from his refuge in Damascus, and closer trade relations with Iraq and Iran were established. During the last decade, Turkey has also actively sought to engage its neighbouring countries in political dialogue and economic cooperation – using so-called “soft power” to achieve foreign and security policy goals. These developments have contributed to a more general shift in responsibility for and expertise on security policy issues from the TGS to government ministries, reducing further the role of the TGS in security policy formation.

Third, Turkey has been enjoying a long period of political stability since the early 2000s, under three majority governments formed by the AKP. During the same period the country experienced strong and sustained economic growth, adding to the popularity of and support for the AKP – also from constituencies that do not identify with the religious aspects of the party. This has greatly empowered the civilian government, enabling it to change existing institutions and practices. Civilianisation of civil–military relations has been an important goal of the AKP, and because of its parliamentary majority and large voter constituency, it has been possible for the government to push for reform of this sector. The strong performance of the AKP has also made it difficult for the military to influence government policy, or to counter measures by the government to curb the autonomy of the Armed Forces. Under the favourable political

and economic circumstances enjoyed by Turkey in recent years, the General Staff would have been hard pressed to find the necessary legitimacy or public support for yet another intervention in politics.

The change in civil–military relations in Turkey can also be linked to the circulation of elites in the country over the last three decades, starting in earnest with the liberalising reforms introduced under the Özal governments in the 1980s and 1990s. The emergence of new elites deprived the military of many of its former allies in the state apparatus, the business community, institutions of higher education and the media, and made it more difficult to influence and intervene in the political decision-making process. Elites in Turkey can be broadly divided into two ideological categories: a secularist or Kemalist elite² dominating state, politics and business for most of the period after 1923; and an Islamist counter-elite that rose to prominence during the 1980s and 1990s (Göle 1997). Due to their role as guardians of the republic, senior military officers have constituted a central group within the Kemalist elite, and a bastion for the defence of Kemalist values. While not strictly Islamist, the background of many leaders in the AKP is similar to that of the Islamist counter-elite described by Göle. Beginning in the 1990s, and in particular after the coming to power of the AKP in 2002, this new elite, espousing more conservative and religious values than the traditional secular establishment, rose to positions of power in state institutions, the business community, media and the universities – including former Kemalist strongholds such as the judiciary and Ministry of Foreign Affairs. One could therefore say that the military elite, being staunch defenders of Kemalism, has become more isolated as other elite groups within the state, politics and business have become more diverse.

Fifth, militaries are often analysed as unitary systems possessed of a strong esprit de corps, whose active members express and support one official line on questions concerning the role of the military in politics and society. However, as the history of civil–military relations in the Turkish Republic shows, there were always differences of opinions in the officer corps concerning the necessity of intervening in politics and the goals of such interventions.³ Accord-

ing to Metin Heper and Ersel Aydinli, among others, there seem today to be different factions within the officer corps on the interpretation and exercise of Kemalism and the guardianship role of the TAF. From the early 1980s onwards, Heper writes, at least some members of the senior military leadership began to question the wisdom of military interventions in politics. General Hilmi Özkök, Chief of General Staff 2002–2006, took this debate further by suggesting that Kemalism was a world-view open to change, not a closed system of thought – an ideology (Heper 2011, 242). According to Aydinli, there appear to be two distinct factions within the officer corps when it comes to the role of the military in politics. Traditionalists (or absolutists) who insist that the military must retain an active role in the political process to secure outcomes that are in line with strict Kemalist thinking; and reformists (or gradualists) who support further civilianisation and accept a more withdrawn role for the military (Aydinli 2011, 228–232). While it is difficult to identify the leanings of recent Chiefs of Staff in relation to these camps, general Hilmi Özkök (2002–2006) and the current Chief of Staff, general Necdet Özel (2011–), both seem to belong to the gradualists. The picture is less clear when it comes to Yasar Büyükanit (2006–2008), Ilker Basbug (2008–2010) and Isik Kosaner (2010–2011), who, at least in some of their political statements, seem to have harboured more traditionalist views than Özkök and Özel.

Finally, the public's opinion of the Armed Forces has changed. The TAF is still the most popular and trusted institution in the country, notwithstanding

END OF GUARDIANSHIP?

Given the changes in civil–military relations in Turkey over the last decade, the question must be asked what the future role of the Turkish Armed Forces in politics will be. Is the traditional guardianship role of the TAF in Turkish politics over?

Zeki Sarigil has described three different outcomes for civil–military relations in Turkey in the future: (1) the military will continue to intervene in politics and retain its public popularity; (2) the military will con-

tinue to intervene in politics at the cost of popularity and legitimacy in society; and (3) the military will withdraw from politics while keeping a prestigious and trustworthy position (Sarigil 2011, 275). As Sarigil points out, scenario number two seems the least likely of the three. The strong bond between the military and the public in Turkey, and the importance of this bond for the legitimacy and prestige of the Armed Forces, makes it highly improbable that the large number of senior officers accused of conspiracy and coup plans, but popular support for military intervention in politics seems to be on the wane (Sarigil 2011, 270–276). This change can be said to reflect the consolidation of Turkish democracy, signalling the start of an era when military interventions may no longer be feasible or desired (Aydinli 2011, 236). Public opinion matters greatly to the General Staff. The strong bond between the Army and the population is a historical legacy of almost mythical proportions in Turkey (Narli 2009, 61), and the Armed Forces owe much of their privileged status to the support they enjoy in the population. Among military officers there is a sense of superiority and a strong disdain and distrust of politicians and politics, but not of the citizens of the country (Sarigil 2011, 275). On the contrary, whenever the military leadership decided to intervene, it was often done in the name of the nation and the people, and despite the brutality sometimes meted out by military regimes on left-wing political activists, Kurdish and Islamist groups, these interventions have by and large been perceived as legitimate and necessary by the public at large. One could say that there has almost been an expectation in Turkish society that the military would intervene if the civilian government proved unable to act decisively in the face of external and internal threats. Given the special relationship between the military and society in Turkey, the shift in public opinion against military interventions in politics has most likely mattered to the TGS and been important in its considerations of how to respond to the policies of the government.

tinue to intervene in politics at the cost of popularity and legitimacy in society; and (3) the military will withdraw from politics while keeping a prestigious and trustworthy position (Sarigil 2011, 275).

As Sarigil points out, scenario number two seems the least likely of the three. The strong bond between the military and the public in Turkey, and the importance of this bond for the legitimacy and prestige of the Armed Forces, makes it highly improbable that

the military leadership will continue to intervene in the political process if such interventions are highly unpopular and perceived as illegitimate.

Scenario three is probably the most likely. It can be argued that as Turkey is adjusting to European Union norms, and indeed to a changing international environment, the political role of the Armed Forces must also change. There is simply no room or need for a military overseeing or guiding governments on security policy and defence issues. Enduring political stability, the emergence of new elite groups with a different world-view from that of the traditional Kemalist establishment, and a growing public opinion against military interventions, have also eroded much of the legitimacy of and opportunity for further military interventions. Even if the military leadership perceived a need to intervene against the civilian government today, it is difficult to see how it could be done with any legitimacy or support from civilian groups or the general public. Parts of the officer corps also seem to question the very idea of military intervention, preferring to keep a low political profile and cooperating with the government. This attitude is probably enhanced by the ongoing legal processes against retired and serving officers accused of conspiracy. It seems reasonable, then, to conclude that if current trends in Turkish politics, economy and society are to continue, the military will, over time, give up its traditional guardianship role, accept civilian supremacy, thus retaining a prestigious and trustworthy position in society.

However, there may be reason for caution about the future role of the Armed Forces in Turkish politics. The current situation with a strong civilian government and a politically quiescent military is not unprecedented in Turkish history. During the 1950s, Turkey was ruled by the Democrat Party under the leadership of Prime Minister Adnan Menderes. The Menderes government strengthened civilian control of the Armed Forces, and changed the chain of command, obliging the Chief of Staff to report to the Minister of Defence instead of directly to the Prime Minister. Amidst growing authoritarianism and political turmoil in the latter half of the decade, elements within the officer corps decided to intervene

and staged Turkey's first military coup in 1960. Following the coup, institutional mechanisms to safeguard the political influence of the Armed Forces were reinstated and strengthened (Hale 1994, 88–113). While today's situation is, of course, very different from that of the 1950s, the events leading up to the 1960 coup are a reminder of the changeability of civil–military relations in Turkey – both in the direction of civilianisation and reversals back to militarisation. The last decade in Turkey has been characterised by increasingly close interaction with Europe and other neighbouring regions, political stability and strong economic growth. These developments have been accompanied by a reduction in the political role of the military, and a growing opinion in society against military interventions. The question is whether this picture would change in the face of a national crisis – set off by growing external and/or internal security threats, increasing political instability, a severe economic downturn or (most likely) a combination of all three. As mentioned several times already, while the public is against military interventions in politics at the moment, the polls also indicate the military is still the most trusted institution in Turkish society. Also, as referred to above, a faction of the senior officers still stands firm on the principle of the military's political guardianship role. This role is very much part of the officers' ethos, which in turn is rooted in the perceived historical cause of the Armed Forces (Jenkins 2001, 33–35), and goes beyond the various constitutional articles and legal codes often said to make up the legal basis of military interventions (Sarigil 2011, 274). It is therefore not inconceivable that the Armed Forces will decide to intervene in politics again given a situation in which such intervention will be welcomed by Turkish society as a way to stabilise a crisis situation which the civilian authorities seem unable to handle on their own. Such a situation would also give impetus to the traditionalists among the senior officers and motivate them to take action. It would resemble Sarigil's scenario 1, where political intervention by the military can be carried out without loss of popularity or legitimacy.

ENDNOTES

- 1 The three main laws relating to the status and legal responsibilities of the Turkish Armed Forces are: The Turkish Constitution (1982), The Turkish Armed Forces Internal Service Law (1961), and The National Security Council Law (1983) (Jenkins 2001, 42).
- 2 Broadly speaking, the Kemalist elite has been made up by a cultural and economic alliance between the state elite in Ankara and the Istanbul-based capitalists who for many years were dominant in Turkey's regulated economy. This alliance was based on an agreement over secularism and the Kemalist ideology. Economic liberalisation under the governments headed by Prime Minister Turgut Özal (1983-1989) paved the way for a religious-conservative Anatolian bourgeoisie that eventually became an ideological and political challenge to the secularists (Yavuz 2009, 52).
- 3 For a comprehensive account of civil-military relations in Turkey from the last years of the Ottoman Empire until the early 1990s, see William Hale. 1994. *Turkish Politics and the Military*, London: Routledge.

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