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Turkey Under the AKP

CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS TRANSFORMED

Ersel Aydınli

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The traditional image of Turkish civil-military relations is well known: Weak elected officials carry out the day-to-day business of government while a strong, popular military establishment keeps its eye on them, ready to step in and mount the occasional coup d'état in order to keep the national modernization process on track. Recent years, however, have seen this picture transformed. Not only have the civilian politicians gained in strength and prestige, but the generals seem ready—or at least resigned—to see the military's influence shrink.

How has this happened, will it last, and what does it suggest about prospects for democratic consolidation in Turkey? In order to frame answers to such questions, a brief look back will be helpful. The main characteristic of the traditional style of civil-military relations *alla turca* lies in the armed services' particular view of civilian politics. Since the Liberation War (1919–22) that forged the modern Republic of Turkey out of part of the old Ottoman Empire, military leaders have considered themselves the nation's watchdogs. In their opinion, civilian politicians fall short of full trustworthiness since they represent all the potential divisions (religious, ideological, and ethnic) that might jeopardize the safety of the hard-won Republic and the course of modernization that it was set upon by its founder (himself the most famous of all Turkish military men), Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881–1938).

Senior military officers evinced a desire to stay “above” politics and politicians in the sense both of remaining unsullied by them and of retaining control over them. In keeping with this dual attitude, the generals staged frequent coups—four between 1960 and the “postmodern

coup” of 1997—but kept the actual periods of military government to intervals of a few years or less.

As accompaniments to its lofty position, the Turkish military enjoyed a range of both formal and informal powers, prerogatives, and perquisites. Until fairly recently, the uniformed chiefs of the armed services were able to dominate civilian cabinets by means of the National Security Council, a body through which the generals in effect laid down policy guidelines on a range of topics, with ministers more or less bound to comply. Moreover, military budgets and spending were free of close parliamentary scrutiny, military courts operated apart from civilian authority, the military had substantial domestic police and intelligence-gathering capabilities through the Gendarmerie, and the military establishment even ran its own businesses. In short, it showed some of the characteristics of what some might call a “state within a state,” which makes it easier to understand how it could periodically stage coups, as it did in 1960, 1971, 1980, and 1997.¹

In recent years, relations between Turkey’s political and military realms have been going through a deep structural transformation toward a more democratic, civilian-dominated system. Barring unexpected reversals in this trend, civilians and soldiers, as well as citizens and scholars, will need to get used to Turkey’s new, though still evolving, civil-military paradigm.²

The transformation stems from dynamics within the military itself as well as from outside causes. Turning first to the internal factors, we can make a further distinction between those related to the military’s practices and those related to certain characteristics in the military’s nature. For decades, the Turkish military had virtual *carte blanche* in its autonomous practices. Viewed as the country’s most-trusted public institution, the military received little or no criticism. It ran unchecked into excesses such as covert disinformation and psychological operations meant to discredit civilian figures who had drawn the generals’ ire. Years of being able to do what they liked without even verbal opposition made officers overconfident and blinded them to the ferment that was taking place among civilian politicians and bureaucrats.

The military’s complacent “business as usual” persistence in its dubious practices had the cumulative effect of alienating its allies in Turkish society. Each coup, though conducted with fairly broad public support, nevertheless caused irreparable damage to military ties with this or that social sector. In 1970, the military gravely disappointed left-wing revolutionary groups by deserting them and intervening in politics on the side of the center-right status quo and the Western alliance. Ten years later, the military not only crushed the leftists, but also jailed nationalists who had been fighting alongside the state against communists. With the “postmodern coup” (orchestrated through the National Security Council) of 28 February 1997 against Islamist pre-

mier Necmettin Erbakan of the Welfare Party, the military lost many of its remaining “friends” and made enemies of the liberal intellectuals and journalists who found themselves blacklisted alongside Islamists during this period. Even worse, the anti-Islamist rhetoric of generals such as Çevik Bir and Güven Erkaya became so extreme that even the moderately pious among Turkey’s 96 percent Muslim population could take offense or feel threatened.³

Before long, these alienated circles would be lending crucial support to the overhaul of civil-military relations. All militaries must care to some degree about public good will, but Turkey’s is in a special class, for it has, for all intents and purposes, long been the country’s leading undeclared political party. As such, isolation and dependence on a small base of ultrasecularist supporters were conditions that it could ill afford.

The military lost not only friends but face. The events surrounding the 1997 coup revealed mistakes and operational inefficiencies that took some of the shine off the military’s reputation even in the eyes of those not overtly opposed to its interventions in politics. As external scrutiny and critical commentary increased, military leaders responded erratically. For example, when state prosecutors claimed to have found evidence of military plans to move against Islamists, the army’s chief of staff dismissed the alleged document as an unsubstantiated “piece of paper.” When the signed original soon became public, the military had to backtrack, making it look incompetent if not downright deceptive. By adding the disillusioned to the ranks of the alienated, the military was undermining its own position.

Divisions Within, Pressures Without

Other sources of the shift in civil-military relations can be traced to the nature of the Turkish military itself. Despite appearances of institutional unity, divisions within the military establishment are nothing new. A prominent one separates soldiers with generally urban and elite “early modernizer” or civil-service backgrounds from their comrades with more traditional and nonelite rural roots. Although the military’s training regimen aims to make the latter more like the former, it has never fully eliminated this divide.

A subtler ideological split distinguishes officers who favor rapid and military-directed strides (not excluding coups) toward modernizing and Westernizing Turkey from those inclined toward a more gradual approach that trusts civilians more. The former (we might call them the “absolutists”) believe that until Turkish society and politics mature, they must be carefully guided by the strong hand of the state and, above all, by its armed forces. The latter (or “gradualist”) group argues that coups and other harsh tactics are counterproductive and that working with the civilians is a better way of achieving modernization.

Divisions such as these were essential to the transformation of the civilian-military relationship because they provided the basis for the pact-making seen in so many cases of democratization.⁴ With such differences present in senior-officer ranks, it became possible for transformation-seekers both in civilian office and in uniform to find potential negotiating partners along the tricky path to change.

For eight decades after the Republic's founding, the absolutists ruled the military's inner councils. Not even NATO membership or closeness to the EU could change this, since outside parties either felt a keen interest in avoiding anything that might weaken Turkish arms or remained content to treat Turkey as an exception. As the Cold War ended and the twentieth century drew to a close, however, it was becoming clear that the absolutist approach was failing to resolve several domestic problems and proving an increasingly problematic anachronism in the eyes of the international community. In a process aided by the EU's accession requirements,⁵ cooperation between civilians and the more gradualist elements in the military came to seem the better path forward.

At the same time that external ideological pressures were encouraging the erosion of absolutist viewpoints, concrete pressures against the older model of civil-military relations also began to build. The key event was the 2002 electoral victory (since repeated in 2007 and 2011) of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) under onetime Erbakan associate Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. With the ironic help of a feature built into the constitution by the military regime of the early 1980s (a high 10 percent threshold for party representation in parliament), the Islamic-oriented AKP emerged as a dominant ruling party in place of the unsteady multiparty coalitions that had long followed each other in and out of office in Ankara.

With the AKP successful at providing coherent governance and economic growth, and Turkish society as a whole becoming more confident and assertive, the political space available for the military to occupy has shrunk. The media, for example, no longer comprises a relative handful of newspapers and television stations, but now includes dozens of new outlets. Postsecondary education is expanding as well, and larger numbers of Turkish citizens are gaining access to diverse ideas. And perhaps of most immediate importance, a new business class is rising rapidly in wealth and influence, spearheaded by entrepreneurs from the heartland region of Anatolia. The world of civilian politics, in short, is becoming enriched and expanded. The military's traditional junior partners from elite bureaucratic circles and the old-money realm of state-favored industry have to a large degree been pushed aside by the newly wealthy "Anatolian tigers" and the AKP. With a strength stemming from numbers and diversity, the new-model civilian powers can afford to question old governing styles and standard operating procedures such as the military's role in politics.

The most concrete example of such “pushback” and questioning is the pressure that has been exerted on the absolutists and their civilian supporters since 2007 in connection with the massive Ergenekon investigation. This complicated and long-running criminal inquiry has purported to expose a secret organization, allegedly tied to the military and national-security establishment, that has carried out various violent *agent provocateur* operations as a means of undermining the AKP government.⁶ While shifts in norms have provided an important backdrop to paradigmatic change, the spectacle of high-ranking officers being prosecuted and jailed on charges of threatening civilian authority has taken a major toll on the absolutists.

Whether one finds all the evidence and charges in the Ergenekon cases to be credible or agrees with the underlying goals of the investigation itself, one cannot help but be impressed by the strength and confidence that the civilians have shown in pushing this matter as far as they have. Most notably, the politicians have learned to use certain security agencies, primarily the regular civilian police, against the security establishment’s own previously dominant circles—a fascinating display of Turkey’s divided governance system, in which cops working for the elected civilian *government* of the day are targeting that supreme institution of the permanent unelected *state*, the army.⁷

The civilian government has been carefully walking a tightrope, allowing newly emerging networks in some areas of the security establishment (the main such network is associated with the Islamic movement led by Fethullah Gülen) to flush out and prosecute antigovernment elements in the army.⁸ This quiet cooperation has placed major new deterrent power in the hands of the civilian governing elite. Although numerous controversies and doubts remain about the civilians’ motives, the outcome of the situation has been to introduce a counterbalancing force that can at least “push back” against the longstanding influence of the military over political life.

The Future of the New Paradigm

Absolutism among the Turkish military appears to be in irreversible decline, and the gradualists seem to have won. But one could argue that the normative shift is going farther—toward a fuller subordination of the military to civilian authority that would surpass the still somewhat antidemocratic framework and assumptions of old-line gradualism. A sign of this further shift can be seen in evolving public reactions to Article 35, the section of the Turkish Armed Forces Internal Service Code that declares the military’s “duty” to “watch over” the Republic, whose words generals traditionally cite as a rationale for political intervention. When former army chief General Hilmi Özkök, a key gradualist, was quoted in 2007 as saying that Article 35 was a

natural brake that the politicians needed “because they sometimes go too far,”⁹ reaction was muted. By contrast, when his successor General Işık Koşaner said in mid-2011 that the article was not actually necessary because the duty that it announced would remain the military’s “natural, historical mission” in any case, media and political reaction was immediate and overwhelmingly negative.¹⁰ Similarly, recent reports and assessments originating from within the armed forces themselves all agree that Article 35 needs to be lifted.¹¹ Throughout these discussions and even the Ergenekon arrests, the current military leadership has remained largely quiescent. Service commanders and staff chiefs (including General Koşaner) did act as one in requesting retirement in late July 2011 as a protest against fresh Ergenekon arrests, but their gesture made hardly a ripple as new appointees took their places.

In the old paradigm of Turkish civil-military relations, the system could best be described as one in which military leaders presented their expert ideas about what they deemed national threats and then proceeded to act according to their own lights in countering them. In the new system, the military still presents expert opinions, but it is now civilian authorities who ultimately decide what the threats are and what to do about them. This is not to say, however, that we should expect to see a purely U.S. or West European model of civil-military relations become a reality in Turkey. Instead, it is more likely that the Turkish military will retain a large measure of special prestige and weigh more heavily in final national-security decision making than is the case in the West, but within a democratic framework. Rather than being rejected as still “imperfect” by Western standards, this Turkish model might be seen as containing an appropriate element of balance against unleashed civilian power. Perhaps it may also offer Turkey an optimal mix of civilian and military influence, given the country’s position in an unstable neighborhood, the continuing domestic and international security threats that it faces, and its consequent need for a strong military.

As a side benefit, the advent of civilian supremacy could strengthen the military as a fighting force. Armies that act as “political outfits” often become notoriously distracted from the actual business of soldiering. In Turkey, whole units have sometimes been focused solely on preparing top officers for interactions with civilian politicians, and senior commanders have spent inordinate amounts of time and energy on such dealings. Under the new paradigm, senior leaders can be free of such burdens and commit themselves more fully and directly to the operation and improvement of the institution itself. Moreover, civilian oversight of the military should bring with it a greater sense of civilian “ownership” and thus fuller support. Given the civilians’ apparent goal of expanding Turkey’s role as regional power, they will certainly need a potent military. Thus civilian control may ironically foster a military

that is not only more concerned with events beyond Turkey's borders but also (in the purely military sense) more powerful.

Where to Go from Here?

Normative change is taking place, but it needs to be backed by institutional change. This must include moving the Turkish military into a new defense ministry, one in which civilian and military expertise can be integrated, but where elected civilian authority has the last word. Although the military has been agreeing in principle with the changes that are under way, it has so far not made effective moves toward active transformation, such as setting up a strategic unit for handling the reform process in the short and long terms. The generals are not only on the defensive, but also genuinely at sea—they have, after all, no precedent for such a transformation. It is vital therefore, that the civilians handle their side of the process carefully.

First, the civilians must provide the military, and particularly its remaining absolutist circles, with an honorable exit rather than continued humiliation. Militaries run on feelings—of honor, pride, patriotism, and *esprit de corps*—that civilians' own sense of enlightened self-interest should lead them to respect. At the moment, the Turkish armed forces appear under fire (more than 15 percent of active generals are in prison), supported only by sporadic civilian rhetoric about the military's ongoing "importance." At a minimum, civilians should find methods of handling the Ergenekon trials more quickly and discreetly, and should consider offering amnesty to those who are charged. Turkey will also need a combined civil-military advisory council—it should comprise serving and retired officers as well as key civilians—in order to help the armed forces manage their withdrawal from undue political involvement without damaging their strength as a purely military organization. This council should advise parliament on how to redefine the military's institutional position within the new round of constitutional changes that the nation is currently debating.

It is important to keep in mind that some of the civilians currently handling the reform process see themselves as victims of the military's earlier interventions. Such individuals have a duty to treat the current situation not as a chance for revenge, but rather as an opportunity to set up standards that will become touchstones for a new era of civil-military relations in a modern, democratic Turkey. Absent civilian self-restraint, the military will continue to play an undue political role—only this time less as a haughty intervener than as the tool of a new set of elites.

Looking to the military establishment itself, two immediate suggestions can be offered. First, the promotions system needs a complete overhaul to make it more objective and transparent, with clear provisions for oversight and redress. The new system must ensure that junior

officers can trust more in the value of doing their jobs well and worry less about currying favor with higher-ups (as in the current flawed system that encourages cliques to form and officers to carry out questionable orders for the sake of advancement).¹²

Second, military training in this country of universal male conscription also needs reform. Currently, the military's key officer cadres come from a handful of high schools and university-level institutions whose internal affairs, including curriculum, teaching staff, and management, are completely under the military's bureaucratic and ideological control. One suggestion is to abolish military training at the high-school level so that the young and impressionable will no longer be exposed to indoctrination. Another suggestion would be to allow civilian university graduates into the system in order to broaden the scope of thinking and attitudes within the ranks. Once charged with producing statesmen and leaders for the country, military training should now be about producing excellent military leaders who are ready to work with civilians, under the latter's authority, for a better Turkey.

In dealing with the changing civil-military picture in Turkey, the international community must maintain a balance. A democratizing Turkey needs a military that is subordinate to duly constituted civilian authority, but this military must remain efficient and strong if Turkey is to serve as a realistic model for other Middle Eastern countries in an era of political ferment. International support for new-model civil-military relations should thus be marked by a certain caution, and not be directed exclusively toward eroding the military's strength.

Finally, it is necessary to ask whether there is any chance that Turkey's civil-military transformation process will be halted or thrown off course. Perhaps the most significant threat to continued reform is the Kurdish question, which includes the thorny security problem posed by the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) and its use of violence both within Turkey and from bases in northern Iraq. If the civilian leadership fails to show good judgment and maturity in handling this issue, which has cost tens of thousands of lives over the last few decades, the country could become destabilized. Should that occur, the possibility always remains for a push—societal and military—to return to the old paradigm under conditions that will benefit no one. All must therefore take whatever steps are needed to ensure that this does not happen.

NOTES

1. For more detailed discussion on the distinctiveness of Turkish civil-military relations, see Ersel Aydınli, "A Paradigmatic Shift for the Turkish Generals and an End to the Coup Era in Turkey," *Middle East Journal* 63 (Autumn 2009): 581–96; Zeki Sarigil, "Civil-Military Relations Beyond Dichotomy: With Special Reference to Turkey," *Turkish Studies* 12 (June 2011): 265–78.

2. For recent works on this evolving model, see Metin Heper, "Civil-Military Relations in Turkey: Toward a Liberal Model?" *Turkish Studies* 12 (June 2011): 241–52; Ali L. Karaosmanoğlu, "Transformation of Turkey's Civil-Military Relations Culture and International Environment," *Turkish Studies* 12 (June 2011): 253–64; Ersel Aydınli, "Ergenekon, New Pacts, and the Decline of the Turkish 'Inner State,'" *Turkish Studies* 12 (June 2011): 227–39.

3. In the Istanbul newspaper *Zaman* on 27 October 2009, General Nusret Taşdeler publicly noted a decrease in the number of institutions with which the armed forces can cooperate, saying that much of the media, business world, unions, universities, NGOs, and even a major portion of the public can no longer be considered as "with the military."

4. See, for example, Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies*, vol. 4 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).

5. For more on the EU accession process and the Turkish military's transformation, see Meltem Müftüler-Baç, "Turkey's Political Reforms and the Impact of the European Union," *South European Society and Politics* 10 (March 2005): 16–30; Aylin Güney and Petek Karatekelioğlu, "Turkey's EU Candidacy and Civil-Military Relations: Challenges and Prospects," *Armed Forces and Society* 31 (Spring 2005): 439–62.

6. For more on Ergenekon, see Gareth Jenkins, *Between Fact and Fantasy: Turkey's Ergenekon Investigation* (Washington, D.C.: SAIS Central Asia–Caucasus Institute, 2009).

7. For more on the duality of state and government in Turkey, see Ersel Aydınli, "Governments vs. States: Decoding Dual Governance in the Developing World," *Third World Quarterly* 31, no. 5 (2010): 693–707.

8. Fethullah Gülen is a Sufi Muslim leader and activist, currently living in the United States and directing the "Gülen Movement." The movement is primarily known internationally for running a series of schools and universities in which the curriculum includes the Turkish language. In Turkey, the movement is rather more controversial because of the role it is seen to play in politics in support of the AKP.

9. General Özkök is quoted in Fikret Bila, *Komutanlar Cephesi* [The commanders' front] (Istanbul: Detay Yayinlari, 2007), 251.

10. For just one example, see articles that appeared in the Istanbul newspaper *Radikal* on 30 August 2011.

11. Ali L. Karaosmanoğlu, *Silahlı Kuvvetler ve Demokrasi, Rapor 33* [The armed forces and democracy, Report 33] (Istanbul: Bilgesam, 2011); Tanel Demirel, *2000'li Yıllarda Asker ve Siyaset: Kontrollü Değişim ile Statüko Arasında Türk Ordusu* [The Turkish military and politics since 2000: Between reform and the status quo] (Ankara: SETA Analiz, 2010).

12. The promotion problem has long been noted. See, for example, Mehmet Ali Bırand, *Emret Komutanım* [Yes, commander] (Ankara: Milliyet Yayinlari, 1986).