

# Continuity and change: prospects for civil–military relations in Turkey

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Early indications suggest that the appointment of General Yaşar Büyükanıt as chief of the Turkish general staff (TGS) at the end of August 2006 marked a new era in civil–military relations in the country. Under Büyükanıt's predecessor, General Hilmi Özkök, the TGS had adopted a relatively low public profile, leading to speculation that the TGS had begun an irreversible withdrawal from the political arena. That such a judgement was, at best, premature was demonstrated within weeks of Büyükanıt becoming chief of staff, as the country's leading military commanders all delivered public statements warning of the threat posed to Turkey by Islamic fundamentalism. Yet it would be a mistake to see the military's more forthright attitude under Büyükanıt simply as a return to the past. The extent to which the military can influence politics in Turkey has never been constant or—with the exception of a brief period of direct military rule from 1980 to 1983—total, but has varied according to changes in the prevailing domestic political circumstances: falling during times of stability and confidence and rising during times of uncertainty.

Over the past 50 years, the Turkish military has ousted four civilian governments. Each of these interventions has had its own unique characteristics, differing not only in itself but also in terms of the extent of the support and involvement of the rest of Turkish society.

The military has never been popular on the extreme left or the radical Islamist right of the Turkish political spectrum. Yet the military consistently ranks first in any public opinion poll of the most respected institutions in the country. Nevertheless, there have often been variations both in the degree of public respect and in public support for the military playing a role in the political arena. These variations have been smallest among the mass of the population and greatest among members of the intelligentsia, who are often highly critical of the military during periods of stability but still have a tendency to turn to it in times of crisis.

Even if it has demonstrated an ability to adapt the manner in which it chooses to fulfill them, there has been less variation in the Turkish military's own perception of its role and responsibilities. Over the past 70 years, the Turkish military has consistently regarded itself not only as the guarantor of domestic stability and the guardian of the official ideology of Kemalism but also as the embodiment of the soul of the Turkish nation.

## The military, nation, society and Kemalism

Soldiering has always played a central role in Turkish culture. The first appearance in the historical record of the people called ‘Turks’ was as raiding nomads and mercenaries from Central Asia. The Ottoman empire, too, was ‘an army before it was anything else’,<sup>1</sup> created and sustained through conquest and, at least initially, designed for and invigorated by territorial expansion. Ottoman society extolled martial virtues and values, albeit typically those of the romantic raider rather than those of the military as an institution. Indeed, during the late Ottoman empire in particular, conscription was deeply unpopular and desertion a constant problem.

Nevertheless, the Ottoman officer corps was at the forefront of the efforts to modernize the empire and, during what has become known in English as the era of the Young Turks, effectively ruled the empire in the decade leading up to its defeat at the end of the First World War. It was also former members of the Ottoman officer corps, led by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881–1938), who founded the Turkish Republic in 1923. Atatürk not only sought to create a secular, homogenized nation-state out of the Anatolian rump of the Ottoman empire but actively encouraged the identification between the nascent nation and its military. Himself a former Ottoman general, Atatürk appears to have been influenced by the ideas of General Colmar Freiherr von der Goltz (1843–1916), the German general appointed to restructure and revitalize the Ottoman officer corps in the nineteenth century. Von der Goltz’s classic *Das Volk in Waffen* (‘The nation in arms’) was translated into Turkish in 1884 and was recommended reading for all Ottoman military cadets. The treatise called on the military to play an active role in reshaping society and regarded the armed forces as representing almost the distilled essence of the nation.

From the early 1930s this concept of a military nation was vigorously inculcated through the education system. Schoolchildren were taught not only that Turks had always been soldiers but that they had always been members of an organized army. Even today the Turkish army still traces its origins back to 209 BC, when the Hun leader Mete Hun reportedly first formed an organized army;<sup>2</sup> and the TGS claims that, throughout history, ‘by personally devoting themselves to the military profession Turks have demonstrated to the entire world that they form an army-nation’.<sup>3</sup> The inculcation of the identification between nation and army was strengthened by the introduction of compulsory military service in 1927. In addition to providing military training, military service also assumed an educational and ‘civilizing’ role as it attempted to imbue the young conscripts with the values of the new republic.

Over time, the principles behind Atatürk’s teachings—such as secularism, territorial integrity and national unity, and western cultural models and traits—

<sup>1</sup> Albert Howe Lybyer, *The government of the Ottoman empire in the age of Suleiman the Magnificent* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1913), p. 90.

<sup>2</sup> Turkish Land Forces website, <http://www.kkk.tsk.mil.tr/GenelKonular/Tarihce>, accessed 17 February 2007. In fact, there is no evidence that the Huns were Turkish by language or ethnicity.

<sup>3</sup> Author’s translation from the TGS website, [http://www.tsk.mil.tr/genel\\_konular/tarihce.htm](http://www.tsk.mil.tr/genel_konular/tarihce.htm). In Turkish ‘askerlik’, the word meaning ‘military profession’, is also used for ‘military service’.

coalesced into a fully fledged ideology known as Kemalism, while reverence for Atatürk himself assumed many of the attributes of a personality cult.

There is little doubt that, during the 1940s and 1950s, given the still very limited access to formal education (particularly in rural areas), military service played a greater role in shaping the characters and attitudes of the mass of the male population of Turkey than the state education system.<sup>4</sup> Military service became a rite of passage for young males and the military became referred to as ‘a school’.<sup>5</sup>

Although the concept of the ‘military nation’ was actively inculcated, there is little doubt that it found ready acceptance in a society which already extolled martial values and which was—and to a considerable, if declining, degree remains—hierarchical, patriarchal and authoritarian, with an emphasis on collective rather than individual rights and values. Ironically, the public prestige of the military was ultimately enhanced by the transition in 1950 to multiparty democracy from the single-party regime which had governed the republic from its foundation in 1923. Amid the volatility of pluralism, the military became regarded as a stable and stabilizing factor; the guardian not only of the state but of Atatürk’s ideological legacy of Kemalism.<sup>6</sup>

### **The Turkish military and politics, 1950–1983: a brief overview**

Although the Turkish Republic was founded by former Ottoman soldiers, Atatürk had insisted that all officers who wished to participate in politics should first resign from the armed forces. The result was to remove the military as an institution from the political arena. In May 1949 the TGS was subordinated to the Ministry Of Defence. In 1950 the Democrat Party (DP) won Turkey’s first fully free elections and the party chairman Adnan Menderes (1899–1961) became prime minister. During the 1950s the salaries and working conditions of the officer corps deteriorated and the DP frequently interfered in military postings and promotions.

From the outset, Menderes had pursued a populist agenda, in which policies were shaped by short-term political advantage. The result was a rise in political instability, which was exacerbated by Menderes’s increasing authoritarianism. On 27 May 1960, amid growing public unrest, the Menderes government was toppled by Turkey’s first military coup.<sup>7</sup>

Civilian rule was reintroduced in 1961. However, a new constitution increased both the de jure prestige and the de facto autonomy of the TGS by making it

<sup>4</sup> ‘You have to remember what Turkey was like in those days. We didn’t just teach them to read and write, many of them didn’t even know how to use a knife and fork.’ Author’s interview with a retired high-ranking army officer who was a young lieutenant during the 1940s. Istanbul, Sept. 1999.

<sup>5</sup> The origins of this phrase and the social realities of the period have been overlooked in Ayşe Gül Altınay’s otherwise informative *The myth of the military-nation: militarism, gender and education in Turkey* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 119–40.

<sup>6</sup> This can be seen in the most literal sense at Atatürk’s mausoleum, the Anıtkabir, in Ankara. Law No. 2524 of 11 Sept. 1981 on the provision of services at Anıtkabir ensures that the mausoleum is controlled, maintained and secured by the TGS.

<sup>7</sup> Following the coup 587 people were tried on charges ranging from corruption to murder and violating the constitution. Three were hanged in Sept. 1961: Menderes, Foreign Minister Fatin Rüştü Zorlu (1910–1961) and Finance Minister Hasan Polatkan (1915–61).

answerable directly to the prime minister, rather than the Defence Ministry; with which it now had only to cooperate.<sup>8</sup> The 1961 constitution also created a National Security Council (NSC), comprising leading members of the civilian government and the high command of the TGS, to serve as an advisory body to the Council of Ministers.

The military staged a second coup on 12 March 1971, when in-fighting between the political parties represented in parliament brought the machinery of government to a standstill. However, this time the TGS remained behind the scenes, merely replacing the elected government with one composed of technocrats.

On 12 September 1980, as street fighting between leftist and rightist extremists brought the country to the brink of civil war, the military staged a third coup. This time it assumed direct control of the administration and remained in power for three years. In 1982 the military promulgated a new constitution, which remains in force today, before restoring civilian rule in 1983.

The 1980 coup was initially welcomed by the Turkish public, for the military restored order and put an almost immediate end to the political violence. However, this was achieved at a huge cost. Curfews were imposed and public activities forbidden. A wide range of magazines, newspapers, books and films were banned, and the activities of virtually all professional associations and trade unions suspended. Fourteen thousand Turks were stripped of their citizenship and another 650,000 people arrested.<sup>9</sup> Many were soon released, but interrogations were often brutal; 171 prisoners are reported to have died as the result of torture.<sup>10</sup>

Military rule severely damaged the Turkish military's public prestige. However welcome the original coup may have been, few among even the military's most ardent supporters had any wish to repeat the three years of restrictions and oppression that followed. Yet, even after the return to civilian rule, the TGS was still reluctant to allow the civilian government complete freedom of action. The result was a system in which the TGS used a number of institutional and informal mechanisms to ensure that government policy remained within acceptable bounds.

## The legal status and responsibilities of the Turkish military

The basic principles of the 1982 constitution were the same as those of the constitutions that had governed the republic since its foundation.<sup>11</sup> Nor were there any major changes to the legal status or responsibilities of the Turkish military. The preamble to the 1982 constitution states that it has been formulated 'in line with the concept of nationalism outlined and the reforms and principles introduced by the founder of the Republic of Turkey, Atatürk, the immortal leader and the

<sup>8</sup> The chief of staff was thus elevated to rank fourth in the state protocol behind the president, prime minister and speaker of parliament: Şaban İba, *Ordu, devlet, siyaset* (Istanbul: Çivi yazılar, 1998), pp. 190–92.

<sup>9</sup> Soner Kızılkaya, 'Bir 12 Eylül bilancosu', *NTV Mag*, Sept. 2000, p. 77.

<sup>10</sup> Mehmet Ali Birand, Hikmet Bila and Rıdvan Akar, *12 Eylül Türkiye'nin miladı* (Istanbul: Doğan Kitap, 1999), p. 232.

<sup>11</sup> Turkey's first constitution of 1924 named Islam as the state religion. An amendment of 10 April 1928 removed the reference to Islam. A further amendment on 5 Feb. 1937 explicitly stated that Turkey was a secular state.

unrivalled hero'.<sup>12</sup> Article 2 of the constitution states that 'The Republic of Turkey is a democratic, secular and social state governed by the rule of law; bearing in mind the concepts of public peace, national solidarity and justice; respecting human rights; loyal to the nationalism of Atatürk, and based on the fundamental tenets set forth in the Preamble.'

The most detailed statement of the legal role and obligations of the military is contained in the Turkish Armed Forces Internal Service Law No. 211 of January 1961. Article 35 states: 'The duty of the Turkish Armed Forces is to protect and preserve the Turkish homeland and the Turkish Republic as defined in the constitution.'<sup>13</sup> Even though the measure was promulgated during a period of military rule, article 35 of Law No. 211 is identical to article 34 of the Turkish Armed Forces Internal Service Law No. 2771 of 1935, which had been introduced during the civilian single-party regime.

There has been considerable debate about whether article 35 gives the military the right to remove an elected government which is perceived as violating the constitution. It has been argued that, as a military coup is *ipso facto* undemocratic, it would itself violate the provisions in the constitution stating that Turkey is a democracy. However, it has also been argued that, as one of the responsibilities of the elected government is to uphold the constitution, any violation of the constitution is also a violation of its mandate and thus also *ipso facto* undemocratic.

The Turkish military, at least, has never had any doubts. It cited article 35 of Law No. 211 as legal justification when it staged the coup of 1980, and article 34 of Law No. 2771 when it seized power in 1960. However, since 1983 the military has tended to use more subtle means to ensure that government policies do not transgress what it deems to be the limits of acceptability.

### **Delineating the acceptable: mechanisms of control 1983–1997**

Following the return to civilian rule in 1983, the TGS rarely dictated policy to the government. It preferred to make recommendations in the expectation that these would be applied, or at least not contradicted. The methods used to communicate these recommendations varied according to the policy area, the nature of the perceived threat, its importance or urgency, and the responsiveness of the civilian authorities. In areas where the military played a key role in the detailed formulation of policy it tended to use official platforms within the apparatus of state. The most important of these was the NSC.

Meetings of the NSC are chaired by the Turkish president. Until 2003 (see below) meetings were normally held once each month. In addition to the president, the NSC comprised four representatives of the government and five members of the military.<sup>14</sup> In theory, this meant that power was evenly divided between the

<sup>12</sup> An English translation of the 1982 constitution can be found at [http://www.constitution.org/cons/turkey/turk\\_cons.htm](http://www.constitution.org/cons/turkey/turk_cons.htm), accessed 17 February 2007.

<sup>13</sup> Author's translation. The full Turkish text of Law No. 211 is available at <http://www.mevzuat.adalet.gov.tr/html/1501.html>, accessed 17 February 2007.

<sup>14</sup> The prime minister, foreign minister, interior minister and defence minister from the civilian government, and the chief of staff and the commanders of the land forces, navy, air force and gendarmerie for the military.

military and civilians. In practice, the numerical composition of the NSC was almost irrelevant as issues were never put to the vote. The members of the NSC discussed the items on the meeting agenda and the president would attempt to formulate a statement on which they all agreed, which would then be forwarded to the Council of Ministers.

But the military was effectively able to dictate what was discussed. The secretary general of the NSC was always a serving full general or admiral. Serving and retired members of the military also dominated the National Security Council Undersecretariat, whose approximately 400 members of staff were responsible for drawing up briefing documents and background papers for distribution to the members of the NSC under the supervision of the NSC secretary general.<sup>15</sup>

Article 118 of the 1982 constitution upgraded the NSC, so that it was no longer a merely advisory body; now the Council of Ministers should give 'priority consideration' to its views. In 1983, Law No. 2945 on the National Security Council and the National Security Council Undersecretariat gave the NSC secretary general unlimited access to any civilian agency and the authority to monitor the implementation of recommendations forwarded by the NSC to the Council of Ministers. However, in practice it was not unusual for the Council of Ministers to fail to implement the NSC recommendations, although it would not introduce measures which directly contradicted them.

In addition to the NSC, the military was able to monitor the civilian authorities through participation in a number of other government bodies, such as holding seats on the boards of the Higher Education Council (HEC), which oversees tertiary education, and the Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTSC), which oversees broadcasting. The military also supplied one of the three judges on the panels responsible for hearing cases at the National Security Courts, which handled cases related to security. At the highest level, the chief of staff was able to communicate the military's concerns at his weekly meetings with the prime minister and the president respectively.

As well as these formal platforms, the military had a range of informal mechanisms at its disposal. These included private meetings between leading generals and government ministers and officials, and public pronouncements, either in set speeches or in comments to the media at official functions. Although such comments often appeared spontaneous, they were never personal statements of opinion and had invariably been approved in advance by the chief of staff.

The TGS maintained close ties with elements of the bureaucracy responsible for policy in which it had a particular interest, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It was also able to draw on its own infrastructure of expertise, most of which was provided by a system of what were called 'working groups', composed of staff officers working either in the TGS itself or in the headquarters of the land forces, navy or air force. The working groups were not permanent but were formed and dissolved according to requirements.

<sup>15</sup> Author's interview with the late Gen. Doğan Beyazit, former NSC secretary general, Istanbul, March 1997.

Through the late 1980s and early 1990s, the restrictions imposed by the regime of 1980–83 were slowly eased, leading many Turkish and foreign commentators to suppose that the era of military interventions was over.<sup>16</sup> However, a number of factors ensured that the military retained a foothold in the political arena.

The first was the escalation in the insurgency launched by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in south-east Turkey in 1984. By the early 1990s the fighting had escalated into a low-intensity civil war, the main responsibility for combating the PKK had shifted to the regular army and most of south-east Turkey was in effect administered by the military.

The deteriorating security situation coincided with a decline in public confidence in Turkey's established political leaders, amid widespread corruption, soaring inflation and persistent high unemployment. This disillusion in turn fuelled a rapid rise in electoral support for untried political parties with an Islamist agenda.

## **The 28 February process**

In March 1994 the Islamist Welfare Party (WP) won the largest share of the vote in local elections and took control of several of the largest cities in Turkey, including Istanbul and Ankara. After the general elections of 25 December 1995 the WP became the largest party in parliament, albeit with just 21.4 per cent of the popular vote and 158 seats in the 550 seat unicameral assembly. In June 1996 the WP formed a coalition government with the True Path Party (TPP), which held 135 seats, and WP chairman Necmettin Erbakan became Turkey's first avowedly Islamist prime minister.

The first few months of the WP–TPP government were characterized more by confusion and uncertainty than any radical policy initiatives. Nevertheless, the mere presence of an Islamist party in power was anathema to the TGS. Through late 1996 leading commanders delivered a series of public speeches warning that secularism was under threat. In January 1997 the commanders of the armed forces held a meeting at the naval base at Gölcük on the Marmara Sea at which they finalized a strategy for forcing the WP from power.

Unlike in 1980, the TGS opted not to seize power directly but to coordinate and galvanize opposition to the WP, encouraging public protests and networking behind the scenes to try to manipulate the party from power. Nevertheless, on 3 February 1997 it took the opportunity to remind the WP that a full-blooded coup remained an option of last resort when it diverted a column of tanks through the Ankara suburb of Sincan after Bekir Yıldız, the local WP mayor, had made a speech in support of Shari'a law.

At the NSC meeting of 28 February 1997 the military presented the civilian government with a list of 18 anti-Islamist measures it wished to see implemented. The list had been prepared by the NSC Undersecretariat in cooperation with the working groups in the TGS. The measures ranged from curbs on the Islamist media to the closure of private Qur'anic schools and courses, and restrictions on

<sup>16</sup> William Hale, *Turkish politics and the military* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 294–5.

state-run preacher training schools known as İmam Hatip Liseleri (İHLs), which the military believed were being used to inculcate anti-secularist values.<sup>17</sup> After initially prevaricating, Erbakan finally agreed to forward the list to the Council of Ministers. On 14 March 1997 the measures were approved by parliament. But privately WP officials insisted that the party could not afford to implement the measures without alienating its grass roots.<sup>18</sup>

In April and May 1997 the TGS stepped up the pressure by holding a series of briefings for the media, the judiciary and the business community on the growing threat to secularism posed by the WP. Each briefing received a standing ovation. On 22 May 1997 the public prosecutor applied to the Constitutional Court for the closure of the WP on the grounds that it was attempting to undermine the principle of secularism enshrined in the Turkish constitution. The military also worked behind the scenes, discreetly lobbying members of the TPP in an attempt to persuade them to withdraw from the coalition. The resultant resignations chipped away at the WP–TPP majority. On 18 June 1997 the government finally resigned and was replaced by a tripartite coalition, including many of those who had recently resigned from the TPP. On 16 January 1998 the Turkish Constitutional Court formally closed down the WP and banned Erbakan from all political activity for a period of five years. Privately, Chief of Staff General Hakkı Karadayı predicted that it would take the Islamist movement at least ten years to recover.<sup>19</sup>

Initially, Karadayı's prediction appeared to be accurate. Although the members of the disbanded WP re-formed as the Virtue Party (VP), without Erbakan's leadership they fared badly in the 18 April 1999 general elections, receiving only 15.4 per cent of the popular vote. Three weeks later, on 7 May 1999, the public prosecutor applied to the Constitutional Court for the closure of the VP on the grounds that it was a continuation of the WP and that its leaders were committed to undermining secularism. The Constitutional Court formally closed the VP on 22 June 2001.

## Reform and readjustment

With the Islamist movement apparently in retreat, starting in 1999 the tripartite coalition began to reduce the institutional influence of the TGS. In June 1999 military judges were removed from the state security courts. In October 2001 parliament amended article 118 of the Turkish constitution to increase the civilian membership of the NSC by including the justice minister and any deputy prime ministers. At the same time the requirement that the Council of Ministers give 'priority consideration' to the recommendations of the NSC was removed and replaced by an obligation that the Council be merely 'notified' of them.

More extensive reforms came in July 2003. The requirement that the secretary general of the NSC be a serving member of the military was abolished,<sup>20</sup> as was

<sup>17</sup> The number of these schools had grown from 398 in 1982 to 467 in 1993 and 609 in 1997, when they were turning out an estimated 43,000 graduates a year.

<sup>18</sup> Author's interviews with WP officials, 20–21 March 1997.

<sup>19</sup> Author's interview with Gen. Doğan Beyazıt, Istanbul, Feb. 1998.

<sup>20</sup> The first civilian NSC secretary general was appointed in Oct. 2004.

the secretary general's unlimited access to any civilian agency and the authority to monitor the implementation of NSC recommendations. The regulations regarding appointments to the NSC Undersecretariat were made more transparent, resulting in an increase in the proportion of civilian employees and an overall 25 per cent reduction in the number of NSC personnel. Perhaps most importantly, meetings of the NSC were reduced from once a month to once every two months; this made it much more difficult for the TGS to use the NSC as an instrument of sustained pressure.

Remarkably, at the time the reforms of July 2003 were introduced, Turkey was once again being ruled by an Islamist government, albeit one formed by the more moderate Justice and Development Party (JDP), under the leadership of Tayyip Erdoğan, the former WP mayor of Istanbul.

### **Özök and the JDP: European normality or Turkish anomaly?**

There is no question that the '28 February Process' initially threw the Islamist movement in Turkey into disarray. But it also accelerated a process of generational change. At the time of his January 1998 ban, Erbakan was 71 years old and had dominated the movement for over 30 years. If Erbakan had been able to assume the leadership of the VP, it is unlikely that anyone would have dared to challenge him. As it was, the VP was led by Recai Kutan (born 1930), who was known to be a close confidant of Erbakan but lacked his mentor's charisma or authority. In May 2001 a younger generation of Islamists mounted a challenge to Kutan's leadership of the VP. When the VP was outlawed the next month, the Islamist movement split. In July 2001 Kutan and the older generation founded the Felicity Party (FP). One month later, in August 2001, the younger generation, headed by Erdoğan, established the JDP.

The timing of the foundation of the JDP was serendipitous in the extreme. A currency collapse in February 2001 triggered the worst economic recession in Turkey for over 50 years. In 2001 gross national product contracted by 9.5 per cent. In summer 2002 the increasingly fractious tripartite coalition government finally collapsed and early general elections were called for 3 November 2002. Although most of the leading members of the JDP were former members of the WP and VP, few had held government posts in the WP–TPP coalition of 1996–7.<sup>21</sup> The JDP was thus able to present itself as something new and untried at a time when public confidence in all the other political parties had evaporated. In the November 2002 elections, none of the parties which had been represented in the previous parliament succeeded in crossing the 10 per cent electoral threshold. The JDP won 34.3 per cent of the popular vote, giving it 363 seats. The only other party to be represented in parliament was the centre-left Republican People's Party (RPP), which took 178 seats with 19.4 per cent of the vote. The remaining nine seats were won by independents.

<sup>21</sup> One of the exceptions was Abdullah Gül, who is currently foreign minister and who had been state minister and government spokesman in the WP–TPP coalition.

The JDP was also fortunate in that it came to power at a time when the economy was beginning to rebound from the recession of 2001. After Turkey was officially named as a candidate for EU membership in December 1999, the tripartite government had initiated a series of democratizing reforms in the hope of securing a date for the opening of accession negotiations. Most importantly, there was a new chief of the TGS, General Hilmi Özkök, who had been appointed at the end of August 2002.

Turkish chiefs of staff are appointed at the end of August each year, usually for a four-year term.<sup>22</sup> In theory, the chief of staff is chosen by the Council of Ministers, which submits the name of a candidate to the president for ratification. In practice, the candidate is selected by the outgoing chief of staff. Although there is no official hierarchy, the chief of staff has traditionally always been a member of the army, usually the commander of the land forces.

Before Özkök's appointment there was considerable debate in the TGS about whether he would be a suitable candidate. Özkök had spent a considerable proportion of his career outside Ankara, including several NATO postings, which had raised questions about his knowledge and experience of the complexities of domestic politics and of the machinery of state. Özkök was also believed to be a devout Muslim, although no one was sure of the extent of his piety or whether it would affect his commitment to safeguarding secularism. Without any concrete evidence, the outgoing chief of staff General Hüseyin Kıvrıkoğlu was reluctant to force Özkök into retirement. But he ensured that two known hardliners, General Yaşar Büyükanıt and General Aytaç Yalman, were appointed to the key positions of deputy chief of staff and commander of the land forces respectively. As Yalman would exceed the age limit for chief of staff before Özkök's term expired, this effectively made Büyükanıt Özkök's heir apparent.

Many in the TGS had been alarmed by the election victory of the JDP in November 2002. During the election campaign the JDP had repeatedly stressed its commitment to secularism and described itself as a 'Muslim Democrat' rather than an Islamist party. Few in the TGS believed that these protestations were sincere. But unless the JDP could be shown to pose a demonstrable threat to secularism there was little the military could do. Unlike in 1997, it was impossible to form an alternative government from the existing members of parliament. Nor was there any desire in the TGS for military rule.

Even before the legislative reforms of 2003, changes in the political environment had already limited the military's ability to exert political leverage through informal mechanisms. The mutual antipathy between the TGS and the JDP meant that there were very few informal contacts, a state of affairs that both reduced the military's ability to apply pressure and increased its suspicions of the JDP's ultimate intentions. Apart from the NSC, the only regular contacts between the TGS and the JDP were the weekly meetings between Özkök and the prime minister. It was also difficult for the TGS to exert influence through public pronouncements. When it came to power the JDP not only continued but accelerated the reforms

<sup>22</sup> There are age limits for each rank in the Turkish military. For chief of staff the upper age limit is 67.

initiated by the previous administration with a view to hastening admission to the EU. In late 2002 opinion polls suggested that over 70 per cent of the Turkish population supported EU membership. Given the EU's insistence on civil control of the military, any overt attempt to influence the political process through assertive public statements risked at least delaying Turkey's receiving a date from Brussels, which in turn would damage the TGS's public prestige.

The first test came within weeks of the JDP's election victory. The JDP's conservative supporters had voted for it in the expectation that the party would ease restrictions on religious education and the ban on the wearing of Islamic headscarves in state institutions, which also prevented pious female students from attending university. On 20 November 2002, President Ahmet Necdet Sezer flew to Prague to attend a NATO summit. He was seen off at the airport in Ankara by Bülent Arınç, the new JDP speaker of parliament. Arınç was accompanied by his own wife, who, like the majority of the wives of the JDP leadership, wears a headscarf. To the TGS the participation of a headscarfed woman in a state ceremony was an assault on secularism. On 28 November, Turkey's force commanders, headed by Özkök, delivered a wordless warning to Arınç by visiting him in his office in parliament, where they sat in complete silence for three minutes before leaving.

The visit to Arınç received widespread coverage in the Turkish press, which had been allowed to photograph the commanders sitting in silent protest, and did much to reassure those in the military who had doubted Özkök's willingness to confront the JDP. But in spring 2003 relief gave way to frustration. On 1 March 2003 the Turkish parliament failed to pass a motion which would have allowed US troops to transit Turkey to open a second front in the forthcoming war against Iraq.<sup>23</sup> At a meeting of the NSC on 28 February 2003, President Sezer had refused to discuss the forthcoming parliamentary motion, which meant that no mention of it was made in the statement released to the press. When the motion was subsequently rejected, many in the TGS were furious at Özkök for not being more assertive at the NSC. They feared that the failure of the motion would make Washington less willing to listen to Turkey's concerns about the possible emergence of a Kurdish political entity in northern Iraq and could have a negative impact on US sales of weapons and military equipment to Turkey.

On 23 April 2003 the TGS boycotted a reception held by Arınç to celebrate National Sovereignty and Children's Day when it learned that it would be co-hosted by his headscarfed wife. One week later, after the NSC meeting of 30 April 2003, the TGS ensured that the subsequent press release led with the declaration that the meeting 'had stressed the importance of meticulously protecting the principle of secularism which is one of the basic characteristics of the state'.<sup>24</sup> On 5 May 2003 the TGS issued its own press statement, describing itself as 'the greatest guarantee of the secular, democratic and social characteristics of the Turkish Republic'.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> The motion passed by 264 to 250 with 19 abstentions, leaving the government three votes short of the constitutional requirement of a majority of those who participated in the vote.

<sup>24</sup> *Hürriyet*, 1 May 2003 (author's translation).

<sup>25</sup> <http://www.tsk.mil.tr/genelkumay/bashalk/aciklama/2003/a08.htm>, accessed 17 February 2007 (author's translation).

Yet Özkök was approving, not initiating, the TGS's new assertiveness, which was instigated by others in the high command. The latter were not only frustrated themselves but were becoming increasingly concerned by restlessness among the younger members of the officer corps, who could not understand why Özkök was not taking a harder line with the government. This frustration increased in autumn 2003 when the government announced a series of educational reforms, which secularists believed would encourage the growth of İHLs and make it easier for their graduates to enter university. When Özkök failed to react, others in the high command took the initiative, albeit after first seeking Özkök's approval. On 9 September 2003 Yalman met with university rectors to discuss opposition to the draft reform bill. On 14 October General İlker Başbuğ, who had been appointed deputy chief of staff in August 2003, gave a press briefing at which he bluntly noted that 25,000 students graduated from the İHLs each year while the total annual recruiting requirement of the state-run Directorate for Religious Affairs, the only body which can legally employ Islamic clerics in Turkey, was 5,500.<sup>26</sup> The JDP government subsequently postponed trying to push the educational reforms through parliament.

In late December 2003 the tensions within the TGS finally emerged into the public domain. On 29 December a JDP MP, Fehmi Hüsrev Kutlu, complained about the portraits of Atatürk in parliament. In an unprecedented break with military hierarchy, on 30 December 2003 Yalman publicly condemned Kutlu's statement without first notifying Özkök. All that Özkök could do was issue his own statement on 31 December 2003 backing Yalman and attacking Kutlu. However, Özkök moved quickly to pre-empt his subordinates when the JDP, apparently emboldened by its success in winning 41.7 per cent of the national vote in the local elections of 28 March 2004, brought another package of educational reforms before parliament on 4 May 2004. On 6 May the TGS published a statement describing the reforms as a threat to secularism and warned: 'The views and attitude of the Turkish Armed Forces towards the Republic's characteristics as a democratic, secular and social state ruled by law are the same today as they were yesterday and shall remain the same tomorrow.'<sup>27</sup>

The reforms were passed by parliament on 13 May 2004. Two weeks later, on 27 May, they were vetoed by President Sezer on the grounds that they were incompatible with the constitutional principle of secularism. Under Turkish law, the president can veto legislation only once. But the JDP declined to resubmit the law to parliament. On 3 July 2004, Erdoğan ruefully admitted: 'As a government we are not ready to pay the price.'<sup>28</sup>

The alacrity with which Özkök reacted to the draft educational reforms reassured hardliners in the TGS as much it cowed the JDP government. Throughout the second half of 2004 both sides remained cautious, anxious not to jeopardize Turkey's chances of receiving a date for the opening of accession negotiations at

<sup>26</sup> 'Askerden İmam Hatip muhtırası', *Hürriyet*, 14 Oct. 2003.

<sup>27</sup> TGS press statement no. BN-07/04 of 6 May 2004, <http://www.tsk.mil.tr/genelkumay/bashalk/aciklama/2004/a07.htm>, accessed 17 February 2007 (author's translation).

<sup>28</sup> 'Erdoğan: YÖK'ü zorlamayız', *Radikal*, 4 July 2004.

the EU summit in Brussels on 16–17 December 2004. Despite considerable opposition, particularly over Turkey's continued refusal either to grant diplomatic recognition or open its ports and airports to the Republic of Cyprus, the EU eventually agreed to open membership negotiations with Turkey on 3 October 2005.

The EU decision was a Pyrrhic victory for the JDP. Although it had secured a date, the discussions that preceded the decision had demonstrated that in some member states opposition to Turkish membership ran much deeper than the dispute over Cyprus. As hopes of eventual accession began to wane, so did support for the EU process. Significantly, in January 2005 the TGS issued two of its harshest public statements on foreign policy since the JDP came to power; on each occasion the declarations were the initiatives not of Özkök but of the commanders concerned.

On 25 January 2005, Başbuğ warned that Turkey would not stand idly by if the Iraqi Kurds attempted to take control of the oil-rich province of Kirkuk or persecuted the Turkish-speaking Turkmen minority. On the same day, during a visit to northern Cyprus, Büyükanıt, who was now army commander, declared that not one of the approximately 35,000 Turkish troops deployed on the island would be withdrawn before a 'firm and final' solution to the Cyprus problem had been reached.<sup>29</sup>

Within the TGS, frustration at both the government and Özkök continued to mount through the rest of 2005. During their weekly meetings with the prime minister, Özkök's predecessors had usually been accompanied by a junior officer, who had been responsible for taking minutes. Özkök discontinued the practice and met with Erdoğan alone. Although Özkök reassured the other leading commanders that he repeatedly warned Erdoğan to respect secularism, few were convinced. In fact, whenever they appeared in public together, Özkök and Erdoğan appeared to have established a relaxed, even harmonious relationship. Although few believed that he favoured the abolition of secularism, many in the TGS became worried that, as a religious man himself, Özkök failed to understand the threat posed by the JDP.

But Büyükanıt and Başbuğ were faced with a dilemma. Özkök was aware of his unpopularity within the TGS and resented the attitude of many of his subordinates. If Büyükanıt and Başbuğ publicly criticized Özkök they would not only damage the public image of the armed forces but leave themselves open to charges of insubordination, providing Özkök with the perfect excuse to force them into retirement before he completed his term as chief of staff at the end of August 2006.

Yet public opinion was also changing. Although Turkey officially opened accession negotiations with the EU in October 2005, the protracted wrangling that preceded the inauguration ceremony reinforced the already widespread suspicion in Turkey that the EU would never accept the country as a full member. The JDP government, too, appeared to have lost direction, unable to introduce the reforms demanded by its conservative supporters and presiding over an economy which, despite healthy macroeconomic figures, was clearly cooling. Yet the RPP had been

<sup>29</sup> 'Asker çekilemez', *Radikal*, 26 Jan. 2005.

an ineffective opposition, and there was still no indication that any other party would be able to mount a serious challenge to the JDP when the next general elections fell due in November 2007.

Many secularists were even more concerned by the prospect of what may happen when Sezer completes his term in office in May 2007. Under Turkish law, the president is elected by parliament. The JDP's huge parliamentary majority means that it will effectively be able to appoint its own candidate. Since the JDP took power, Sezer has vetoed several laws and blocked the appointment of hundreds of JDP supporters to key positions in the bureaucracy. Erdoğan is known to have presidential ambitions, with Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül the most likely candidate to succeed him as prime minister.<sup>30</sup> In the continued absence of a political party which could challenge the JDP, through late 2005 and into 2006 many secularists began once again to turn to the military. This was particularly noticeable in the mainstream Turkish press. Columnists who just a few years earlier had attacked the military for meddling in politics now began to mute their criticism.<sup>31</sup> In the TGS, meanwhile, the hardliners were counting the days until Özkök stepped down and was succeeded by Büyükanıt. They were not the only ones who expected the new chief of staff to be more assertive.

In March 2006 Ferhat Sarıkaya, a pro-JDP public prosecutor in the south-eastern city of Van, tried unsuccessfully to implicate Büyükanıt in the 9 November 2005 extrajudicial killing of a suspected PKK sympathizer by agents working for the gendarmerie in the town of Şemdinli. It was a tactical error. Not only was there no evidence to incriminate Büyükanıt, but the attempt to implicate him merely galvanized his supporters.

Worse was to follow. On 10 May 2006, Erdoğan stormed out of the ceremony to mark the anniversary of the Council of State, Turkey's highest appeal court, after the court's president warned that the republic was under threat from religious fundamentalism. On 17 May Alparslan Arslan, a 28-year-old lawyer with ultra-nationalist and Islamist sympathies, walked into the Council of State building in Ankara, shot dead one of the judges, Mustafa Yücel Özbilgin, and wounded four others. When he was arrested, Arslan told police that he had carried out the assassination in protest at the ban on Islamic headscarves.

Police investigations suggested that Arslan had been acting on his own. But for many secularists he represented all of those who opposed the headscarf ban. Özbilgin's funeral in Ankara turned into an anti-JDP rally. Erdoğan refused to attend, opting instead to open a new road in the Mediterranean resort of Antalya. But the TGS turned out in force. All of the military personnel stationed in the capital attended the funeral, including the top commanders, who walked through the streets to the ceremony to cheers and applause from the mourners. In the aftermath of the attack on the Council of State the various elements in the Turkish judicial system issued a joint statement calling on all institutions 'responsible for

<sup>30</sup> Author's interviews with sources close to Erdoğan, Istanbul and Ankara, Oct. 2005–Dec. 2006.

<sup>31</sup> Many of these columnists had also been among those who gave the military a standing ovation at the press briefing in spring 1997.

protecting secularism’ to ‘do their duty’. No one doubted that at the head of these institutions came the TGS.

In early summer 2006 elements within the JDP launched a defamation campaign against Büyükanıt, including emails, faxes and stories planted in the Islamist press claiming, among other things, that he was of Jewish origin. In response, serving and retired generals, including former chiefs of staff, bombarded Özkök with emails, faxes and telephone calls warning him not to try to prevent Büyükanıt succeeding him. At the beginning of August 2006 Sezer wrote to Özkök and Erdoğan suggesting that they quell any speculation by immediately approving Büyükanıt’s appointment. They acceded. A few days later Başbuğ was appointed commander of the land forces and is expected to succeed Büyükanıt when he completes his term in August 2008.

### **The TGS under Büyükanıt**

Few in Turkey had any doubt that Büyükanıt’s appointment as chief of staff marked the beginning of a new era in civil–military relations. In late July 2006, the country’s largest circulation news magazine *Tempo* ran an ingratiating ten-page profile of Büyükanıt entitled ‘The hawk with the heart of a dove’.<sup>32</sup> The handover ceremony from Özkök to Büyükanıt on 28 August was carried live on eleven national television channels.

Büyükanıt delivered his first warning to the government within minutes of assuming command, declaring: ‘Protecting the fundamental principles of the republic is not a matter of domestic politics, it is the army’s duty.’ In late September 2006 the commanders of the Turkish army, navy and air force each delivered public statements warning of the threat posed to Turkey by Islamic fundamentalism. On 2 October Büyükanıt gave an address to mark the opening of the new academic year at the Military Academy in Istanbul, which was again carried live on eleven television channels. In his address Büyükanıt directly targeted the government, warning that the TGS would never allow it to erode secularism. The audience at the Military Academy included former chief of staff General Kıvrıkoğlu. When Büyükanıt had finished speaking, Kıvrıkoğlu loudly declared: ‘At last our silence has been broken.’

Büyükanıt’s speech was designed as much to reassure his subordinates in the TGS as to threaten the government. In December 2006 he demonstrated that he was also prepared to speak out on foreign policy. When press reports suggested that the JDP was preparing to open one port to Cypriot ships in order to try to keep the EU accession process alive, Büyükanıt bluntly criticized the government for not consulting the TGS first. However, not only did the EU reject the JDP’s proposal, on 11 December 2006 it suspended eight of the 35 chapters of the accession process pending the opening of all of Turkey’s ports and airports to Cypriot ships and planes. Inside Turkey, the decision was taken as yet further proof that the EU had no intention of ever accepting Turkey as a member. In late December

<sup>32</sup> ‘Güvercin yürekli şahin’, *Tempo*, 27 July 2006.

2006 opinion polls suggested that support for EU accession in Turkey had fallen to 30–35 per cent.

There is little doubt that, unlike Özkök, Büyükanıt has the support of the majority of the Turkish officer corps. But with it comes an immense burden of expectation, not only from within the TGS but also from civilian secularists.

On 14 February 2007, in a speech delivered during a visit to Washington, Büyükanıt sought both to reassure secularist Turks and to deliver a thinly veiled warning to the government back in Turkey. He noted that there were ‘dynamic forces protecting Turkey’ and added: ‘Turkey is a democratic, secular, social and unitary state. There is no power which can divert Turkey from this path and there never will be. The Turkish Republic is the republic founded by Atatürk and this republic will endure, with its regime, with its founding principles, until the end of time.’<sup>33</sup>

## Conclusion

Civil–military relations in Turkey have always been characterized by a combination of continuity and change. Since the 1930s, the military has regarded itself as the guarantor of domestic stability and territorial integrity, the guardian of Atatürk’s ideological legacy and the mystical embodiment of the Turkish nation. Despite recent legislative amendments which have curbed some of the instruments used by the military to exert political leverage, the legal foundation for its role and obligations has remained unchanged for over 70 years. However, the manner in which it has attempted to fulfil its interpretation of these responsibilities and ensure that government policy remains within what it deems are acceptable parameters has always been subject to change.

Similarly, although the military has traditionally always enjoyed considerable respect among the mass of the population in Turkey, the degree of respect has varied both between different sections of society and according to prevailing circumstances. Some of its admirers have even become irritated by the military’s authoritarian self-confidence during times of stability and economic growth; while many of its harshest critics have not hesitated to turn to it when the country appeared headed for chaos or Kemalist values seemed under threat.

In early 2007 Turkey appeared to be heading for a period of sustained uncertainty against a backdrop of a slowing economy, fading hopes of EU accession, rising nationalism and increasing tensions with the Kurds of northern Iraq. In such an environment, and in the continued absence of a political party able to challenge the JDP, many Turks will once again look to the country’s military not only as a force for stability but also as the *de facto* opposition to the government.

A full-blooded military intervention in Turkey is currently only a hypothetical possibility, not least because past experience has shown that coups fail to guarantee long-term stability and damage the public prestige of the TGS. It was this public

<sup>33</sup> ‘Cumhuriyet en riskli dönemde’, *Radikal*, 15 February, 2007 (author’s translation).

prestige which enabled the military to oust the WP in 1997 and, for the foreseeable future, it is likely to remain vital to its ability to exert political leverage.

Büyükanıt's first test will be to ensure that an Islamist does not become Turkey's next president. Yet, although he now has less reason to worry about alienating the EU, Büyükanıt's options are still limited. The JDP's commanding majority in parliament means that it is currently impossible for the military to fashion an alternative government from the current assembly, as it did in 1997. Opinion polls suggest that the JDP remains the most popular party in the country. But the military's public prestige means that, if a situation arises in which JDP policy explicitly defies a warning from the TGS, the immediate risk will not be a coup but a loss in electoral support, particularly to the already resurgent nationalist right. Privately, AKP officials candidly admit that their main concern is currently not whether they will emerge from the November 2007 elections as the largest party in parliament but whether an increase in support for the nationalist right will prevent them from enjoying an overall majority.

Over the months ahead, the TGS will continue to issue warnings to the JDP both privately and through public statements in the hope that an alternative to the current government will appear in the wake of the November 2007 elections. But whether such an alternative will appear, whether the JDP will continue to back down under pressure from the military, and what the TGS can or will do if the JDP defies its warnings, all remain unclear.