

# The Turkey Analyst

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# THE TURKEY ANALYST

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# WAITING FOR BAŞBUĞ: THE AFTERMATH OF THE SLEDGEHAMMER OPERATION DETENTIONS

Gareth H. Jenkins

*The recent detention of 68 serving and retired military personnel by the Turkish police on suspicion of planning a coup in 2003 has reinforced the deep divisions in Turkish society and escalated the already dangerous tensions between the country's powerful armed forces and the civilian government. Although there have been arrests of serving and retired military personnel in the past – particularly during the controversial Ergenekon investigation – both the scale of the latest detentions and the claims on which they are based are without precedent. As a result, General İlker Başbuğ, the chief of the General Staff, is now under intense pressure to react; particularly from his colleagues in the officer corps, the vast majority of whom regard the detentions as the latest move in a politically-motivated campaign of lies and disinformation which ultimately aims to destroy the military as an institution.*

As of February 28, 2010, Başbuğ had yet to issue any public comment about the detentions. But, if it were to continue indefinitely, even his silence would ultimately be regarded as being loaded with meaning; interpreted within the officer corps as a sign of weakness and amongst the general public as a tacit admission that the accusations are true.

On February 22, 2010, a total of 49 serving and retired members of the Turkish military were detained on suspicion of being involved in an alleged plot, purported codenamed the “Sledgehammer Operation”, to overthrow the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). On February 26, 2010, the police detained another 18 serving military personnel and one retired officer. As of the beginning of March 2010, a total of 35 of those



detained had been formally arrested and imprisoned pending trial.

The accusations are based on documents first published in the fiercely anti-military *Taraf* daily newspaper on January 21, 2010. *Taraf* claimed that

the documents detail a plan by a junta within the military to destabilize the government through a series of staged provocations and, when the AKP failed to declare a state of emergency, seize power. According to the newspaper, the plan was discussed at a seminar at the headquarters of the Istanbul-based First Army in March 2003.

It is no secret that some high-ranking members of the Turkish military were deeply disturbed by the

to 2006, to be more assertive in his dealings with the government. But, although it is likely that there were those who wished there was a way to maneuver the AKP out of power, there is no convincing evidence of any “coup plot” – much less of plans for the military to seize power in its own right.

High-ranking officers serving in the military at the time have admitted that a seminar was held in

Istanbul on March 5-7, 2003 and was attended by 162 officers. They have also stated that one of the sessions involved a war gaming scenario similar to those conducted in other NATO countries on how the military would administer the country in the event of a crisis involving the collapse of the central government. This has also been confirmed by Özkök, who told the *Star* newspaper that he had approved the seminar. But the participants in the seminar have vigorously rejected suggestions that they were planning to stage a coup and have denied any knowledge of the staged provocations detailed by *Taraf*. Indeed, it is the details of these alleged provocations that raise the most serious questions about *Taraf*'s claims.

According to *Taraf*, the junta was planning to increase tensions with Greece by increasing the number of flights in disputed airspace over the Aegean in the hope of provoking the Greek Air Force into shooting down a Turkish plane. If this failed, the Turkish Air Force was to ditch one of its own planes over the sea and claim that it had been shot down by the Greeks. The Turkish Air Force was also to play a key role in



victory of the AKP in the November 2002 general election. It is also well-known that some were frustrated by the failure of General Hilmi Özkök, who served as chief of the General Staff from 2002

generating public support for a military seizure of power through its display teams staging a series of air shows throughout the country.

More bizarrely, *Taraf* published extracts from documents which detailed plans to dress military cadets and conscripts performing their military service in religious attire – such as robes and turbans -- and stage a mass demonstration in Istanbul. Apparently, this would create the impression that Turkey was facing the threat of a radical Islamist takeover; although it is unclear how the cooperation of the cadets and conscripts could be ensured or how easy it would be to fool the Turkish public and press.

The documents published by *Taraf* also included plans – allegedly signed by a Gendarmerie captain and major -- to bomb mosques in Istanbul and kill worshippers. For example, they claim that, after the bombing of a mosque in the conservative neighborhood of Fatih, a member of the military would contact a local artisan who was known to be close to radical Islamists, persuade him to lead a protest against the bombing and this would then be used as a pretext for the military to press the AKP to declare a state of emergency to prevent a radical Islamist takeover.

Other documents published by *Taraf* include plans to establish a new cabinet under military tutelage, introduce a closed economy with restrictions on the movement of gold and foreign currency and appoint a member of the military to the board of every large firm and holding company in Turkey.

**IMPLICATIONS:** In the past, Islamist activists have been known to fabricate documents in order to try to discredit the Turkish military. In 2006, Islamists circulated forged documents purporting to show that Army Chief General Yaşar Büyükanıt was of Jewish origin in an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to prevent him from succeeding Özkök as chief of the General Staff.

However, this does not necessarily mean that some or all of the documents published by *Taraf* are forgeries. There are equally

harebrained schemes and conspiracy theories circulating in Turkey in abundance. But it is extremely difficult to believe that such plans were discussed, much less adopted, by 162 military personnel, including – according to the prosecutors who ordered the detentions in late February – 29 generals and admirals.

More worrying is the implication in the prosecutors' apparent belief that the so-called Sledgehammer Operation was discussed at the seminar in March 2003. Most Turkish military personnel do not choose whether or not to attend a seminar. They are ordered to do so by their superiors. If the prosecutors are implying that the alleged junta was able to ensure that only those already favorable to the idea of a coup attended the seminar, then it must have exercised extraordinary influence within the armed forces. If the junta did not control who attended the seminar then it was running a huge risk by openly discussing plans to topple the civilian government and seize power. Whichever the case, it is very difficult to understand how – if such plans really were discussed – Özkök, as chief of the General Staff, was unaware either of the junta or of what was discussed at the seminar. Yet, even though he has publicly acknowledged approving the seminar, the prosecutors have not even asked Özkök to give a statement about what he did or did not know.

This otherwise inexplicable oversight is probably explained by the tendency of AKP supporters to portray Özkök as a model chief of staff and a committed democrat who thwarted several coup attempts -- even if no convincing evidence has been produced to suggest that such attempts were actually made. But this image is incompatible with the Sledgehammer Operation being genuine. If Özkök was aware of the junta and/or plan, then his silence to date looks suspicious. If he was unaware of a plot being openly discussed by 162 of his subordinates – including 29 senior officers -- at

a military seminar in Istanbul, then his competence is called into question.

Such considerations have reinforced the conviction in the Turkish officer corps that the detentions in the Sledgehammer investigation were aimed not at individual suspects but at the military as an institution. Perhaps more critical for Başbuğ, as he weighs up his options, is the belief amongst his colleagues that, unless something is done to stop them, the recent detentions are unlikely to be the last.

**CONCLUSIONS:** There has long been a general acknowledgement in the Turkish General Staff that the era of coups is over. Nevertheless, given the depth of discontent in the aftermath of the election of the AKP in November 2002, it is theoretically conceivable that individual officers – even a small cabal of disgruntled officers – may have contemplated ways of forcing the government from power.

It is also theoretically possible that the documents published by *Taraf* are not deliberate forgeries. But what is extremely difficult to believe is that they were openly discussed – even adopted – at a seminar attended by 162 military personnel and that no one else in the military ever heard about them. Consequently, if the so-called Sledgehammer Operation is genuine, the implication of guilt – or at least tacit complicity – would appear to extend well beyond the individuals accused to the military as an institution.

As a result, General Başbuğ is under intense pressure from serving and retired members of the

officer corps to formulate an appropriate response. Few are likely to regard doing nothing as an option. Not only would most regard it as a tacit admission of guilt but there is a genuine concern



that, unless it acts, the detentions and arrests will continue until the military is broken as an institution.

But Başbuğ's options are limited. Merely issuing another warning similar to those he has issued in the past is unlikely to serve as a deterrent. It currently appears more likely that he will go on the offensive. In an interview published in *Habertürk* newspaper on February 11, 2010, Başbuğ warned that the General Staff was compiling "evidence" on who was behind what he described as an asymmetrical psychological war against the military. It is unclear when or how Başbuğ will respond to the Sledgehammer detentions or whether it will include details of the evidence he claims the General Staff has in its possession, but his current silence is unlikely to be permanent.

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# WILL THE REVERSAL OF THE REGIME OF MILITARY TUTELAGE ENCOURAGE A REINVENTION OF TURKEY'S SECULAR CAMP?

*Halil M. Karaveli*

*With its policies of a “democratic opening”, the AKP government has embarked on an enterprise that ultimately challenges the core identity of the republic as a specifically Turkish state. The revulsion that the notion of putting Turkishness on an equal footing with the other identities of society is eliciting suggests that it may, once again, prove difficult to find a liberal way out of the perennial dilemma of Turkey – to establish a secure foundation for the state in a setting of societal heterogeneity.*



The critical question today is whether the Turkish secularists will conclude that a reassessment of their ideological stance has become inevitable subsequent to the reversal of the regime of military tutelage. Not unlike the Islamists a decade ago, the seculars face the challenge to either broaden their appeal or concede defeat. Without secular forces making a transition to liberalism, the democratic evolution of Islamic conservatism will remain uncertain.

**BACKGROUND:** On February 28, 1997 the then all powerful Turkish military staged the operation that would end with the resignation of the country's first Islamist Prime Minister, Necmettin Erbakan four months later. The “post-modern” coup of 1997 targeted not only Islamists, but liberal intellectuals as well, as newspaper magnates were told by the General staff to fire liberal columnists who had challenged the regime of military tutelage. On February 22, 2010, another date that will go down in Turkish history, the military

intervention in politics thirteen years ago was effectively reversed. The historic importance of the detention, starting that day, of top military officers charged with having taken part in a coup scheme in 2003 can hardly be overrated. Irrespective of how much of the allegations against the officers are indeed true, it is a singular event in the history of the Turkish republic, whose custodians had remained above, indeed dictated, the law.

The “post-modern” coup of 1997 served as a corrective for the Islamists; they were eventually to shed most of their ideological rhetoric, repositioning themselves as pro-Europeans and liberal reformists in the shape of the Justice and

development party (AKP). The critical question today is whether the secular forces in Turkey, long accustomed to rely on the power of the military, will similarly conclude that a reassessment of their ideological stance has become inevitable subsequent to the reversal of the regime of military tutelage.

The repositioning of the Islamists in the aftermath of 1997 was occasioned by the appreciation that the religious conservatives needed to broaden their appeal in order to strengthen the legitimacy of their traditional demands; the issue of the headscarf, for instance, was no longer presented in terms that evoked religion, but as a matter pertaining to individual freedom.

The subsequent “openings” to minorities, in particular the Kurdish minority, has had the benefit of further refurbishing the image of the AKP as a party that represents a radical departure from the authoritarian nationalist ideology of the republic and its military custodians. Yet, the democratic pretensions of the AKP are belied by a series of events. These include, most recently, the clampdown on Kurdish mayors and other political representatives of the Kurdish movement – those arrested amount to over nine hundred; the continued imprisonment of Kurdish children on charges of “terrorism”; and Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s regular assaults on the freedom of the press. Indeed, the precipitate retreat from the much vaunted “opening” to the Kurds strongly suggests that the replacement of the regime of military tutelage will not necessarily entail an appurtenant abandonment of the statism and the Turkish nationalism that were the hallmarks of the defunct regime. The transition of Islamist forces to democracy remains at best incomplete; it is certainly easier to envision a synthesis of Islamic conservatism with Turkish nationalism and statism, than an emergence anytime soon of a

Turkey where liberal values govern the political debate.

That is the case not because the evolution of the religious conservative mindset would be inconceivable. On the contrary, opinion surveys do indicate that those who adhere to religious conservative values in their private realm are increasingly prone to hold democracy in high esteem. That evolution could obviously be ascribed primarily to the fact that a religious conservative party is in power; nevertheless, the prospect of an eventual democratization of the conservative heartland cannot be dismissed, not least as the increased economic interaction of the religious bourgeoisie with the outside world could theoretically encourage cultural and political liberalization as well. However, ultimately, Turkey’s democratization will depend on the interaction between the secular and religious parts of society.

**IMPLICATIONS:** Historically the vector of the modernization of the country, the secular middle class of Turkey has been singularly unable to cope with the turn that modernization has taken during the last two decades. As that process has resulted in the empowerment of the lower, culturally conservative classes, the secular middle class has become increasingly estranged from the very values – Westernization, freedom – with which it was once associated. According to a 2008 survey, those who were most inclined to hold libertarian views in their private lives were also those who exhibited an authoritarian stance concerning politics. The existential threat that religious conservatism is believed to represent has turned seculars – who a decade ago advocated Turkish EU membership – into reclusive, authoritarian nationalists.

Tellingly, Deniz Baykal, the leader of the opposition Republican People’s party (CHP), defended the arrested military officers, designating

their arrest as something that supposedly would never have occurred in a democratic country. Baykal went on to compare the arrested officers with the Ottoman dignitaries who were exiled to Malta by the British in 1920. Consoling the



*Bülent Ecevit was a secularist who succeeded in reaching out to the popular masses.*

military, Baykal predicted that the arrested officers would have their freedom restored, just as the “national heroes” exiled to Malta had been returned to the homeland. The latter were in fact accused of complicity in the mass killings and deportations of the Armenians 1915, and were never acquitted. Their release was the result of power politics, not of justice being administered. The implication of the CHP leader’s historical analogy is problematic to say the least – he seems entirely indifferent to whether the accusations against the imprisoned officers are true or not.

In another statement, Baykal claimed that the AKP government is only motivated by a desire to “beat the military”, and reiterated the opposition of the CHP to a change of the constitution that

would make it possible to try military personnel in active duty in civilian courts.

The stance of the CHP is remarkable, given the fact that the party is self-avowedly social democratic, and a member of the Socialist international. The CHP represents a modernist middle class, the best educated part of society; it has been remarked that the CHP would have obtained an absolute majority of votes if only university graduates had been allowed to vote. By any historical and international standards, such a party should not object to the application of the rule of law to the military. The CHP has not always supported military tutelage; indeed, the party was one of the main targets of the 1980 military coup. At one level, the CHP’s pro-militarism reflects the intellectual regression of the secular mindset that has been brought about recently. Yet, at another level, the anachronistic authoritarianism displayed by the secular, “modern” middle class is congruent with how modernity has always been understood by Turkish secularists.

Although Turkey’s secularist modernizers aspired to have their country accepted as a Western, European country, they never fully embraced the implications of the notion of Westernization. Westernization inevitably carried the implication of the empowerment of free individuals and civil society, notions which remained alien in a political context where the overriding concern was to ensure that society did not escape the control of the state. Liberalism along Western lines failed to develop among the secular middle class that largely remained beholden, not least in material terms, to the state. Neither has a social democracy

of the European kind - an alliance of part of the middle class and the working class - ever materialized, except for a brief moment in the 1970s when such a promise was held out by populist leader Bülent Ecevit. This is precisely because the secular middle class never could connect, or indeed sought to connect, with the lower classes that it despised.

The social arrogance of those who deem themselves to be enlightened is a crucial determinant of the hostility toward the AKP. That was displayed recently by the officers in a military unit who chose “base Prime Minister” as password, an act that prompted Prime Minister Erdoğan to take legal action against those involved.

**CONCLUSIONS:** Political scientist Fuat Keyman, the author of a recent book that details the seminal sociological and economic changes that is altering the cultural fabric of Anatolia, describes Turkey as having three distinct middle classes, all defined by different versions of conservatism: The secular middle class, residing mostly in the western, coastal rim, has developed a reclusive nationalism in reaction to having been deprived of its formerly elevated position and status. The religious middle class of the Anatolian heartland, acquiring strength by the day, is culturally conservative. And in the Kurdish Southeast, a growing middle class is strongly tempted by ethnic nationalism. Keyman warns that Turkey faces the risk of becoming a country divided into mutually intolerant communities who seek freedom only for themselves, not tolerating the rights of the others. As Keyman argues, the risk of authoritarianism can only be averted if freedom and democracy is sought for society as a whole. Like other liberal leftist intellectuals, he believes that that is a mission to be shouldered by a reinvented left, as the AKP is “too burdened by

its conservatism, although the party has been the vector of Turkey’s transformation”.

Indeed, the politics of the supposedly social democratic pro-militarist CHP has reached a dead end. Military authoritarianism can no longer keep a society whose heterogeneity has become too “unruly” in check, a fact the Chief of the General staff General İlker Başbuğ himself seems to recognize. To assail the authoritarianism of the AKP, while opposing the democratization of civilian-military relations will not enable secularist politics to reach beyond its core constituency.

The secularists face very much the same challenge as the Islamists did a decade ago: to either broaden their appeal or to concede defeat. And like the Islamists, the secularists will have to make a conceptual leap, albeit of a somewhat different nature, reappraising democracy, and ceasing to see the military as their ultimate rampart.

The adherence of Turkey’s Islamic conservatives to liberal and democratic values can certainly not be taken for granted, as the policies of the AKP during its second term have showed. Yet, no less consequential for Turkey’s democratization is that secularism is reinvented, making its own transition to liberalism. Haluk Şahin, a liberal secularist academic, exhorts the seculars to reclaim the banners of freedom that “rightfully belongs to them”. Such voices are rare among the secularists. However, challenging the AKP to forgo the habits of authoritarian statism and nationalism - instead of assailing it for subjugating the military to the rule of law - would indeed make the secularist claim to represent enlightenment values credible.

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## WHAT THE COLUMNISTS SAY

*The detention of over fifty active and retired military personnel – among them several generals and former force commanders – accused of having planned to stage a coup in 2003, has led several commentators to conclude that Turkey has passed a critical threshold of great historic importance. Although the accusations against the military are dismissed by secularists, the general sense is that the military is being relegated to a subordinate role. There is nevertheless apprehension also among those who welcome the subjugation of the military that this development may not in itself be enough to secure full democratization.*

### **BERKAN: WHAT HAPPENED IN 2003?**

İsmet Berkan in *Radikal* writes that he has recently been informed that General İlker Başbuğ, the Chief of the General staff, who at the time was Chief of Staff of the Army, had been actively involved in the efforts in 2003 to circumvent the 1st army in Istanbul from carrying out the coup codenamed Sledgehammer. According to his information, Başbuğ was instrumental in assisting his commanding officer, the army Chief General Aytaç Yalman and General Hilmi Özkök, the Chief of the General staff, in their efforts. As part of these, several units of the 1st army were transferred from the Istanbul region, which effectively disabled it. Are these reports accurate? If they are, it raises the question whether subsequent coup conspiracies could have been discouraged; shouldn't the General staff have taken legal action against the conspirators? Similarly, President Abdullah Gül, the Prime Minister at the time, and Prime Minister Recep

Tayyip Erdoğan should give an account of what they knew: according to the diaries of journalist Mustafa Balbay (who is imprisoned, charged in the Ergenekon coup trial), the then chief of the MIT (the National intelligence agency) had told him that “the 1st army has prepared its coup plan”. Was that information given to you as well? If so, what actions did you take upon receiving it?

### **ÇANDAR: TURKEY IS BEING PURGED OF COUPMAKERS**

Cengiz Çandar in *Hürriyet* finds it remarkable that the two top ranking, four star generals and one four star admiral – former Air force chief General İbrahim Fırtına, former Navy chief Özden Örnek and former deputy Chief of the General staff General Ergin Saygun – were all released after the tripartite summit between President Gül, Prime Minister Erdoğan and Chief of the

General staff İlker Başbuğ at the presidential mansion. That has happened once before, and it inevitably creates the impression that matters are co-managed at the highest level of the state. The chief prosecutor in Istanbul stated that the two four star generals and the admiral were set free since “there is no risk that they will escape or tamper with evidence”. That statement incredulously suggests that those generals and admirals of lesser rank that have not been released would indeed try to escape and tamper with evidence. It would seem that the rule of law does not apply at the four star level. Never mind; we should be content that the law has reached this far, that the military can no longer avoid justice. Those who were involved in coup schemes in the past can no longer assume that they enjoy perpetual impunity. But what is happening today is as much about the future, of about discouraging any future attempts to stage coups. Turkey is going through the same cleansing process as Argentina, Spain, Greece and other countries did in the past.

### **BILA: BAŞBUĞ TOLD THE GOVERNMENT TO RELEASE THE GENERALS**

Fikret Bila in *Milliyet* refers to his conversation with Deniz Baykal, the leader of the opposition Republican People’s party (CHP). Baykal sees Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan as the big loser in the latest round of the battle between the government and the military. The leader of the CHP points out that Erdoğan remained mute for 72 hours after the generals were taken into custody. Then all four star generals and admirals assembled at the General staff, after which a short but stern statement was issued.

The critical words in that statement were that the situation was deemed to be “very serious”. These words were enough, says Baykal. Subsequently, Deputy Prime Minister Cemil Çiçek paid a visit to the General staff at late hours. Then, the tripartite summit was held. The former commanders were brought before a judge during the same hours, and were released immediately after the summit had been concluded. According to Deniz Baykal, the obvious conclusion is that Prime Minister Erdoğan has had to cede to General Başbuğ. It was politics, not law that was decisive. The release of the generals was politically motivated, just as they had been taken into custody on political grounds, says Baykal.

### **MAHÇUPYAN: BAYKAL AND DEMOCRACY**

Etyen Mahçupyan in *Taraf* writes that CHP leader Deniz Baykal has exonerated the accused generals. Following the round-up of over fifty active and retired military personnel, Baykal issued a statement in which he declared that it was deplorable that respectable, high ranking officers were subjected to such treatment. The day after, Baykal went a step further when he stated that the Sledgehammer plan was just a normal war game, and that those involved in it would never have been arrested if Turkey had been a normal democracy. Well, the truth of the matter is that it is such coup makers that have stopped Turkey from ever becoming a normal democracy, which it is now trying to become. But the leader of the CHP has built his politics on distorting reality, offering psychological solace for the seculars. Indeed, Baykal’s tactics are in perfect harmony with the strategy of

ideological manipulation upon which the entire republican historiography has rested, and which has kept the seculars in a state of pitiful ignorance. That was underlined when Baykal compared the arrested generals to those “prominent figures of the Independence war” that were exiled to Malta in 1920 by the British, stating that they would return to freedom just as the Malta exiles had done. In fact, these latter were not any prominent figures of the Independence war, but accused of involvement in the Armenian genocide, and they were never acquitted. We know very well what they did, just as we know what the generals and Baykal have done. As long as the seculars remain ignorant of history and unable to evolve ideologically, there will always be a couple of generals and a Baykal around to represent them.

#### **ÖZEL: IT IS NOT ENOUGH TO TEAR DOWN THE OLD STRUCTURE**

Soli Özel in *Habertürk* observes that the political struggle that rages in Turkey has several dimensions. Power is shifting hands, and it is doing so at multiple levels. In economic and social terms, we are witnessing how the power of the conservative Anatolian heartland is asserting itself. The social conservatism of Anatolia is ideologically on the ascendancy. At another level, power is being displaced from the state, or from those who have deemed themselves to be “the proprietor of the state, and the master of society”, to politics. The military is in the process of having to cede its power to the civilians. If Turkey is to become a true

democracy instead of pretending to be a democracy, these changes are obviously necessary and indeed long overdue. The democratic construction is now more or less in place; now we have to turn our attention to the details. It is not enough to tear down the old edifice in order to secure democracy; that does not in itself promise the advent of democracy, in particular since the political leadership has hardly done anything during the last seven and half years to change the authoritarian structures and mores of the state institutions that it conquered.

#### **CALIŞLAR: THE AKP AND BIG BUSINESS**

Oral Çalışlar in *Radikal* writes that economic power still largely remains in the hands of the Istanbulite bourgeoisie that is hostile to the AKP. Of the 100 richest persons in Turkey, only 10 could be said to be close to the AKP. That list is still dominated by the bourgeoisie of Istanbul, and the wealth of that group has multiplied during the eight years of AKP rule. Much has been said and written about the supposed power of the supposedly ascendant Anatolian, conservative bourgeoisie, the so called “Anatolian tigers”; it is often assumed that this bourgeoisie is on the verge of reversing the economic power relations of the country. In fact, economic power, most of trade and industry, remains in the hands of the Istanbulite elite. And they are still the main beneficiaries of the favors that are handed out by the state. The “Anatolians tigers” are very far from being able to rival the power of the Istanbulite elite.