

# How Will the Turkish Military React?

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Articles & Testimony

**T**heme

Since the 1990s, the Turkish military have emerged as a force defending Turkey's secular democracy in the political realm. How will they react towards the upsurge in Islamic influence and the other issues facing the country?

## Summary

The Turkish military began to Westernise in the late 18th century and became a strictly secular institution under Ataturk in the early 20th century. The military are Turkey's most Westernised institution and a bastion of secularism. What is more, they consistently rank as the most popular and widely respected institution in Turkey. Since the 1990s, the Turkish military have emerged as a force defending Turkey's secular democracy in the political realm. What explains the military's behaviour? Given the recent rumblings in Turkey over its presidential, and upcoming parliamentary elections -- the Justice and Development Party (AKP), with an Islamist pedigree and currently in government, is at the centre of the controversy -- a review of the Turkish military's commitment to secularism will help reveal how it might react in the near future to a number of important issues.

## Analysis

On 22 July Turkey faces crucial parliamentary elections, which follow in the footsteps of an important political crisis. Since adopting its current constitution in 1982, Turkey has elected four Presidents. Turkey's recent failure to elect a new President has brought about its worst political crisis of the past two decades. This development marks a new era in Turkish political life, which has been dominated by the AKP since the November 2002 elections. Although the Turkish military, known as the 'defenders of Turkish secularism', had distanced themselves from Turkish politics after 2002, they are increasingly assuming their position of political power. On 27 April the military issued an Internet declaration to the effect that 'radical Islamic understanding . . . has been expanding its sphere with encouragement from politicians and local authorities'. The statement added: 'the Turkish armed forces . . . are staunch defenders of secularism . . . and will display their position and attitudes when it becomes necessary'.

The 22 July elections and the presidential elections will be a platform for political contest between the AKP and not only the secular parties but also the secular courts of justice. At this juncture, the military's statement could be seen as a warning to the AKP. From where do the Turkish military gain such confidence and what are the roots of the military's position as the 'defenders of Turkish secularism'? Given the elections and rising political tensions between the AKP and the secular Turks, how will the military act vis-a-vis the AKP government? The answers to these questions should provide clues for the future of Turkish politics, as well as to how the military will react to issues such as accession to the European Union (EU) and the fight against terrorism, especially the Kurdistan Workers Party's (PKK) presence in northern Iraq.

## The Turkish Military: Three Self-Perceived Roles

One-Track Western Mind. Understanding the Turkish military's commitment to secularism necessitates a review of Turkey's journey to the West. Contrary to common wisdom, the Turks' embrace of the West is not a 20th-century

phenomenon but rather took place during the Ottoman period after a long period of soul searching. Following the Ottoman defeat in Vienna in 1683 and the subsequent loss of territories, the Ottoman elite painfully conceded to Western superiority. They concluded that the only way to defeat Europe was to become European. Because the most obvious sign of Ottoman weakness compared to Europe was in the military realm, the empire decided to create a European military. In 1773, the Sultan established the Imperial School of Naval Engineering, a modern, Western military school, designed to create a Western navy, the military backbone of all European powers at the time. This school and the institutions which followed provided the backbone of a secular, Western army. Because of the Ottoman modernisation experience, the military became Turkey's first and most-westernised institution. As a result of this experience stretching back to 1773, the Turkish military's memory of being Western is older than the memory of France being a republic. The Turkish military, fully secularised under Ataturk, remain committed to being Western and secular because they have no memory of being anything else.

The Guardians of Secularism. It is no coincidence that Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the leading figure of westernisation in modern Turkey, arose from the Ottoman army. At the end of World War I, Ataturk not only liberated Turkey but also established a fully Western republic that recognised only secular laws and provided only secular education. Ataturk's vision was that the military, as modern Turkey's most Western institution, would guard over his legacy, including secularism. To this day, the military are legally assigned the task of preserving Turkey's secular constitution. Article 35 of the Internal Service Law of the military stipulates that the Turkish Armed Forces are responsible for 'guarding and defending the Turkish republic as defined by the constitution'.

The military have acted on this legal obligation. Most recently, in the late 1990s, they joined a public campaign to force the Welfare Party (RP), the AKP's mother party, out of government.

The Most Respected Institution. Regardless of their legal authority, what explains the Turkish military's comfort in intervening in politics? Turkish opinion polls consistently show the military as the most respected institution in the country. A 2002 poll by Washington DC-based Pew Center demonstrated that the military are the institution most liked by the Turks, more than the government, the parliament, the media and the mosques.

From where do the military derive their popularity? First, the fact that the military under Ataturk liberated Turkey from an invincible occupation ensures that all Turks across the political spectrum, including Islamists, recognize them as a national saviour. A second contributing factor is that they conscript across all of Turkey's social classes, ethnic groups and regions. Acting as a social mixer and a democratising institution, the military provide a rare chance for upward mobility. Thirdly, many Turks respect the military because, unlike the political classes, they are not corrupt.

#### The Turkish Military: Two Popular Views

Yes to the Military for 'Political Housecleaning'. Popular trust in the military has, however, created a sense of 'political atrophy'. Secular parties and the population at large often turn to the military for 'political housecleaning', rather than taking political action themselves. The middle classes especially take comfort in the military as a secular firewall against Islamism. One consequence of this attitude is that the prospect of having an Islamist party in power, such as in 1996 when the RP came to power in a coalition government, does not create an immediate panic or flight of capital.

No to the Military's Candidates. Despite the military's popularity, the Turks have developed a cynical attitude to military-backed candidates. Although the people support the military's role in political housecleaning, they shy away from voting for parties that appear to be the military's candidates. In the aftermath of Turkey's last coup in 1980, for instance, the military-backed Nationalist Democracy Party, led by a retired general, came last in the elections, while the party least favoured by the military, Turgut Ozal's Motherland Party (ANAP), emerged victorious. This shows the

Turkish public's political bias against candidates favoured by the military and towards those considered the military's underdog.

### The Turkish Military vs the Islamists

Notwithstanding their puzzling relationship with the public at large, the Turkish military feel comfortable intervening on behalf of secularism as long as they have popular backing for their policy. This confidence is best illustrated in the way the military dealt with the RP in the 1990s.

Turkish Islamists, long a marginal movement, profited from the winds of change in the 1990s following the fall of communism and the subsequent failure of the Turkish left to reinvent itself. At this juncture, casting itself as the party of the working and lower-middle classes, the RP received 21% of the vote in December 1995 and came to power in a coalition government with the centre-right True Path Party (DYP).

The February 28 Process. The RP-DYP government became controversial when the RP launched an Islamist agenda, announcing, among other things, that it would create an Islamic M-8, a gathering of Muslim countries to balance the G-8.

The RP's policies, laced with elements of sharia, such as banning alcohol in RP-run city municipal restaurants and creating separate public transport systems for men and women, led to a strong domestic backlash. Street demonstrations by secular unions, political parties and NGOs ensued. Public criticism of the RP government by 'Istanbul' -- influential business lobbies, NGOs and the media -- culminated in an anti-RP front. 'Istanbul' threw its support behind 'Ankara', composed of secular parties, the military and the unions. In this regard, the military acted as the grand arbiter, supporting policies against the RP. For instance, a Turkish civil society campaign known as 'One Minute of Darkness for Eternal Light', in which people protested against the RP by turning their lights off for one minute at 8:00 pm every day, got a boost when the Turkish Chief of Staff's offices joined in.

On 28 February 1997, in what is known as the 'February 28 Process', the Turkish National Security Council, which includes the military, presented the RP government with a memorandum identifying unconstitutional Islamist acts under RP rule. Faced with mounting domestic discontent and street demonstrations of millions, the RP stepped down from government in June 1997.

### Enter the AKP

While the RP failed to challenge Turkish secularism, the AKP has succeeded. The AKP hopes to fare well in the approaching parliamentary and presidential elections. The AKP's success is rooted in the lesson it accurately drew from 1996-97: backing from 'Istanbul' (the business sector and media) and steady popular support are critical to surviving a secular onslaught. The party's pro-business policies, along with the support of the Turkish media (owned by large Istanbul businesses), have helped the AKP achieve some of this support, at least for the time being.

### What Next Between the AKP and the Military?

On 1 September 2006 General Yasar Buyukanit became Turkey's new Chief of Staff. Compared with his predecessor, General Hilmi Ozkok, who entered office around the same time as the AKP government in 2002, General Buyukanit is more vocal on issues related to secularism. In this regard, General Buyukanit's term marks a crucial era in military-civilian relations in Turkey. The following will be some of the critical issues to watch.

Secular Education. One of Ataturk's fundamental reforms was the creation of a secular universal education system. Today, the AKP seems to be challenging this system through the imam-hatip schools and turban issues.

The Imam-Hatip Schools. Turkey's educational philosophy is European, directing high-school students towards either an academic or vocational track. Students on an academic track at regular high schools (lise) continue on to universities, whereas students on the vocational track get preferential treatment in applying to university majors in

their professional field.

The imam-hatip schools (IHS) were established in the 1950s as vocational schools to train imams (clerics) and hatips (preachers). Later on, however, they emerged as an alternative, religious track to secular education as the number of students who enrolled in these schools exceeded the number of imams and hatips that were needed. As a result, IHS graduates began to overwhelmingly enter universities as public administration and law majors. By the mid-1990s, the schools had become so widespread that in the conflict between RP/Islamists and the secular block/military in 1997, IHS constituted a point of friction. In the end, secular pressures forced the implementation of new laws stipulating that IHS graduates would be systematically directed to enter universities as theology majors as was originally intended.

This barrier stymied the growth of IHS, and the number of students at these schools dropped to 64,534 in 2002. Since the rise of the AKP government however, the number of IHS students has increased. In 2005, 108,064 youths studied at the IHS. The AKP has created loopholes allowing IHS students to transfer to academic high schools before graduation, thus granting them preferential treatment in going on to non-theology majors in universities. The entry of the IHS graduates into university departments other than theological fields is not only a technical matter but has led to a fierce internal debate about universal secular education, a pillar of Turkish secularism.

The Turban. Just like the IHS issue, controversy over the turban (a specific headscarf that the secular courts regard as a sign of political Islam) is an issue about education. Conservative Muslim women in Turkey have always covered their heads as a sign of modesty, choosing among a variety of styles, including east and south European-looking handkerchiefs, known as esarp, worn by urban women; a more conservative late-Ottoman-era version called basortusu; and a gauze cloth, yazma/yemeni, worn by rural women. According to polls, in 2006, less than half (48%) of Turkish women used these forms of head covering. The turban, however, is a specific headgear that first appeared in Turkey in the early 1980s after other predominantly Muslim countries. The turban exposes no hair, and unlike the other forms, it even covers parts of the face in a tight-fitting form while extending over the shoulders. Despite efforts to promote the turban, especially by younger generations to popularise it as a symbol of Islamism and virtue in the 1990s, it never became a mass phenomenon. What is more, due to secular pressures since 1997, the number of women who wear the turban has dropped. Today, 11% of Turkish women wear the turban, compared with 16% in 1999.

The Turkish courts have ruled against the turban for violating Turkey's secular constitution. In due course, the Turkish Higher Board of Education, a council of university rectors and a secular bastion, banned the turban on university campuses. This ban has created a controversy on campuses; students who wear the turban took their case to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), which upheld the Turkish court's ruling.

The imam-hatip and turban issues are the most acrimonious topics in Turkish domestic politics. Any AKP moves to alter the status quo on these issues, especially on the more-iconic turban question, will likely face strong discontent and resistance from the high courts and military. Turkey's current political crisis over the presidential elections is generated by a concern for these very issues.

The Turkish President has the prerogative to appoint members of high courts and select university presidents from a list compiled by university academic personnel. In this regard, an AKP-elected President could use his executive power to tilt the balance on divisive issues in the AKP's favour. A possible scenario could be one in which the President selects university rectors who overturn the turban ban on campuses and allow IHS graduates into non-theology majors. This would be followed by the appointment of high court judges who would review the constitutionality of any changes on the turban and imam-hatip issues and vote in favour of them. Hence, the presidential elections, and even more importantly, the behaviour of the new president, mark the beginning of a new era for Turkish politics as well as for secularism.

The PKK. The AKP and the military also disagree on the PKK issue. On 1 October 2006 the PKK declared a unilateral ceasefire to shield itself from an anticipated Turkish campaign to root out its bases in northern Iraq. On 2 October 2006 Erdogan gave at least partial backing to this move, saying he expected that 'if the terrorist organisation keeps its word, no operation will be undertaken [by the Turkish military] without reason'. General Ilker Basbug, commander of the Turkish Land Forces, dismissed Erdogan and the PKK, asserting that the struggle against the PKK would 'continue until they are destroyed at the root' in Turkey and northern Iraq, where it is based.

#### How Will the Turkish Military React?

Whether the issue is the turban, the fight against the PKK or Turkey's EU accession, how will the Turkish military react over the next few days? The Turkish military see themselves as the most trusted institution and as the guardians of secularism. Yet they are prone to thinking and acting like a 'political party', with their own vision of a secular Turkey. The military position themselves as the grand arbiters to safeguard the secular constitution, while thriving on public support. Because they care about being popular and respected, the military seek and build up public support to promote their vision of a secular Turkey. In other words, the military will only do what they consider has popular support.

Domestic Politics. The military's pro-secular stance against the RP government of the 1990s is expressing itself against the AKP today. Accordingly, the military appear to have the acceptance of the secular Turks who aim to block the AKP from winning the July elections and choosing Turkey's next President. Should the AKP win enough seats in July to form a government and elect the next President, the military will seek to build up public support to confront the AKP, especially on the turban and imam-hatip issues. In this regard, the military will interpret the continuation of recent anti-AKP demonstrations as popular support for their position against the AKP -- a la February 28.

However, the military will also have to strike the right balance in two calculations:

- First, the military will need to find a balance between the two popular positions towards it. While the secular Turks will appreciate a helping hand from the military in 'political housecleaning' vis-a-vis the AKP, society at large will resent any heavy-handed military efforts to impose its own political candidates.
- Secondly, should the AKP be the underdog in the current confrontation with the military, this will strengthen the political support for the party.

Hence, the Turkish military will likely act as an arbiter, supporting, but not leading, the efforts to block the AKP's political ambitions. In this regard, the secular political parties, the courts and perhaps the media are likely allies for the military.

The PKK. Acting as a political party and systemic arbiter, the military will draw support from their success against the PKK. For the military, defeating the PKK is a sine qua non in the fight against terrorism. That the AKP government has not delivered security on the PKK issue since 2002 -- the PKK has recently killed dozens of Turks -- increases the military's desire to take credit on the PKK issue themselves. This could happen in two ways: first, with the arrest and handing over to the Turkish military of the PKK's leadership in northern Iraq by the US. This tactic would surely give the Turkish military strong popular support. The second method would be direct Turkish military intervention in northern Iraq to eliminate the PKK bases used to train terrorists for attacks into Turkey. While this method could provide the military with public support, it might prove more burdensome, as any intervention into northern Iraq would incur criticism from the US and the EU.

The EU. Even if Turkey's EU accession process has come to a near halt due to the hurdles set by a number of EU member states, the Turkish military will remain supportive of the country's entry in the EU. While some Turks, including some members of the military, have warned that the 'EU is diluting Turkish sovereignty', this is not a worrying development. Many EU members have strong 'sovereignist' institutions and parties against the Union, and

the 'sovereignist' anti-EU arguments are not unique to Turkey, nor should they be considered alarming. Ultimately, the Turkish military's identity, committed to upholding Turkey's Western orientation, will play a significant role in supporting EU accession. However, given the Turkish military's behaviour as a political party that reflects and supports popular sentiments -- the Turks are 'Eurosceptic Europhiles' on EU accession -- the Turkish military will likely ask that the country's EU process be fair and not include Turkey-specific conditions. Indeed, the Turkish military would be more closely involved in the EU if the accession process were to be close-ended, as it has been de facto for all the 21 members that have held accession talks.

## Conclusion

It could be argued therefore, that the way the Turkish military think is not motivated by short-term cost/benefit calculations, but that it rests on a long-standing self-perception. The Turkish military act as the guardians of secularism, have an unwavering Western orientation and also rest on massive public support that brings about a great deal of responsibility. Such a self-perception and self-identification clashed with the Islamists in 1997 (during what is referred to as the 'February 28 process') and led to the memorandum issued by the National Security Council that criticised the Islamist Welfare Party's stance against secularism. Today, in a similar process of confrontation between the Islamists and the military, the main issues are the Imam-Hatip schools and the turban issues as well as the ways of confronting the PKK problem. Perhaps, the most important sui generis quality of Turkey's democracy is the presence of the military in it. As long as the Turkish military are a respected institution, it is unlikely for their presence in Turkey's democracy to wither away.

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