

Turkey Gets Ready to Elect President under New Chief of Staff:

Implications for the United States

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Brief Analysis

On September 1, 2006, Gen. Yasar Buyukanit became Turkey's new chief of staff. Compared with his predecessor, Gen. Hilmi Ozkok, who came into office about the same time as the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government, General Buyukanit is a more vocal personality on many issues, including secularism. As Turkey prepares for the April 2007 election of a new president by parliament, General Buyukanit's term marks a new, crucial era in military-civilian relations in Turkey. What are the dynamics of this new era, and what implications does it have for U.S. policy?

A Difficult Promotion

General Buyukanit's promotion was preceded by a vigorous Internet and SMS (cell phone text messaging is ubiquitous in Turkey) campaign against him, suggesting that he has "secret Jewish heritage" and therefore should not become Turkey's chief of staff. This is shocking in a country that has prided itself on providing safe haven to Jews—from those fleeing the Spanish inquisition to those escaping Islamist Iran. The fact that imagined Jewish heritage could hurt a general's promotion shows how much Turkey has changed since the rise of the AKP in 2002.

A "Turkish Senate" Emergent

General Buyukanit's term represents a new era for the AKP's solid legislative majority. In the November 2002 elections, the AKP got one-third of the vote but two-thirds of the parliamentary seats due to a 10 percent election threshold that barred smaller parties from the parliament and allocated their seats to the AKP. So far, the AKP has exercised unchecked executive power, though now General Buyukanit and Turkish president Ahmet Necdet Sezer, former chief justice of the constitutional court (the pinnacle of Turkey's secular judiciary), are emerging as figures critical of the AKP's executive acts. In some ways, Buyukanit and Sezer, representing the military and the high courts, will function as a "senate," which Turkey does not have. Issues of conflict between the AKP and the "Turkish senate" are:

Secularism vs. Islamist Radicalism. On August 30 and October 2, Buyukanit named "reactionaryism," a Turkish

shorthand for Islamist fundamentalism, as the biggest threat facing Turkey. Buyukanit added that the military has a constitutional duty to combat fundamentalism; internal statutes task the military with defending the country's constitution, which defines Turkey as a secular state. President Sezer added, on October 1, "Secularism is the best way to tackle the increasing threat of reactionaryism." Although the AKP had itself kicked off the secularism debate, in April the speaker of the parliament and AKP deputy Bulent Arinc said Turkey needed to redefine secularism. Turkish prime minister and AKP leader Tayyip Erdogan dismissed Sezer and Buyukanit's comments as attempts at "creating an artificial agenda."

War on Terror. The AKP invited Hamas's military leader, Khaled Mashaal, to Ankara on April 25, and has since maintained contacts with Hamas. Buyukanit and Sezer have called Hamas a terrorist organization, taking issue with the AKP's policy.

The two sides also differ on the issue of the terrorist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). On October 1, the PKK declared a unilateral ceasefire to shield itself from an anticipated Turkish campaign to root out its bases in northern Iraq. On October 2, Erdogan gave at least partial backing to this move, saying he expected that the Turkish "military would not fire on the PKK unless fired upon." Gen. Ilker Basbug, commander of the Turkish Land Forces and an ally of General Buyukanit, dismissed Erdogan and the PKK, asserting that the struggle against the PKK "would continue until the group was entirely defeated."

The AKP's Stakes

Disagreements between the "Turkish senate" and the AKP, following months of tension between the AKP and the courts (see "[Rising Tensions Between Turkey's AKP and the Courts](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2474)" (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2474>), PolicyWatch no. 1109), suggest a difficult period in Turkish politics in the runup to the presidential elections. With domestic opposition rising in the media, courts, secular parties, nationalist groups, and now the military, the AKP should be concerned. Thanks to its parliamentary majority, the AKP is able to elect the next president. What factors might deter it from doing so, or help it achieve this goal?

Foreign Policy. Over the past years, the AKP's foreign policy has moved away from the West. The party castigated the Middle East policies of the United States. And after Turkey got the green light in December 2004 to start accession talks with the European Union (EU), the AKP lost enthusiasm about the EU, fearing that cumbersome accession talks would erode its domestic popularity. It took the AKP six months to appoint a chief negotiator to head the Turkish team in the talks. Now, however, the AKP views ties with the EU and United States as tools with which to strengthen its hand at home.

If the EU talks move ahead, the "Turkish senate" will be forced to soften its tone against the AKP in order not to derail the talks. Consequently, the AKP has readopted the accession talks, signaling that it wants to avoid a train wreck with the EU over the Cyprus issue. Press reports suggest that in September the AKP fathered a government change in Turkish Cyprus, driving the nationalist parties from the ruling coalition, so that the new Turkish Cypriot government would accept an unpalatable EU compromise package on the Cyprus issue.

With survivalist instincts, hoping to weather the domestic political storm with Washington's backing, the AKP has also changed its attitude toward U.S. policies in the Middle East. Despite domestic opposition, the AKP leadership fully supported sending Turkish peacekeepers to Lebanon in preparation for Erdogan's visit to Washington on October 2. Thus, when the parliament authorized a motion on the peacekeeping issue, only six AKP deputies defected—an interesting fact suggesting that had the AKP shown similar resolve, it could have secured the approval of a 2003 motion to support the Iraq war, which failed when ninety-nine AKP deputies defected.

The PKK. While the AKP has failed to combat the PKK, in July, twenty-three Turks were killed as a result of terror

attacks. Action against the PKK presence in northern Iraq has become crucial. Most Turks know someone killed by the PKK, and terror angers them tremendously. The United States has recently appointed a special coordinator to combat the PKK. Should the AKP take credit for major strikes against the PKK, it will certainly gain much popularity, elect the next Turkish president, and even win the ensuing parliamentary elections in October 2007.

Implications for the United States

Even if the AKP's attitude toward Washington has become more positive, it is doubtful that the party will be able to deliver support to the United States on crucial Middle East issues. After years of harsh AKP criticism of the United States, Turkish public opinion is vehemently anti-American and most Turks now identify with Islamist issues. Pervasive anti-Western public opinion will make it difficult for the AKP to provide actual support for U.S. policies in the Middle East, such as Iran's denuclearization. Along the same vein, it will be tough for the AKP to sell a Cyprus deal to the Turkish public.

Ironically for the AKP, anti-Western sentiments, largely a product of the party's rule, will lessen the effectiveness of the party's turn to the United States and the EU. Accordingly, the political battle between the AKP and the "Turkish senate" will likely be resolved by domestic dynamics, with issues such as the PKK, the nationalist upsurge (largely a response to PKK terror and likely to turn violent), and corruption (so far, there has not been any news of major corruption cases involving the AKP) determining the winners of the 2007 elections.

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