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Conceiving the New Turkey After Ergenekon

Umit Cizre and Joshua Walker

The approaches and policies toward Turkey of international and regional players cannot alone be expected to fundamentally alter the political *Zeitgeist* and operational principles of its political system. In fact the opposite is true: underlying Turkey's foreign policy formulations and recalibrations is a domestic power struggle to redefine the real parameters of Turkish politics. The primary focus of this struggle in the last two years has centred on the still ongoing historic court case known as *Ergenekon* that is altering the status quo framework and understanding of Turkish politics.¹ Engaged in this struggle are, on the one hand, the secular establishment, led by the military² and, on the other, the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), a pragmatic conservative offspring of the banned Islamist party.³

The first part of this article examines the need for the West to refocus its understanding of Turkey on the correct variables of domestic politics so as to recalibrate its policies towards the new Turkey that is emerging. The second part elaborates on the significance of the recent *Ergenekon* affair to understand more thoroughly the relevance of the "military factor" in Turkish politics.

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¹Labeled as the "case of the century", *Ergenekon* is the name given to an allegedly clandestine, ultra-nationalist organisation in Turkey with ties to members of the country's military and security forces. The investigation has, since July 2008, led to the arrest of over one hundred people, including military, party and police officials, and a former secretary general of the National Security Council.

²The secular establishment is further composed of the segment of the judiciary dealing with regime issues (i.e., public prosecutors and the Constitutional Court), some elements of the civilian bureaucracy (especially the Foreign Ministry), and a sizeable cluster of civil society actors.

³The grand-predecessor of the AKP was the Welfare Party, founded in 1983 and closed down by the Constitutional Court in January 1998 on the grounds that it had become a focal point of anti-secular activities. The Welfare Party was succeeded in 1997 by the Virtue Party, which was also closed down in June 2001. The movement eventually split into the traditionalist Felicity Party founded in July 2001 and the reformist Justice and Development Party founded in August 2001.

The final section analyses how Ergenekon has helped the ruling party emerge as an actor, taking advantage of its ambiguous identity, and shaped new opportunities for restructuring the civil-military balance and addressing the Kurdish question.

The imperative of understanding the new Turkey

President Obama's first presidential visit to a Muslim-majority nation and second bilateral visit in his first 100 days focused global attention on the Republic of Turkey. As a 60-year NATO ally and close partner of the United States, Turkey's geography has always mattered to Western strategists. Given the ups and downs of US–Turkish relations since the 2003 war in Iraq, this newfound attention and interest has once again focused on the location and geostrategic nature of Turkey.

President Obama's visit also came at a critical juncture not only in US–Turkish relations, but also in Turkish domestic politics, a fact often overlooked by analysts of international relations. The Turkey that Obama visited in April 2009 is a very different place from the “moderate Islamic model” that President Bush touted five years ago. The ruling AKP has been taking advantage of the new opportunities for reshaping the traditional command-and-control model of the Turkish state, led by a “religiously” secular military bureaucracy. In addition, the Turkish economy has been expanding steadily along with the Turks' new sense of self-confidence in world affairs. Interestingly, Turkey has become more European, more democratic, more conservative and Islam-friendly, and more nationalist simultaneously. Even more significantly, the Ergenekon affair has shown that it is also a country where coup attempts to bring down the government, organised by civilian figures and active and retired military officers, are not relics of the past but still represent a real threat to the political and economic stability of the country.

Today, Turkey's identity and survival are not entirely bound up with the West. It is not just its Islam-friendly political power or its diplomatic efforts in the region or the sense that with its newly minted seat on the UN Security Council Turkey is a “player” – it is all of these things. The synergy between President Obama's visit and some of the most significant changes in the young republic's history represents a golden opportunity to redirect the West's attention to Turkey's capacities and limitations in the region. Not only in terms of geopolitics, Islamism or secularism, but also from a sociological and political perspective the focus should be on internal flexibilities and rigidities, those that drive and frustrate democratic and domestic changes in the civil-military equilibrium and long-term political stability, as well as the foreign policy agenda.

The premium placed on Turkey's role as a “model” of a secular Muslim representative democracy is based on a gross misunderstanding of the rules of the political game in Ankara, in Turkish society and in the region. In reality, the promotion of Turkey as a stable model for the region must stem from the quality

of its own political principles, and from its own stability – not merely from its military strength, its “successful” balancing of religion with secularism or its geostrategic location. None of these properties, together or alone, has been able to create stability in Turkey in the last two decades. For instance, despite the softening impact of global changes, Turkey’s civil-military relations are still tilted in favour of a strongly militarised state and a political army. In an international environment that discourages overt military intervention in politics, international observers often see little threat of a return to direct military rule in Turkey, but they fail to notice the ways in which military power is in fact exercised in a context where a politically autonomous and secular military is pitted against a popularly and democratically elected, Islamic government. Therefore, only by learning about the internal dynamics of Turkish politics and paying close attention to the balance of civil-military relations in particular, can Washington and Brussels endeavour to formulate a unique Turkey strategy.

On Obama’s three most urgent strategic issues (Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran), Turkey must be a critical partner. Fortunately, US–Turkish interests are more closely aligned now than at any time in the past six years. At the same time, although the accession process to the European Union (EU) is caught up in a complex set of problems, the EU reform agenda is critical for the reappearance of the reformist side of the AKP government. It is Ankara’s engagement with its neighbours to the south and east, including Syria and Iran, without abandoning its EU membership, that has garnered the Turks newfound regional prestige. However, internal problems continue to hamper Turkey’s growing influence here as well. The first of these is the unresolved nature of the Kurdish question. The second, which points to the still uncertain status of Ataturk’s legacy, is the unresolved question of whether Turkey will succeed in transforming itself into a democratic secular European state. Both problems impinge on the fundamental fault line of civil-military relations in Turkey.

“Ergenekon crisis” and redefining the civil-military interface

Since the 1999 EU Helsinki Summit’s decision to extend candidate status to Turkey, EU accession has become the main driving force for democratic reforms in civil-military relations in Turkey. As part of the accession process, the European Commission has been assessing Turkey’s progress based on fulfilment of the political criteria set out in the Copenhagen European Council meeting of 1993.⁴

⁴The Copenhagen Criteria, as they are now known, require the implementation of institutional stability, complete freedom of expression, the entrenchment of human rights, respect and protection for minorities and an efficient market economy. Although civil-military relations are not explicitly referred to, the spirit of the document is that there should be a rethinking of the extent to which the military is independent of democratic control.

The Accession Partnership Document and the European Commission's annual reports on Turkey have suggested the need for structural changes⁵ in the organisation of civil-military relations to enhance democratic civilian control and bring the relationship in line with EU standards.

Perhaps the most important features that distinguish the EU's policies toward Ankara from those of the US are their sharp insights, their realistic and proactive character, and their power of enforcement. Officials in Brussels accepted the risk of drawing upon themselves the antagonism of the military and other traditional actors when they acknowledged from day one that "the so-called internal security problems may in fact be the result of the extant civil-military imbalance. If so, then the Turkish armed forces' (TAF) justification of its greater domestic involvement and independence from democratic checks and balances is both self-fulfilling and self-perpetuating."⁶ EU documents and representatives have not refrained from explicitly criticising the state's security ambitions and their deleterious effects on the country's democratic governance. Adoption of this critical perspective and policy has led to acceptance of the fact that unless primacy is given to reviewing and altering the civilian-military equilibrium, a general democratic reform strategy cannot produce effective results.

More significantly, the most recent Commission Progress Report, published on 5 November 2009, pinpoints the ambiguous nature of the AKP's policies toward the military:

Political control over the military was applied in practice in the context of military operations aimed at terrorist targets in Northern Iraq. Such operations were authorized by the parliament and decided upon by the government. Overall, however, no progress has been made in ensuring full civilian supervisory functions over the military and parliamentary oversight of defence expenditure. Senior members of the armed forces have made statements on issues going beyond their remit. No progress has been made on strengthening parliamentary oversight of the military budget and expenditure⁷

The revelation of charges against state bureaucrats, military personnel, right-wing intellectuals and professionals for planning to provoke the military to intervene and bring down Turkey's Islam-sensitive government gave the government an unprecedented opportunity to repair and reset, more intentionally and intensely than ever, the lopsided balance between civil and military authorities in Turkey in

⁵Regular annual reports on Turkey have been published since 1998 and contain detailed analyses of the extent to which conditions in the National Plan for the Adoption of the Acquis and the Accession Partnership Document have been fulfilled.

⁶Cizre, "Democratic Governance of Civil-Military Relations", 118.

⁷Commission of the EC, *Turkey 2008 Progress Report*, 8-9.

favour of constitutionally elected organs.⁸ It is clear that the strong response to the Ergenekon case in people from all walks of life is not just a reaction against the political autonomy and impunity of the Turkish military. The Ergenekon episode is about who genuinely makes fundamental rules in Turkish politics and with what force, coalitions, legitimacy and agenda. Hence, the episode, more directly and intensely than ever before, raises the need to institute genuine forces and processes of democratic politics in Turkey.

The power and privileges of the Turkish armed forces stem from two sources. First, the TAF bears the torch of the state ideology (called Kemalism or Atatürkism, after the founder of the republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk), the most unflinching tenet of which is secularism, which forms the basis for the priorities and values of Turkish public life. The TAF's strong and persistent role in Turkish politics throughout most of the twentieth century, albeit with different modalities and emphases, is an imperative of this ideology. Turkey's "design-flaw",⁹ – the idea that the armed forces must guard secularism first, and democracy (and the commitment to Europe) second – shows that the military bureaucracy's view of politics is steeped in esoteric pre-democratic notions, including a visible distaste for popular politics as a societal activity and an ambivalent attitude toward the electoral power of the populace.

Second, the TAF's unchallenged control in defining and deciding what constitutes security or threats to the nation, built up over the last half century, serves to promote its own legitimacy and to perpetuate its own veto power in politics. From the Cold War years through the last decade of the twentieth century, the army transformed itself from a reformist institution into one that views the world around it with disapproval, frustration, concern and despair, and regards the political system as being in constant "reaction" to the good and solid foundational principles of a modern, secular, developed Turkey. The EU's emphasis on the democratic accountability of the military and security sector, sensitivity to expressions of identity, and concern for human rights are considered part of a grand plan to

⁸A serious investigation of Ergenekon only began in June 2007, when munitions and grenades were found in the home of a retired military officer in Istanbul. As the story has unfolded and arrests made, commentators have argued that a number of political assassinations are in fact linked to this network, for example, those of a priest in Trabzon (2006), a judge in Ankara (2006) and Hrant Dink in Istanbul (2007). Among those arrested are Dogu Perincek, chairperson of the Workers' Party; Ilhan Selcuk, columnist at the *Cumhuriyet* newspaper; and Kemal Alemdaroglu, a former rector of Istanbul University. On 12 June 2009, the liberal left *Taraf* daily published an unclassified document reportedly discovered during a police raid on 4 June at the office of Ergenekon suspect, retired military lawyer Serdar Ozturk; the document revealed a covert "Action Plan to Combat Islamic Reactionaries". Prepared by senior active Colonel Dursun Cicek, it involved psychological warfare, bomb attacks and intelligence gathering. The plan aimed to use various means to undermine public support for the AKP by discrediting and framing the party and the hugely influential Gulen movement, a global educational network for Turkish nationalist-Muslim renewal that is said to have infiltrated the Turkish armed forces.

⁹G. Schoplin, "Turkey's Crisis and the European Union", *Open Democracy*, 23 July 2007, <http://www.opendemocracy.net>

weaken Turkey. As a result, the TAF's overall attitude toward westernisation has moved from early advocacy to accusations against the EU's "fantasy" of democracy and accountability in the Turkish system.

Civil-military relations took a new turn after the 3 November 2002 general elections brought the AKP to power. In the minds of the military, the idea that Islam, formerly just an identity marker and securitisation target, had now become a holder of power by popular will simply reaffirmed the high command's belief that the security threat had grown in size and that the TAF had been right all along in its suspicion of governments with parliamentary majorities. That is why it regards the ruling party's project of inserting itself into the EU fold as a ruse, intended to disguise its Islamic agenda.

Since the AKP's double election victories in 2007 and in response to the reforms proposed by the EU which would delimit its political role, the TAF has sought to safeguard its traditional prerogatives by adopting new strategies. Ergenekon represents the culmination of a series of unconstitutional activities over the past four years aimed at destabilising the government through coups.¹⁰ One aspect of the alleged coup plans is the military high command's proactive drive for societal support to undermine the government which has been akin to the actions of a political party.¹¹ In April 2007, the military bureaucracy attempted to block the presidency of the ruling party's candidate, Abdullah Gul, through morally and (in the eyes of many constitutional lawyers) constitutionally questionable means; Gul was in fact one of the founders and major figures of the party, but his wife wears a headscarf. The most extreme strategy, however, for dealing with the AKP was the attempt to close the party down: less than a year after its landslide victory in the 22 July 2007 general elections, the prosecutor general launched closure proceedings in the Constitutional Court in March 2008. On 30 July 2008, the Court fell just one vote short of doing so on charges of anti-secularism, demonstrating that, like that

¹⁰In March 2007, the current affairs weekly *Nokta* published excerpts of a diary allegedly written by Admiral Ozden Ornek, the former navy commander. The diary entries contained detailed plans for a military coup prepared jointly by the commanders of the army (Aytac Yalman), navy (Ornek himself), air force (Ibrahim Firtina), and gendarmerie (Sener Eruygur) in 2004. According to the diary, it was the opposition of then Chief of Staff Hilmi Ozkok that played a major role in preventing the coup plans from being put into action. The code name for the first intended coup was "Blond Girl", for the second, it was "Moonlight". The self-identified motivation for the coup plans was the indignation felt by the commanders for the positive turn in negotiations for Turkish accession to the EU after 2004, which roused the fears they shared with nationalists that accession might require Turkey to grant concessions on Cyprus and to give greater freedoms to minorities, leading to the break-up of the republic.

¹¹The General Staff prepared an Action Plan to be instituted in September 2008 that was published the preceding June by *Taraf*, an Istanbul daily. The plan proposed to "bring the public opinion to the same level of agreement with the General Staff on issues to which the General Staff is sensitive and to prevent incorrect impressions from being formed about the TAF" by the recruitment of "civil associations that are fully controllable, can be influenced and activated; or suitable media organs; or those sharing the same approaches as the TAF". To the extent that such actions contradicted any known example in the modern democratic world, they offended the sensitivities of Turkey's thinking elites, regardless of their own criticism of the government.

of its predecessors, the fate of an Islamic-oriented governing party with a strong electoral backing could still lie in the hands of eleven judges. Such closures have become a prominent sign of the “exceptionality” of Turkish democracy: the establishment’s ability to take extraordinary measures to restore an exceptional secular regime bearing no relation to popular elections.

The excessive character, scale and scope of Ergenekon have encouraged the government to restrain its traditional impulse of simply following along with the powerful military. The crisis has enabled the government party to highlight its ambiguous ideology and dual identity: one conservative-nationalist, the other liberal-reformist. By the middle of its first term, the AKP leadership had found it more sensible to guard itself against the military’s interventionist potential by reverting to the traditional civilian strategy of compromise with the military rather than engaging in democratic control of the armed forces and further reforms to align with the EU. Ergenekon, however, has given urgency to taking control of civil-military relations and turning the TAF into a “peacetime” establishment. The ruling party has been enabled to re-emphasize its reformist-liberal dimension and bring new energy and purpose into another phase of reform in 2009. As a result, for example, the government, in a long overdue act of defiance, passed a law clearing the way for the first time in the republic’s history for the prosecution and trial of officers who commit crimes in civilian spheres – thereby virtually ending the judicial autonomy of the military. This represents a critical setback for the military institution, in terms of its political role and social prestige, and carries the potential to alter radically the contours of its existence. As a result, the military is also impelled to define a new role for itself to preserve its unity and dignity. However, such a change is neither easy nor inevitable.

Emergence of a democratic civilian perspective on the Kurdish “problem”

The military-led secular establishment has historically invested considerable energy in establishing Kurdish nationalism and Islamic activism as the sole emphases of national security concerns and addressing them through emergency military measures rather than parliamentary decisions, governmental policies and civilian wisdom. The post-Ergenekon trauma brought forth the elected government’s potential to have the leverage to present the population with clear choices of its own making on the fundamental problems of the day.

The “military solution” to the Kurdish question has been responsible for the decline of democratic discourse and its replacement by repackaged conservative nationalist reactions. In fact, the issue has been the government’s Achilles heel, bringing out its conservative-nationalist support of the status quo. Nevertheless, the party’s pragmatic bent now seems to be introducing a democratic opening with

renewed commitment to EU reforms and a “grand negotiation” with Turkey’s thus-far publicly shunned Kurdish leaders after decades of bloodshed.¹² If successful, this initiative can further correct the power imbalance between civilians and the military by limiting the latter’s political role and influence.

The government wishes to regain the public support in the region that it lost in the last local elections of March 2009. After a long hiatus in which the military solution and nationalist narratives dominated the political discourse, the time has also come to ease the pressure from its own Kurdish deputies for new forms of response to the region’s problems, not all of which are identity-related. The economic recession with its substantial impact on people’s lives and employment has also played a part in the new move. More to the point, with some retired or active officers accused of being involved in a conspiracy to overthrow a democratically elected and widely supported government, the AKP believes it can take advantage of the army’s tarnished image. At the same time, the TAF high command risks its long-term survival if it ignores the AKP’s electoral popularity or obstructs its agenda at this time, so long as new reforms leave a zone of comfort for the military to keep its institutional autonomy by, for example, maintaining a public voice and its core corporate interests.¹³

Although the Kurdish issue flared up in the last decade, its political origins lie in the early republic and the 1970s, with the emergence of the separatist Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), which established itself as the champion of Kurdish identity and demanded the acknowledgement of Kurdishness by the central state. At least in the discourse of major Kurdish platforms, this demand did not entail special status for the Kurds; on the contrary, it included a forthright emphasis on levelling the field to make the concept of Turkish citizenship more inclusive, equal and democratic.¹⁴

Indeed, the government is aware of the fact that opening up to the Kurdish issue is the key to Turkey’s progress toward stability and leadership and away from internal security obsessions in the twenty-first century. Turkey is going through a process of “Kurdish fatigue”, and almost any departure from the prevalent – at times incessant – defensive/nationalist discourse of the military-civilian elite is a welcome move, even if such a departure is not intended to produce radical changes in the established definitions of Kurdish identity. Although the substance of the Kurdish initiative is unclear, one can imagine that the emerging contours of the

¹²“Atalay’dan Bir Aylık Demokratik Acilim Bilancosu”, *Radikal*, 8 July 2009; “Hükümetin Kırmızıları”, *Hürriyet*, 27 August 2009; “Details of Kurdish Initiative Emerging”, *Today’s Zaman*, 25 August 2009.

¹³One indication of this continued military autonomy was the government’s inability to have Dursun Cicek, one of the officers indicted as an Ergenekon plotter, dismissed from the army during the annual meeting of the Supreme Military Board in August 2009.

¹⁴See the report based on the research carried out in the region prepared and published by the Istanbul-centered think-tank TESEV (Türkiye Ekonomik ve Sosyal Etüdler Vakfı): *A Roadmap for a Solution to the Kurdish Question*, 5 and 15.

new policy will be directed toward bringing peace and tranquillity to the region through a declaration of amnesty, injecting substantial capital in the region to increase economic development, and significantly enhancing the existing programs of Kurdish-language broadcasting and education. Beyond the domestic level, the Kurdish opening on which the AKP is betting its political future is bound up with new international realities, namely the continued withdrawal of US troops from Iraq and the re-emergence of the EU.

However, without pursuing the EU reform agenda, the AKP will find it difficult to normalise civil-military relations or anything else in Turkey's domestic politics, even if there is a popular consensus on issues such as the Kurdish question. The EU reform agenda is critical for the reformist side of the AKP government to reappear but, in order to alter the political power balance that has sustained the military's political influence, Ankara needs to break its pattern of behaviour and address the Cyprus issue as well. If the government put its mind to it, it could rebuild a sufficiently broad coalition on this matter too and regain legitimacy among the disillusioned liberals who supported it in its initial days in office, when it moved forward forcefully on reforms and freedoms.

There is no doubt that the Brussels bureaucracy needs to work harder to lend its strong support to the re-emergence of the reformist policies of the AKP by overcoming the considerable resistance inside the Union and fully endorsing the message that Turkish democracy matters to the EU and to the broader international community.

Conclusion

While the US withdrawal from Iraq has created positive momentum on the Kurdish issue and regional cooperation with Turkey's neighbours, Turkey's new self-confidence and regional prominence has transformed a static Cold War bulwark into a potential catalyst for regional stability. However, the Ergenekon affair, the series of alleged coup plots that preceded it, and the TAF's attempts to act like a political party in reaching out to and aligning with both organised and unorganised sectors of society have all been so unprecedented as to lead significant segments of Turkish society to begin questioning the compatibility of these actions with the hallmarks of twenty-first century democracy that they keep hearing, watching and reading about, thanks to globalisation.

Taking democratisation further in an accession-weary and war-weary country will not only help stabilise domestic politics but will enhance Turkey's regional role and international status. These realities serve as a major step toward realising the maxim that Turkey does not "automatically" foster stability in one of the most unstable regions of the world simply because of where it is located, but because of what it stands for.

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