

Gareth Jenkins

# Context and Circumstance: The Turkish Military and Politics

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The Turkish Military  
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# Introduction

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Over the last decade Turkey has been the focus of more international, particularly Western, attention than at any time in the republic's history.<sup>1</sup> The new security environment has enhanced, rather than diminished, Turkey's economic and strategic importance to the US. While the increasingly close relationship between the EU and Ankara, which culminated in December 1999 in Turkey's inclusion in the list of candidates for accession, has focused European attention not only on the country's foreign relations but on whether its domestic policies comply with the Copenhagen criteria for EU membership.

To most proponents of the Western model of liberal representative democracy, the continued domination of Turkish politics by the country's military appears to be an anomalous anachronism, even an anathema. As a result, discussions of civil-military relations often become coloured by moral judgments as military involvement in politics is seen as not only undesirable but almost an affront to a natural order. The purpose of this paper is neither to condemn nor to justify the Turkish military's involvement in politics; merely to try to understand and explain. It attempts to answer three basic questions:

- Why does the military exercise such influence in Turkey?
- How does the military exercise such influence?
- What are the implications of the military's influence for Turkey's domestic and foreign security policies both now and into the future?

The paper argues that the role of the military in Turkey is rooted in Turkish society, history and culture. The military has always lain at the heart of how Turks define themselves; and most still regard the institution of the military as the embodiment of the highest virtues of the nation.<sup>2</sup>

The resultant high public esteem in which the military is held has been enhanced, rather than eroded, by the Turkish experience of multi-party democracy. Even its detractors admit that the Turkish military is not only the most efficient institution in Turkey but has remained relatively free of the corruption that has become endemic in both the government and the civil service. Even given the low standing of politicians worldwide, Turkish politicians have a poor reputation, being almost universally regarded as venal, incompetent, unprincipled and self-serving. On several occasions in recent Turkish history, political infighting has brought the machinery of government close to collapse. In such situations it has been to the military that the Turkish public has tended to turn, either to intervene directly or to provide leadership in applying pressure to the government.<sup>3</sup>

Yet the public mandate for an interventionist role in politics does not extend to support for military rule. Few Turks have pleasant memories of the two occasions when the military has taken over the government of the country.<sup>4</sup> This is particularly true of the most recent period of military rule, 1980–83, which is remembered as being oppressive and restrictive, even though the September 1980 coup that preceded it was welcomed at the time for restoring order and saving the country from a potentially bloody civil war.<sup>5</sup>

The Turkish military's role as a 'moderating power',<sup>6</sup> responsible for protecting the country against squabbling civilian politicians, has parallels elsewhere.<sup>7</sup> But the Turkish military is unusual in that it has traditionally been reluctant either to seize power or to participate in the civilian administration. If possible, it has preferred to remain aloof from day-to-day politics, which it tends to regard as debased and debasing. Although its pension fund, known by its Turkish acronym of OYAK,<sup>8</sup> has major shareholdings in several companies,<sup>9</sup> it has remained organisationally distinct from the military itself, which has made little attempt to develop its own economic interests.<sup>10</sup>

But what makes the Turkish military unique is that it sees itself as having an almost sacred duty to protect an indigenous

ideology,<sup>11</sup> namely Kemalism, the principles laid down by the founder of the Turkish republic, Kemal Atatürk. This ideological dimension to the military's perception of its role has meant that its definition of security extends beyond public order and Turkey's political or economic interests to include threats to the country's Kemalist legacy.

Kemalism is enshrined in the Turkish constitution and includes a rigorous commitment to secularism, territorial integrity and cultural homogeneity. Over the last 30 years Kemalism has been taught with an increasing intensity in both civilian schools and military academies, initially in an attempt to create an ideological bulwark against communism, but more recently to counter the two most dynamic ideological forces of the post-Cold War world, radical Islam and fissiparous nationalism, which in Turkey has meant Kurdish separatism. It was in response to these perceived threats to Kemalism that the Turkish military returned to the political arena during the 1990s.<sup>12</sup>

Yet the military's influence on policy is neither uniform nor total. It only attempts to exert influence in areas with, by its own definition, a security dimension. For example, it has shown little interest in economic policy.<sup>13</sup>

Military influence over policy also depends on the degree to which it differs with the government over a specific issue. For example, it is unusual for there to be a divergence of opinion over foreign affairs, which tend to be seen as state rather than government or party policy. As a result, although the military closely monitors foreign policy, it has less need to intervene to try to influence it.

When it does attempt to influence policy, the military depends on its informal authority, based on a combination of its historical role and its public prestige, rather than any officially defined legislative or executive powers. In theory, the military is not only subject to civilian control – it is subordinate to the prime ministry – but the main platform on which it attempts to exercise influence, the National Security Council (NSC), is merely an advisory body which reports to the Council of Ministers.

In practice, however, the military's informal authority is such that, when it expresses an opinion, civilian governments rarely try to implement a policy which contradicts it. Yet the military has proved less successful in persuading governments actively to initiate policy.



The result is a system in which civilian authority is primary, rather than supreme, and where the military is able to prevent policy from straying outside specific parameters, rather than making things happen within them.

Ironically, it is the prospect of fulfilling Ataturk's greatest dream that now presents the military with its greatest dilemma. The overriding aim of Ataturk's ambitious reform programme<sup>14</sup> of the 1920s and 1930s was to transform Turkey into a modern, Western state able to take its place on equal terms in the European family of nations. Today that means joining the EU. But the Europe that Ataturk so assiduously imitated no longer exists. Not only are today's EU members expected to cede a measure of sovereignty to Brussels but, as the EU made clear in November 2000,<sup>15</sup> Turkish membership would require the radical reform of several of the keystones of the Kemalist state, including the withdrawal of the military from the political arena and the lifting of restrictions on political and cultural pluralism; concessions which the military fears could eventually lead to the establishment of a separate Kurdish or even Islamist state.

# Chapter 1

## **The Military and Turkish Society**

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The political role of the military in Turkey has grown out of a specifically Turkish historical, social and cultural context. But the military's pre-eminent role in Turkish life is not merely a historical hangover. Not only is Turkish society still dominated by the values, attitudes and traditions which underpin the role of the military but, to the vast majority of Turks, the military and military values still lie at the heart of any definition of what it means to be Turkish.

Ironically, the role of the military has been enhanced rather than eroded by Turks' experience of parliamentary democracy. The failure of parliamentary democracy to provide prosperity, efficient government or political stability brought the military back into the political arena in the 1950s and has subsequently created a broad, though not universal, public mandate for an interventionist role in the political process as the guarantor of last resort of stability and public order.

The military's role is further bolstered by public perceptions of the security environment, where external and internal threats are often inflated and distorted by conspiracy theories in which even Turkey's NATO allies are secretly plotting to weaken and divide the country.<sup>1</sup> In such a situation, it is to the military that most Turks turn, not only as the protector of Turkey's territory and economic and political interests but as the guardian of the state ideology of Kemalism.

## **The Historical Context**

The military has always played a central role in Turkish history. The Turks' first appearance in history, when they emerged from Central Asia, was as an army rather than a nation. The Ottoman Empire too was 'an army before it was anything else',<sup>2</sup> created through conquest and, particularly initially, administered along military lines. It has even been argued that both the structure of the state and Ottoman society itself were 'auxiliary elements for the support of the armed forces'.<sup>3</sup>

During the nineteenth century, as the Ottoman Empire entered its final decline, the military was in the vanguard of attempts to create a modern Western state,<sup>4</sup> not only importing Western military theories and technology, but also establishing the first secular schools for Muslims, publishing the first-ever Turkish grammars<sup>5</sup> and even pioneering the simplification of the Turkish script which led eventually to the adoption of the Latin alphabet.<sup>6</sup>

In 1908, in what became known in the West as the 'Young Turks Revolution', a group of Ottoman officers seized power and forced the Sultan to introduce constitutional rule. Following defeat in the First World War it was a military officer Mustafa Kemal, later to be known as Atatürk, who not only drove out an invading Greek army and the occupying Allied forces during what is known in Turkey as the War of Liberation, but in 1923 created the modern Turkish Republic.

Although Atatürk resigned from the military to become Turkey's first president, a post he held until his death in 1938, it was his status as a military hero which gave him the authority to push through a series of radical reforms in an attempt to transform the rump of the Ottoman Empire into a homogenous, Western-style modern nation state.

Atatürk established a political party, the Republican People's Party (RPP), which enjoyed a monopoly of power until 1950.<sup>7</sup> He also insisted that all officers who wished to participate in politics should resign from the armed forces. The result was to remove the military as an institution from the political arena, although until 1950 virtually all of the leading politicians were Atatürk's former military colleagues from the War of Liberation and Turkey was effectively ruled by former soldiers in civilian clothes.<sup>8</sup>