

A Healthy and Democratic Civil-Military Relationship in Turkey: Accountability of the both Entities

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ABSTRACT

Until recently the Turkish military was beyond criticism or control, as the self-styled guardians of Turkish Republic the military officers have seen themselves the only source to protect the main principals of the Republic. This self-appointed task, they thought, had given them the right to interfere with Turkish politics when they see fit. Yet, with the latest arrests of some very top-brass generals accused of plotting a military coup against the Justice and Development Party's (AKP) government, it seems that the balance of power has shifted decisively. This paper explores the ways in which how far this balance could be maintained in a healthy civil-military relationship in a democratic country. The author suggests that the circumstances have been changed since the proclamation of Republic and Turkey is becoming a more and more self-confident country as she improves her relationships with neighbors and becoming a wealthier country due to several economic reforms. All in all, the citizens wish to live in a normal democratic country. So, the two entities, the civilians and the military, should be more accountable to each other, especially the military must learn the decisions of the public expressed in ballot polls.

Key Words: Military, Turkey, civil-military relationship.

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Introduction

One might wonder whether the state-military relationship would vary from one society to another; especially would there be a difference between eastern and western societies or between democratic and non-democratic societies. I personally believe that specific geographical and cultural conditions would affect both the state-military relationship and that society's rank in the league of democratic countries. For a long time Turkey's lack of democracy had been explained in a peculiar way. First, it was in the middle of the Cold War geographically and second, it was a nation that was borne as soldiers throughout its history. So, the Cold War necessitated that Turkey should have a very powerful army to protect the country from the peril of communism. Yet, the army officials had managed to find some time and opportunity to interfere with the domestic politics as they must have been busy to protect the borders. After the Cold War the military should have been busy with the Kurdish guerilla war, again they did not miss any opportunity to interfere with politics. We learn from the so-called "Coup Diaries" that the top brass were quite busy with performing a coup at every opportunity. The military has been voted as the most trusted institution in Turkey but even this result had been abused by the military to interfere with the everyday life of the citizens. This predominance has a long and strong tradition in the country that is why people neither complain against it nor are aware of such a pressure on them. Since the days of Central Asia steppes the Turkish government has been first an army before everything else. Perhaps it was a cultural and geographical tradition because al-Gazali also supports such a condition in his own time (quoted in Gibb and Bowen 1950: 31):

Government in these days is a consequence solely of military power, and whosoever he may be to whom the holder of military power gives his allegiance, that person is the caliph.

Such a view is also valid for contemporary Turkey because even today a leader of the opposition party would provoke the army by stating that words and warnings would not be sufficient but the existing government needs more actions. The main problem of Turkey is that it tries to appear as a democratic country but its military could not accommodate itself within a democratic framework. The result is the military would be a shadow player in Turkish political life because the army "expresses" its views and takes its side on many issues like the Kurdish issue, the relationship of individual with the state, freedom of expression, Turkish membership of the EU, preparations for a new constitution, the so-called affaire du foulard, etc. etc. The more the military "expresses" its views the late a true and healthy democracy would reach Turkey. The military would act more democratically if it confines itself to security issues more. The military is a shadow figure in Turkish politics because it tries to appear as democratic institution from outside but it is deeply involved in political affairs like the relationship between a grandfather and a grandson. The grandfather is not the father of the boy but it is he that controls the behavior and attitude of the father towards his son. In other words, the grandfather does not govern the relationship but in fact "rules" the nature of the relationship like the militaries of the Middle East. They do not occupy the state offices physically but it is their wishes and

desires that “rule” the country (Cook 2007). So, there is an urgent need to separate the “governing” body from the “ruling” institution to achieve democracy. Yet, the military philosophy of Turkey has grown from the minds and hearts of the people; social mores and customs, and the environment they inhabit. It is clearly the product of national and racial attributes of Turkish people and their perception of potential enemy threats. If a nation occupies a geographically secure land, their military philosophy would definitely be very different from another nation that had been surrounded by enemy forces. Historically the best Turkish political leader has been the one who protects and defends his nation at the head of his army. In other words, the best Turkish leader is the one who dies not in his death-bed but in the war fields. Braveness, one of the most desirable qualities of a Turk can only be tested and proved in the war games. Religiously highly appreciated martyrdom could only be achieved through dying in defense of the country. Therefore, to test their braveness and achieve the possibility of the status of a martyr the Turkish youth more than any other young people in other countries are willing to do their military service with pride. This is the way how their parents raise them. That is why when the parents receive their sons’ dead bodies fallen in the civil war against the Kurdish separatist guerillas in south-eastern Turkey with pride and are willing to send their remaining sons to the army without any hesitation. They believe their sons go to the heavens directly when they die in defense of their country. So, this is the reason why the Army holds a high esteem in the eyes of the Turkish public. Yet, the Army justifies its interference with politics through this high regard of the ordinary public.

In analyzing Turkey’s dynamics that impede her reaching a true and healthy democracy Eric Rouleau (2000: 104) observes that

Perhaps the most poignant irony of Kemalism today is the fact that the ‘Father of the Turks’ unalterably opposed any intervention by the armed forces in the affairs of state – a principle that his admirers have consistently violated for the last 40 years. Such departures from the founder’s principles have not prevented the military from virtually deifying Atatürk, however, or elevating Kemalism to the rank of sacrosanct dogma, while arrogating to its officers a monopoly on interpretation and the right to punish suspected dissidents.

Therefore, if the military complies strictly with the commands of its founder Turkey would rapidly achieve a higher status among the democratized countries in the world. Turkey needs to put the possibility of military intervention behind and look forward to improve its image. It would not be as difficult as many observers expect because of the nature of Turkish society and army if only the high and low rank officials pay heed to the actions and wishes of the founder of Turkey, Kemal Atatürk.

The classical distinctions of political regimes as monarchies, aristocracies, or democracies fail to take into account the notion of “elitism”. In other words, in all types of societies has always existed a minority who, by virtue of possessing power, has taken the decisions that concern the majority of the society. The elite have had the power because they control some resources or possess some attitudes that are valued by the society. So, the foundation of their power is not necessarily economic but sometimes it would be cer-

tain acts that they did in the past or some sort of valuable/sacred knowledge granted on them. Military officers might also constitute an elite class in a society in which they were active in its formation (Finer 1988; Huntington 1957; Stepan 1971; Peri 1983; Karsten 1997; Feaver and Kohn 2001).

Modern Turkey that was founded on the ruins of the Ottoman State is such a country whose beginnings could be attributable to the military institution. That the Ottomans were losing all the battles against the Western armies in its later years, the state started to modernize the military first as the institution of Janissaries that had become an organic part of the state rather than being just an instrument of it. They had been the elite corps of the Ottoman State's army but the early strict rules of behavior laid down in the 15th century were later abandoned such as celibacy and accumulation of goods and realty. The members of the institution began to play active role in court politics and they rebelled in 1826 to reject the reform of the army that attempted to re-order them in European lines. The revolt was violently suppressed and many of the janissaries were killed in the event.

The Turkish army inherited this legacy of both being an organic part of the state and rejecting any reforms aiming to separate it from politics. The involvement in the politics is the result of the Independence War since the newly founded state recruited many of its ruling bureaucratic elites from the army ranks who had contributed to its establishment in the war fields. Now, the military heroes turned civilian elites began to impose all kinds of ambitious westernizing reforms on the people except the reform of the army –their alma mater- to separate it from the state like in most of the western countries. Nevertheless, such a “revolution from above”, in Trimberger's words, would neither be effective nor humane because it cannot help the nation to catch up with the other industrialized countries in an earlier period nor it can humanize the development process (1978: 167).

In fact, separation of the army from the state affairs has been a problématique on the path of achieving a truly democratic regime in many countries for a long time. In other words, it has been a really difficult task to make an armed group of people believe that they were not supposed to be as strong as they think and concede the whims of civilians. At the heart of the relationship between military and civil entities is a paradox: an institution that has been created to protect the political institutions could become powerful enough to threaten and interfere with them. So, the civilians must be able to exercise a democratic control over the military, yet, this control “requires the subordination of the military to the democratic regime and the elimination of the military's political autonomy and influence” (Diez 2008: 115) but still keeping the military strong and effective at the same time. Strong military organizations have always posed a sometimes insurmountable problem for democratic regimes. That some democracies might hold of these military institutions in check to some extent the relationship between the state and military continue to reach a crisis level. Moreover, the problem does not seem to disappear smoothly in the near future. The successful regimes might only manage the problem through establishing strong policies to counterpoise the demands that may come from the military. Yet, if one looks at the problem from the viewpoint of democracy it would be perfectly accept-

able and understandable that every single institution within a country should be accountable to the democratically elected authorities.

The question "how a civilian government would control its own military both in peace and war times" has compelled many scholars to develop theories to address the issue. Perhaps the most known and wide-spread theory comes from one of the Cold War era giants Samuel Huntington who offered a suggestion that the army must maximize its professionalism. This suggestion has sparked a lively debate among the military-civil relations theoreticians since the book *The Soldier and the State* (1957) was published half a century ago. Huntington basically claims that there are two alternate ways for civilians to subordinate a strong army: In the "objective" civilian control, civilians dictate the army security policy while allowing the army the freedom to choose the objectives to implement it. In this way the military must maximize its professionalism within their domain but at the same time must refrain from political decision making process; in other words, politicians should not interfere with the military affairs. The result of such a mutual non-interference both sides have their relative freedom without influencing each other's realms. On the other hand, "subjective" control means civilians must maximize their power vis-à-vis the entire social groups within the country and require the armed forces to accept their political ideology. Yet, in such a control mechanism the military cannot enjoy any freedom because it must subordinate to the ideology of ruling civilian elites. However, this twofold model merely reflects the Cold War period's two opposing ideologies and their army models. Huntington's "objective control" approach, however, remains persuasive because politicization of the army is still undesirable by the political circles. It is true that the US Armed Forces through their professionalism and the division of labor between the state and the military has stayed away from politics. Yet, the army continued to play an important role after the Cold War era's prevailing conditions of external conflicts. In other words, when there was an external enemy, the army might be kept busy with producing professional policies and strategies but whenever the external threat ceases to exist anymore, the army would turn to domestic politics. Huntington deals with such a situation in his second book *The Common Defense* (1961) in which he investigates the American military policies through the international and domestic domains of the US politics.

Turkey, a country that had suffered more than any other state from the Cold War due to her proximity to the USSR, had not been able to manage her armed forces under control where the military might be expected to prepare itself for an imminent war. During this era Turkish politicians did their best to exercise the Huntingtonian "objective control" by allowing the army relative or even unlimited freedom and resources to professionalize. Despite the fact that there was an external threat, the Turkish army managed to find opportunities to interfere with domestic politics three or five times in the last half a century as if there were a course "MIL101 How to make a military coup" in their curriculum in military schools. That the army had a public support in the first three interventions might be explained by the failure of politicians in their domestic policies. Furthermore, the Turkish public still holds the army as a security valve against domestic threats that might

change the secular regime. Paradoxically, this role of “security valve” paves the way for the Islamist political parties to form government as the public votes them without any deep concern because if they were to attempt to change the regime the army would step in to stop them.

Kemal Atatürk had, much before than Huntington's “subjective control” thesis, always insisted that the military forces, as a national institution above partisanship and factionalism, should stay out of politics. The military leadership traditionally had subscribed to this viewpoint, with the proviso that a major role of the armed forces was to act as guardian of the constitution and Kemalism. By 1960, with the military already deeply involved in political affairs because of the government's use of martial law to enforce its policies, the senior command concluded that the government had departed from Kemalist principles and that the Republic was in imminent danger of disintegration. However, the founder of Turkey had designed a regime in which the military should stay away from politics for this reason Atatürk insisted that “all officers who wished to participate in politics should first resign from the armed forces” (Jenkins 2007: 341). Resigning from the army is not a very attractive idea for Turkish officers because they think they would be stripped of their power when they are out of their uniforms. So, they wish to continue to rule without really engaging in government affairs which is not fair for the politicians because they are elected by the popular vote but the “real rulers” are not accountable to the people.

Turkey's military has a dual role in the country; politically it is responsible to protect the borders from the real and fictive enemies. The social role of the army comes from the nature of Turkish society that being authoritarian, hierarchical, and patriarchal society, the army and military values have been regarded with a social respect. Apart from historical reasons such as “being a soldier state” or “every Turk is borne a soldier”, the Turkish army has suffered from being overly politicized perhaps due to the wrong choice of civilians to control the army in a Huntingtonian “subjective” way. In other words, Turkish politicians failed to remove the army from internal affairs, on the contrary, civilians turned to the army as a resource of support to strengthen their positions. The failure of separating the army from the state has led the army to involve in politics more than once. Any politicized army must be considered as a threat to the healthy democracy. Turkish public seems to be aware of this fact and it did not lend any support for the latest intervention (the so-called e-memorandum of April 27 in 2007) of the army just before the last elections. Since then the Turkish Army appears to be “hurt” by the lack of public support and remained silent on many issues that it would express its “statement of views” but this may be a grand opportunity for Turkey to establish a division of labor between the state and its military organization.

Conclusion:

Just before the presidential elections *Newsweek* (December 2006) published an article “The Coming Coup D'Etat?” by Zeyno Baran predicting that the army would interfere if the PM Recep Tayyip Erdogan decided to ascend to the presidency. Many others,

besides Baran were expecting street demonstrations and turmoil in the country. Even such an attitude clearly shows that the Turkish public has not yet come to confront with the real democracy. The main reason is that the military has not given up its traditional behavior of acting on values.

“Transition to democracy” has been a fashionable term nowadays especially applied to some Latin American countries in which the military has been less and less interfering with the democracy since no democratic system allows any possibility of exercising any power over the will of the people which was defined by the free elections. This “exercise of power” –whether by military or civilian elites- seems to be the main obstacle in front of Turkey’s transition to democracy. Turkish democracy that had prospered out of Kemalist tradition needs a lot of self-confidence for its durability from both military and civil elites which means many political parties with different ideological stances may come into power. So, these elites must learn that these political parties may rule the country as long as they adhere strictly to the principles of democracy with the help and support of the newly-emerging civil society. If and when such a political party –like the case of the Felicity Party- were not to comply with the rules of the political game, they would risk their chances of being represented in the parliament.

For the continuity and prevalence of this division of labor Turkish state must implement a “democratic control” over the army. Yet, this does not mean “civilian control” in which all policies of the government –including policies concerning national security and defense- must be approved by civilians only. The civil-military relationship must be grounded on such a framework that through democratic governance both parties, especially the military, must be accountable to Turkish people. In this way the Turkish Army must subordinate itself to the democratic regime by cleansing itself all the remnants of the political ideologies.

In order for the Turkish Army to do this it must also stop playing the role of “national guardianship of the Republic” immediately. Rather than involving in the domestic developments, it must concentrate more on the external threats. One must admit that this is not an easy course of action considering the unique geographical situation and social conditions of the country with the internal threats of Kurdish conflict and Islamist tendency of some political parties. Yet, the Turkish Army must come to accept the global trend towards a democratic governance at all levels of government in the decision-making process of both civilian and military affairs.

The very often published polls depicting the army as the “most trusted institution in Turkey” have been falsely and intentionally interpreted by some circles in a way that the public supported the values –such as French-type-laicism- that the army had traditionally been defending since the disestablishment of the Ottoman State. Such polls, on the contrary, clearly show the public’s anxiety and concern over its security or chaos in the absence of an authority. This is such a simple fact since Ibn Khaldun’s foresight that the more people are urbanized the more they would need security forces since they cannot protect themselves against external threats. So, this popularity should not be misinterpret-

ed anymore because whenever the army tries to intervene with the daily politics on the pretext of defending secularism it would backlash and backfire on them in the next elections.

Furthermore, in Turkey the military should not misinterpret the latest success of the Justice and Development Party as a victory of religious segment of the society against those groups who defend secularism, but it is simply a triumph of the independent bourgeoisie located in the periphery over the centralized bureaucracy. So, Gen. İlker Başbuğ's warnings against the threats of the expansion of the religious brotherhoods in the country which he expressed during the handover ceremony that he took over the duty of chief of general staff from Gen. Yaşar Büyükanıt are totally groundless because when religion interacts with capitalism it ceases to be a threat to secularism as was explained by Max Weber many decades ago. These expanding religious brotherhoods do not seek a theocratic regime but more pluralist and liberal democracy.

The apparent lack of professional accountability of the security and armed forces in Turkey is the key for the instable democracy. As a result, state-military relations in Turkey should not solely be based on the values like nation-state, secular-state, and centralized and unitary-state but it should also include the universal values like democracy, human rights, and rule of law; otherwise Turkey would be forced to cut off and isolate itself from the rest of the world in a globalized age. In other words, civil-military relations in mature and healthy liberal democracies operate on the basis of responsibility between on the one hand, the civil authority and the other, military for the defense of the country and the control of the armed forces. Here, the two entities should share the responsibility in the decision-making processes of policy, defense management, the employment of forces, and most importantly, in the control of armed forces. So, what is taking place in Turkey nowadays is simply a learning process of the army how and why they must respect the elected leaders of the country. As the New York Times correspondent Sabrina Tavernise has put it very succinctly, the Turkish Army is receding and the power is being re-aligned from the hands of armed forces to the civilian ones (*NYT*, March 1st, 2010). This balance is being occurred due to the fact that the Turkish public is not anymore being intimidated with the imaginary threats of an Islamic theocratic state is underway. Contrary to the expectations, the religious groups in the country –including the most powerful and influential one, the Fethullah Gulen community- support and do their best to consolidate the democratization process as they have come to a shared understanding that Islam would flourish under a democratic regime. So, the Army cannot persuade the public that they are trying to protect the principle of secularism anymore. Therefore, without a justification of a military coup the Army is losing power over the civilian government as the latest top military officials are being arrested and charged with coup attempts. The simple and natural result is the increasing accountability of the Army to civil authorities and adherence to rule of law.

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