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Security Sector Reform in Turkey: Indigenous Challenges and Barriers

What Winston Churchill once said about Russia looks perfectly is well applicable to Turkey in the year 2006: A riddle wrapped in mystery inside an enigma.

We are talking about a country of:

-- over 70 million people with a per capita income of less than \$5,000, but a country that spends about \$4 billion every year for new weaponry and \$12 billion in its defenses, or nearly 10 percent of its national budget

-- a former empire

-- ninety-nine percent Muslim but staunchly secular

-- stretching between Asia and Europe and located in one of the world's most terrible trouble spots bordering Iran, Syria and Iraq but desperately seeking a permanent place in the European Union

-- Washington's one-time Cold War ally

-- NATO member, surrounded by hostile states – hostilities dating back to its imperial past

-- with a military that maintains NATO's second biggest army with nearly a million soldiers, contributor to international peacekeeping and stability missions including Afghanistan, Bosnia, Kosovo, Somali and most recently in Lebanon

-- a military that has had to fight one of the most difficult wars against separatist terrorism – with over dead people since 1984—

-- a military that has been keeping 35,000 troops in Cyprus since 1974

-- a military that considers itself as the guardian of the secular regime, a military that staged three conventional coups since 1960 and one post-modern coup to oust the country's first Islamist government in 1997, and the same military viewed by a majority of the Turks as the country's most-trusted institution...

This is the Turkish reality. But what is the security structure of a country whose national threat paper mentions almost all of its neighbors plus a flurry of domestic threats including Islamism, Kurdish separatism, ultra-right and ultra-left. Turkey is not Switzerland, nor even Morocco in terms of the multiplicity and variety of the threats it faces.

Turkey's **security institutions** are: the National Security Council, the Armed Forces, the Police, Gendarmerie, Coast Guard, Special Operations Unit, village guards – who fight the separatist terrorist in the country's southeast— and three different intelligence services: national, police and Gendarmerie. Today I am going to skip most of these organizations and focus on the Armed Forces as this huge but dynamic institution lies at the centre of Turkey's reform efforts.

Turkey, now a candidate for full membership in the EU, has long been under pressure from Brussels to reform its Armed Forces “so as to minimize the **role of its army in politics.**” Under pressure from the EU, Turkey appointed its first civilian secretary general for the NSC in 2003, and has retired scores of officers from that office. In the same year, a law stripped the military off its powers to appoint officers to governmental boards that oversee higher education and broadcasting. Another legislation in 2004 brought broader judicial scrutiny over military spending, and in 2005 full parliamentary supervision was introduced. The Supreme Court of Accounts audits spending in weapons systems and procurement programs on behalf of parliament. But that's not sufficient to join the EU, says the EU.

The latest progress report by the European Commission on Turkey, released last week, is highly critical of civil-military relations. Some excerpts from the report:

“The Armed Forces have continued to exercise significant political influence. Several members of the Armed Forces have expressed their opinion on domestic and foreign policy issues including Cyprus, secularism, the Kurdish issue...”

“No further progress has been achieved in terms of strengthening parliamentary overseeing of the military budget and expenditures. Furthermore, extra-budgetary funds are excluded from parliamentary scrutiny.”

From a purely European viewpoint the EU criticism is justified. But Turkey has its own –sometimes—bizarre peculiarities. Hence the numerous legal and practical obstacles...

On the legal side, **the Constitution** gives powers to the Armed Forces to defend the country against “foreign and domestic threats.” The threats specified in the national threat paper, or the National Security Policy Document in its formal title, must be approved by the government. There is a funny situation here: The EU tells Turkey that its generals should not speak on issues like Cyprus, secularism and the Kurdish issue, that these are subjects the civilian authority can speak about. Fine, but the trouble is, all of these issues, according to the threat document approved by the government, are security issues, and what is more natural if generals speak about security matters?

The current situation in Turkey is even more ironic than that. We have a government that takes its roots from Islamism as a political doctrine, not Islam as faith. Our prime minister’s political career began with Islamic militancy. Allow me to paraphrase him from various speeches only years earlier, before he became prime minister: *“Our reference is Islam. Secularism has failed. There is nothing superior to Muslim faith in governance.”* Or quoting him in a 1993 speech: *“Imperialist powers persecute Europe’s Muslims... U.S. imperialism executes its New World Order by Muslim blood...”* Or, quoting him again, *“For us, democracy is only an instrument to achieve our broader goals.”*

The irony here is that, what happens if the military views the government as a security threat, as evinced by the threat paper sealed by the government? Is this not the government, by signing that paper, giving a *carte blanche* to the military to fight it, the elected? Who are we to blame in that case? Which practice would be more democratic?

Turkey has always faced that **paradox**. Today there is a government controlling 66 percent of parliament with only 34 percent of the valid votes in 2002 general elections – and 25 percent of the entire electorate. According to various opinion polls, over 80 percent of the Turks cite the **military as the most-trusted institution** and only less than 20 percent say they trust the government. We might as well recall that 92 percent of the Turks had supported the last conventional coup of 1980. If asked to choose between full-fledged democracy with their military crippled and a strong but sometimes-not-too-democratic military, the Turks would go for the latter.

We are here to discuss security sector reform. But what is **reform**? According to The Unabridged Devil's Dictionary of Ambrose Bierce, one of 19th century America's most renowned satirists, reform is "A thing that mostly satisfies reformers opposed to reformation." The definition looks like the case between Turkey and its EU mentors. There is empirical evidence.

A couple of years ago a military court in Turkey tried a former Navy Commander for abusing his authority, defrauding his expense account and failing to explain how he afforded two luxurious apartments in Istanbul. In court hearings open to public and the media, **Admiral İlhami Erdil** was sentenced to 30 months in prison, stripped off his military ranks, dismissed from the service and his apartments were seized. Admiral Erdil was the top military officer that had to go through an embarrassing process in the Turkish history (a Commander of the Air Force in the 1970s had been tried for corruption but was acquitted on all charges).

But what happened to the **top Turkish judge** ever went through proceedings of corruption in history? The man, a senior member of the Court of Appeals, was charged by exerting influence on junior judges involving commercial cases worth hundreds of millions of dollars. There was undeniable evidence including statements, tapped conversations and a flurry of dossiers. The senior judge was tried –by his colleagues-- in a closed session and got the heaviest penalty a judge of his seniority could get: He was requested to resign!

Now, let's go back to the idea of transparency for defense contracts in Turkey. As a matter of their nature, most defense contracts have

“secrecy clauses” i.e clauses that often work as shields against full parliamentary/government/public supervision; whether these deals are clean or not, no one probably knows. Defense deals can be classified even in first-class democracies. But civilian contracts cannot be classified. In Turkey, however, even civilian deals are sometimes classified.

For example, the tax affairs of a company owned by our finance minister’s son remain to be classified on the basis of “secrecy of tax records.” Most recently, an opposition MP filed a question motion for the energy minister inquiring how much money the government-controlled City of Ankara owed to the state-run pipeline company in natural gas debts. The minister did not reply, citing “commercial secrecy” between a government-controlled municipality and a government-controlled gas supplier. If there can be commercial secrecy between a municipality and a gas supplier, both government-controlled, can it be awfully undemocratic if some defense contracts, too, remain classified?

I am trying to show that security sector reform and full civilian control over the military would be difficult tasks in countries where:

- a- Democracy has its own bizarre rules – like a government controlling two-thirds of the legislature on one-third of valid votes,*
- b- There isn’t satisfactory civilian control over the civilian authority in the first place – i.e. a proper civilian control over the government is the prerequisite for a proper civilian control over the military,*
- c- Corruption in non-military government is endemic,*
- d- A majority of the people respect and trust the military, and not the government,*
- e- The military command often looks more democratic in challenging evidence of corruption than the civilian authorities are.*

Only a couple of months ago, the top EU diplomat in Ankara, **Hansjoerg Kretschmer**, in criticism of the military, said that: “... *in a democracy the ultimate decision rests with the people... it is they who*

decide which kind of state they want to have, which role the state should play and how much money they wish to pay for security...”

In democracies, civilian control over the military is a *sine qua non*. But so is civilian control over the government... The fact that most Turks believe that the most immediate obstacle against better democracy in Turkey is the lack of **civilian control over the government**, not over the military. That perception, so widespread in the public, can only deter security sector reform. If the political authority is serious about that reform, it should first reform itself and set a precedent so that no general can hide behind the excuse of undemocratic practice in the civilian sector.