

## Analysis

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**Summary:** The unprecedented move by Turkey's chief of the General Staff and three of the four force commanders to resign their posts led to concerns about the future of Turkish democracy given Turkey's record of coups and military meddling in politics. But the mood in Turkey was mainly sanguine. Most of the public saw the event for what it was: another step in the retreat of the Turkish military to the proper institutional role and functions that befit a democratic country. What we are witnessing is the restructuring of the Turkish military according to the needs and realities of a more modern, economically globalizing, and urban Turkey.

## Military Resignations: Crisis or New Beginning?

by *Soli Özel*

Old questions cascaded from around the world after the news broke that Turkey's chief of the General Staff and three of the four force commanders had resigned their posts. The force commanders had only a few weeks left in their term, but Chief of Staff General Koşaner's term was not due to end until August 2013. He was duly replaced by the commander of the gendarmerie, Necdet Özel (no relation of mine, by the way). Institutional continuity was thus secured.

Abroad, this unprecedented move by the military top brass led to concerns about the future of Turkish democracy given Turkey's record of coups and military meddling in politics. Some wondered whether this could be the prelude to a more radical move, such as an attempted military takeover, as had happened in the past. Others questioned what such a development meant for Turkey's NATO membership. Yet others saw in this development the final step towards the so-called Islamization of the Turkish polity or the unchallenged rule of Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan.

Contrary to such alarmism, the mood in Turkey was mainly sanguine. Despite efforts by some media

outlets to further dramatize what was undoubtedly an important instance in Turkey's political development, most of the public saw the event for what it was: another step in the retreat of the Turkish military to the proper institutional role and functions that befit a democratic country. Nothing more, nothing less. This latest, somewhat dramatic episode probably sealed the process of the demilitarization of Turkish politics that began a decade ago, and cleared one more hurdle on the way to draft a new civilian constitution. It also left no excuses to the government as to how to tackle the Kurdish question and put a spotlight on its own democratic credentials.

The resignations, which were announced after markets closed on Friday, came three days before the Higher Military Council meeting to decide on the promotions, retirements, and appointments of the officer corps. The move indicated disagreements about personnel decisions between the government and the military authorities. In the most important example, the military wants at most to freeze the rank of those officers who are on trial in a variety of cases, but the government wishes to send them to retirement.



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A similar episode took place last year when the top brass, accustomed to seeing its personnel decisions rubber-stamped by the civilian authorities, insisted on promoting individuals who were totally unpalatable to the president and the prime minister. At that time, the civilians mostly had their way and blocked the ascent of General Hasan İğsız to the position of ground forces commander and none of the officers on trial got promoted.

Variations of the concerns for the future of Turkish democracy or what the military's move meant for Turkey's politics actually addressed issues that belonged to a bygone era. It has been quite some time since the Turkish military won a political battle against the civilian government. If anything, every move they made in the course of the past four to five years backfired, and strengthened the civilian government and the ruling AKP. The incessant urge for intervention in the political process systematically eroded their prestige and their status as the most trusted institution in the country. The photograph from the first day of the Higher Military Council meeting spoke louder than words; Prime Minister Erdoğan sat by himself at the head of the table, instead of the prime minister and the chief of staff together as they have done traditionally, signaling equivalence of power.

This erosion of the military's political role was partially an outcome of the waves of revelations about elements in the military who have been engaged in extralegal activities, psychological warfare against groups deemed undesirable, political profiling, and coup plotting. These activities, a Turkish version of the Gladio affair that continued way beyond the Cold War, are now being prosecuted in the so-called "Ergenekon" trial.

Unlike Italy, Belgium, and France, Turkey never faced off with its own "Gladio" and came to terms with that record. Instead of cleaning the system from the institutional remnants and the mentality of Gladio, once the Cold War was over, the Turkish military used the Kurdish insurrection led by the PKK as well as the concocted threat of "Islamist regression" as the excuse to maintain the system and structures of a "national security state." As such, they resisted any and all efforts to open up the political system during the 1990s. The weakness and incompetence of the political leaders of that period, along with former President Demirel's betrayal of his civilian responsibilities, helped

them in this intransigent stance. Under such a system, the military would always have the upper hand, control the political process, and would present itself as the custodian of the secular republican order, if need be at the expense of the people's democratic will.

At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, given Turkey's socio-economic developments and a political transformation that was greatly aided by the EU accession process, such a system could not continue. Nor could the military retain the privilege of having the last say in matters political and at the same time continue in its position as insubordinate to civilian authorities. In an age when the accountability of all institutions is of primary importance, the military could not be above the law and scrutiny either.

In that sense, it was both ironic and very telling that General Koşaner cited his inability to protect "the legal rights of my personnel" in his very dignified farewell message. Koşaner, who refrained from making public statements during his term and tried to regroup his institution, was referring to the detention of hundreds of acting and retired officers (including generals), some on truly scandalously flimsy evidence in the Ergenekon and especially in the related Sledgehammer cases.

These trials are progressing at snail's pace, thereby turning detentions to virtual sentences without a guilty verdict. The inadequacy of the indictments, the insufficiency of the evidence, and the growing suspicion that a political vendetta is taking place under the guise of a judicial proceeding are also undermining the legitimacy of this all important case.

"It is impossible to accept that these detentions are based on any universal laws, justice, or rules of conscience," Koşaner wrote displaying a most welcome sensitivity for the rule of law and judicial procedure. He was perhaps cognizant of his own institution's contribution to the debasing of the rule of law and the violation of individuals' rights and reputations through decades. The fact remains, however, that General Özel, first of his class throughout his career and reputed to be apolitical, cannot fall far behind the line his predecessor has drawn on the fate of the officers on trial. To accept their retirement before they had been found guilty in a court of law, as the prime minister demands might erode his own



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authority at the very beginning of his term. The resolution of this issue is the most important agenda item of this year's Higher Military Council.

At a different level of analysis, what we are witnessing is the restructuring of the Turkish military according to the needs and realities of a more modern, economically globalizing, and urban Turkey. The days of the national security state and the inwardly oriented, ideological army that sustains it are over. The next Turkish military will have to be a more professional body that will remain ideologically neutral and politically impartial, as befits a rising "trading state," as Kemal Kirişçi calls it, and be more in tune with the new international security environments.

In the course of the last 100 years, there had been three major restructuring of the Turkish military when a large chunk of the officer corps had been eliminated. The first in 1913, organized by the Union and Progress Party, rejuvenated the military and structured in line with the Prussian system. That army, which fought the independence war and helped found the Republic, assumed a nation-building role. The second big restructuring came in 1961 when the coup makers of 1960 sent 7,200 officers to retirement (90 percent of the generals) and the newly shaped military reconfigured the state as a "national security state" along Cold War lines and appointed itself as that state's ideological and administrative custodian. That structure and role have long outlived their usefulness and are no longer appropriate for a Turkey that is rapidly modernizing, urbanizing, and integrating into the global economy.

So the elimination of a large number of officers, some guilty as charged and others caught in the web of revanchism or prosecutorial zeal, is a function of the third restructuring. The army of the future therefore will be lighter, more in tune with the international security environment and probably will transform itself into a professional, mainly apolitical corps. The crises along the way are the birth pangs of a new institutional logic and structure. It must always be borne in mind that all such restructuring has taken place with the tacit or overt support of international players. This time around, the single most important missing dimension that hardly anyone mentions is the absence of international, particularly U.S. support, for a military-led restructuring or a military-dominant political system in Turkey.

Therefore it should be appropriate to see the symbolically potent resignation of the top commanders as the final stage of the demilitarization and civilianization of the Turkish polity. Henceforth the supremacy of the civilian authority will not be questioned and the new constitution that will be drafted by the current parliament will reflect this new balance of power. Whether the civilian forces in Turkey will manage to deepen the democratic credentials of the polity is the more pressing question today.

### About the Author

Soli Özel teaches at Istanbul Kadir Has University. He is a columnist for the national daily *Haberturk* and is senior advisor to the chairman of the Turkish Industrialists' and Businessmen's Association. Additionally, he is the editor of TUSIAD's magazine *Private View*.

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