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# Civil-Military Relations in Turkey

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The nature of civil-military relations throughout the history of modern Turkey has been contentious to say the least. Since the founding of the Republic in 1923, the country has had four military coups to varying degrees: while the military performed a full-blown overthrow of the civilian governments and took over temporary rule in 1960 and 1980, more subtle means were used for the forced resignation and replacement of the governments in 1971 and 1997. As civil-military relations are best when civilian preferences prevail and worst when military preferences dominate military policy in a state,[1] Turkish politics have then clearly historically been dominated and guided by military preferences, and thus the nature of civil-military relations have been problematic in terms of the democratic process. More specifically, however, it would be appropriate to characterize the military as historically having taken on a self-appointed tutelary role in the political and democratic development of Turkey.[2] However, judging from a series of significant political events since the commencement of the *Ergenekon* trials in 2008, and a more general inspection of the evolving tension between the military and the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government since their ascendance to power in 2002, a significant shift in the balance of Turkish civil-military relations has emerged throughout the last decade. In this line, it would be appropriate to characterize this shift as a transition from a tutelary to a post-tutelary era in Turkish politics.[3]

This study seeks to identify the factors that have led to this shift in the context of the historical role of the Armed Forces in Turkish politics, and in doing so, provide a critique of the structural theory of civil-military relations provided by Michael Desch. In this line, I contend that a comparative examination of Turkey's structural threat environment of the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the first decade of 21<sup>st</sup> century ultimately fails in explaining the shift in Turkish civil-military relations post 2002. Rather, borrowing from the constructivist perspective, I attempt to explain this shift as a consequence of an emerging reconfiguration of norms, interests, and identity in Turkish politics, deriving from varying system-level and domestic factors.

### Examining the Historical Tutelary Role of the Armed Forces in Modern Turkish Politics

Since its first intervention in 1960, the military has been one of the most important actors in Turkish politics.[4] The Turkish military has constantly regarded itself as the guarantor of domestic stability, the guardian of the ideology of Kemalism[5], and ultimately the embodiment of the soul of the Turkish nation.[6] In this line, it has historically attributed to itself a tutelary role in Turkish politics and democracy, maintaining a stance where change in government or society is justified in terms of imperatives other than direct popular references or input, in line with what the military as a 'caretaker' views is for the good of the nation. Furthermore, the military has historically continuously gained significant exit guarantees that enhanced its role in the subsequent democratic regime following each intervention in line with this tutelary role.[7]

Tutelary powers involve exercising "broad oversight of the government and its policy decisions while claiming to represent vaguely formulated fundamental and enduring interest of the nation-state." [8] One way that this is typically done is by incorporating values highly cherished by the military in to the new constitution.[9] This was done in the 1982 Turkish constitution, which was drafted and promulgated by the military administration following the coup on 12 September 1980, and remained completely unchanged until the constitutional referendum of 2010. Many articles of the constitution referred to the territorial and national integrity of the state and to other various aspects of Kemalist thought, which is regarded highly by the military.[10] Another effective method is then to create formal institutions

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dominated by the military that are entrusted with preserving the values of the constitution. The Turkish 1961 constitution, which was enacted following the military coup of 1960, created a National Security Council, chaired by the president and composed of an equal number of members from the civilian government and the armed forces. The council was created to assist the Council of Ministers in making decisions and ensuring coordination with national security – broadly defined as “the protection of the constitutional order of the state, its national existence”[11]. Aside from the formation of such a council, such a broad definition of national security in itself emphasizes the military’s extremely politicized professionalism, concerned with defense against external and internal threats as well as the promotion of the country’s ability to achieve its national objectives[12]. Amendments to the article in 1971, following the military intervention of 1971, and again in 1982, then served to further enhance and enforce the role and powers of the council.[13] A third way for the military to grant itself tutelary powers is through ambiguous constitutional references to the role of the Armed Forces as ‘guarantors’ of the constitution and laws.[14] Although the 1961 and 1982 Turkish constitutions do not contain clauses explicitly entrusting the military with such a role, Article 35 of the Turkish Armed Forces Internal Service Law states: “The duty of the Turkish Armed Forces is to protect and preserve the Turkish homeland and the Turkish Republic as defined in the constitution”. Although there has been considerable debate as to whether this gives the military the right to remove an elected government, the Armed Forces themselves seem to have never had any doubts.[15]

Alongside measures taken for the maintenance of their tutelary powers, the Turkish military has also implemented various other exit guarantees throughout its history of military intervention. The first of these are provisions taken for the irreversibility of actions of the military regime, in order to make it difficult for their influence on the political process to be removed. For example, both the 1961 and 1982 constitutions included clauses stating that laws passed by the ruling military council could not be challenged for unconstitutionality even after transition to democracy. A second type of exit guarantee can be found in amnesty laws on crimes, particularly human rights abuses committed by the commanders of the regime. Again, both the 1961 and 1982 constitutions included guarantees against the judicial trial and prosecution of members of the ruling military councils and all those acting on their orders.[16]

## Setting the Stage: Indicators of a Real Shift in Turkish Civil-Military Relations

Despite these various measures taken by the military to ensure the continuance of their heavily politicized tutelary role in Turkish politics, a series of developments, ongoing since the AKP was elected to government in 2002 indicate a real shift in the balance of Turkish civil-military relations. In fact, for the first time in Turkish history, the elected civilian government is more powerful than the Armed Forces.[17]

The most recent and perhaps striking of these developments are found in the unprecedented events of April 4<sup>th</sup> 2012, where the two surviving leaders of the 1980 coup d’état, Generals Kenan Evren and Tahsin Sarikaya, went on trial for the overthrow of the civilian government and the subsequent heavy crackdown on ensuing political rights and freedoms throughout the early 1980s.[18] The trial was due to significant amendments to the Constitution of 1982 as a result of the 2010 nation-wide constitutional referendum. One of the most significant and contentious amendments was then the abolishment of Article 15 from the constitution, which banned the prosecution of the 1980 coup leaders, and thus had served as an exit guarantee in the form of an amnesty law for the military. For many years, this clause was a symbol of the political immunity of the military, and the resilience of military preferences in national policy. Thus, for the first time in Turkish history, one of the military’s exit guarantees has been reversed, representing a dramatic decline in its power within Turkish politics and the perception of the Turkish public.

Many other events, starting with the launch of the *Ergenekon* trials in 2008, are indicative of this shift. The *Ergenekon* trials refers to a series of trials that are currently on-going and were started in 2008, following the discovery of an alleged Kemalist and ultra-nationalist underground organization with hundreds of members including military officials, politicians, and civilians. The alleged members have been tried on charges of plotting to foment unrest by assassinating intellectuals, politicians, judges, military staff and religious leaders, with the ultimate goal of toppling the AKP government.[19] Furthermore, the alleged *Balyoz* coup plot against the AKP government discovered in 2010, and supposedly originated in 2003, has so far led to the detainment of over 300 military personnel, compounding the total number of trials and prosecutions exclusively aimed at the military, including the arrest of former Chief of Staff Ilker Basbug[20]. Such a large-scale systematic arrest of members of the military is

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unprecedented in Turkish history. In this line, a final important indicator of the decline of the military's political affluence is found in the unprecedented resignation of four main military generals in during the summer of 2011, including Chief of Staff Isik Kosaner, in reaction to the continuing arrests and perhaps in for fear of being arrested themselves.[21] While this would have been unthinkable prior to the ascendance of the AKP government a decade ago, their resignation garnered minimal reaction from the media, general public and government, and lost its headline status in newspapers within one or two days.[22] Thus, this timeline of events indicates an overall decline in the power and influence of military preference over civilian government and institutions for the first time in Turkish politics, and thus a significant tipping of the balance in civil-military relations.

## Explaining the Shift

Given this evidence of a legitimate transition from military-dominated politics to increased power of the civilian government, we are then left with the question of which factors caused this shift, and in this line, which paradigm of international relations provides us with the most adequate framework for explaining this phenomenon.

## External and Internal Threats: Critiquing a Structural Theory of Civil-Military Relations

Desch's model is built on the premise that the strength of civilian control of the military is fundamentally shaped by structural factors – especially the international and domestic threat environment – within which the state operates.[23] In this line, a state that is operating in a high external and low internal threat environment is likely to have strongest civilian control of the military and thus the best kind of civil-military relations. Conversely, a state that operates within a low external and high internal threat environment will then have weakest civilian control of the military and thus the worst civil-military relations. While states within both high external and internal threat environments are likely to have generally poor civil-military relations, states with both low external and internal threats are mostly indeterminate and will have mixed results.[24]

Since the founding of the republic, Turkey has operated within a constant environment characterized as one of relatively low external threat. It has never directly engaged in interstate war. It chose to remain neutral in World War 2, and soon after, modestly participated in the Korean War strictly as a member of the United Nations. Although having gained NATO membership following its involvement in Korea, and since then remained an important US ally, the Cold War never presented a direct external threat to Turkish national security, and Turkey maintained relatively immune to the heightened international pressure. Since then, its invasion of Cyprus in 1974 on the grounds that the Cypriot National Guard had organized a coup in order to annex the island to Greece, and its provision of 1,750 troops to Kabul and Wardak province for the war in Afghanistan have been the only other instances of Turkish involvement in interstate combat. Therefore, overall, Turkey has consistently operated in a relatively stable, low international threat environment throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, receiving no direct military threat from a contending state, and having been involved in interstate combat only minimally, mostly as part of coalitions through NATO or the UN.[25]

Conversely, Turkey has had a constant relatively high internal threat environment since the transition to multi-party politics, which has shadowed most external military operations. The two main internal threats from which the military has always derived its power and legitimacy in politics continue to be the threat to territorial integrity, or more specifically, separatist Kurdish nationalism, and the threat to the secular regime by forces of political Islam.[26] The military's continuing efforts to maintain and heighten the specters of these two threats, coupled with the republic's "obsessive anxiety"[27] in maintaining national unity in the face of such perceived divisive forces, then further legitimized these threats and the military's hard line stance. In this line, every military coup to date has been justified, either overtly or covertly, using the threat of political Islam, while many events have been justified referring to internal unrest and turmoil caused by domestic sectarian or political divisions. It is important to note, however, that in identifying threats, what ultimately matters is how relevant actors perceive threats, as Desch points out. Furthermore in peacetime threats may indeed be subjective, where military doctrine can then play a significant role in determining what the threat is.[28] In this line, when considering internal threats, what matters for this framework then is essentially what the military perceives to be a threat, as opposed to what one would generally identify and describe as objective threats.

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These threats, as defined by the military, continue to exist today – perhaps with even more strength than ever before. For the first time in Turkish history, a party (AKP) with its roots in political Islam has maintained power for three consecutive terms, with landslide electoral victories for each of its terms. Many of its social reforms have been interpreted as an attempt to ‘Islamicize’ the country, especially by hard line Kemalists and generally by the military itself, and the military has been increasingly public about their concerns regarding the government and the AKP’s threat to Turkish national unity and secularism. However, they have seemingly grown increasingly inept to take any measures for the AKP government’s removal. Furthermore, although the organized and widespread extreme violence of the PKK – a Kurdish insurgency group and terrorist organization – does not continue today as it did in the 1980s and 1990s, the Kurdish problem is still very real and high on the public’s and military’s agenda. This was highlighted in recent events, where military officials, following standard operating procedure, ordered the raid of a group of thirty Turkish innocent civilian children smuggling goods from the Southeastern border of Turkey, having mistaken them to be a group of Kurdish insurgents. That such forceful and rash measures would be taken as standard operating procedure in the case of suspected Kurdish insurgents in itself is then indicative of their continuing sensitivity to the issue.

Thus, the structural environment that the Turkish military has constantly operated in to this day is one of low external and high internal threat. According to Desch’s model, Turkish civilian control over the military will then be extremely weak, and Turkish civil-military relations poor, as domestic threats in the absence of external threats “divide the state and focus everybody’s attention inward”[29]. This, coupled with the Turkish military’s unique historical role in the state and its perception by the people have indeed given the military extraordinary power over political affairs, as is evident from the tumultuous history of frequent coups and military interventions in civilian governments throughout the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, Desch’s model succeeds at explaining the outcome of Turkish civil-military relations prior to 2002. However, from this framework it should then necessarily follow that a shift in the degree of civilian control of the military can be explained as a consequence of the reconfiguration in the structural threat environment of the state. However, as we have demonstrated, Turkey’s structural threat environment has fundamentally remained unchanged for both the periods from 1945 to 2002, and post-2002 period of AKP rule. Thus, Desch’s structural theory ultimately fails in explaining the shift in civil-military relations in the latter period, deeming it erroneous for us to exclusively examine structural factors in seeking to explain this phenomenon.

## The Role of Legitimacy and Soft Power: Three Causal Factors

Rather than relying on structural factors, we can explain this shift, borrowing from constructivist ideas, through an examination of the transforming norms, identity, and interests within Turkish politics, deriving from three interrelated causal factors shaping Turkish politics in important ways since 2002. In this line, we look at the implications of the EU reform and accession process, the increasing parliamentary strength and extreme popular support for the AKP, as well as the role of Turkish soft power as designed and asserted by the AKP and subsequent international support for the government. All of these factors combined have essentially significantly shifted the perception of the legitimate roles and identity of the military in the public’s eyes, thus redefining norms within Turkish politics and ultimately deeming the possibility of a military coup against the AKP government currently unimaginable. Despite the seemingly blatant measures to maintain and enhance its tutelary role in politics at the cost of a fully functioning democratic political system, the Turkish military has paradoxically historically been ranked as the most highly respected and trusted institution in the country.[30] Furthermore, the military has often allied with civil-society organizations, while powerful media, business and civil organizations either tacitly or openly supported their intervention in 1997.[31] Thus, the institution has historically greatly relied on its perceived legitimacy and importance to the Turkish nation to maintain and expand its influence in politics. In this line, the transformation and narrowing of military action that would be considered acceptable to the public has similarly narrowed the scope of action that the military would consider within its possibilities. This has then served to significantly decrease their real power in Turkish politics.

### i) The EU Accession and Reform Process

The EU-accession process and reforms implemented for prospective EU membership has served as an anchor in limiting the influence of the military and contributing to a more democratic framework of civil-military relations.[32] The reforms have focused primarily on the influence of the National Security Council (NSC) on day-to-day politics, as

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well as the absence of effective legal and political mechanisms to enable and sustain the democratic control of the armed forces. After Turkey's accession to EU candidacy following the Helsinki Summit in 1999, the country was faced with the need to significantly restructure its democracy. In this line, the EU demanded various reforms to be implemented soon after, which the AKP quickly embraced upon entering into parliament. The first of these reforms regarded changes in the position and roles of the Chief of Staff, mandating that he would report to the Defense Minister as opposed to the Prime Minister. The second type of reform mandated a change in the composition of NSC membership, as well as the NSCs role and general outlook. In this line, an increasingly civilianized outlook would be adopted and the number of civilian members increased, while the NSC would take a secondary role in security affairs after the civilian government. Finally, the abolishment of the state security courts and limitations imposed on laws regarding a state of emergency were demanded. Therefore, the longstanding state of emergency in Southeast Turkey where the Kurdish insurgency problem was most widespread, which had brought excessive authority to the military in the region, would be somewhat relieved.[33]

Thus, from the start, it was apparent that the EU accession process would pose a large number of provisions and reforms that would significantly weaken the military's power. However, given the enormous popular support for the reforms and general enthusiasm of the public regarding the prospect of joining the EU (77 percent at the time), the military could not risk opposing the reforms.[34] Furthermore, the reforms essentially represented an important stage of the modernization of Turkey in line with Kemalist ideals that they promoted, while EU membership could provide a potentially sustainable solution to some of what the military regarded as Turkey's key domestic challenges, such as Kurdish separatism and Islamism. Therefore, opposing the process would ultimately be hypocritical and serve as a clear indicator for their desire to maintain their status of political influence, which would further delegitimize the institution.[35]

Despite the military's willingness to comply with these measures, the EU reforms nevertheless led to a real shift in what the public regarded as the role of the military in politics, and delegitimized military interference and influence in civilian government. Perhaps the most telling indicator of the strength of the impact of the EU reform process on Turkish civil-military relations can be observed in the events following the military's attempt to change the AKP's decision to present its Minister of Foreign Affairs, Abdullah Gul, as its presidential candidate in 2007. This was the first outright attempt by the military since the commencement of the reform process to openly intervene in political affairs. In response, the AKP criticized the military's guardianship role over Turkish politics, and the EU criticized the military's attempt to intervene in politics, stating that as long as the military continued to interfere with democratic processes, Turkey could never become a member of the EU. Faced with such criticisms and warnings, the military then could not find popular support for its actions. Along with general AKP supporters, even those who did not support the AKP expressed their ambivalence towards the military's actions with the slogan "no Islamic government, but no coup either". In previous interventions, most citizens had been comfortable with the military's role as guardian of democracy and secularism and considered their actions and intervention as legitimate. However, the stance from both AKP's supporters and opponents alike that the military needed to stay out of the debate was unprecedented. This represented a very important change and shift in the civilian perception of the boundaries of the military's role and actions, as well as one of the first steps towards the giving of credence to civilian rule rather than that of the military by those in support of and opposed to the incumbent government alike.[36]

## ii) The Parliamentary Strength and Popular and International Success of the AKP

The vast popular support for the AKP, paired with its majority government status, unlike the governments directly preceding them, has provided the AKP the leverage and flexibility to implement and sustain sweeping economic reforms, paired with various significant social and political reforms throughout its terms of leadership. This in turn has had direct implications for civil-military relations, as the AKP has maintained the political strength and public support necessary to follow through with provisions taken to increase civilian control of the military.

The timing of the founding of the AKP played a large role in its subsequent popular and political success. A currency collapse in 2001, which had triggered the worst economic recession in Turkey for over 50 years, had just occurred, vastly contracting GDP and leading to a widespread increase in unemployment and massive devaluation of the Turkish lira. Furthermore, in the summer of 2002, the increasingly fractious tripartite coalition government collapsed,

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leading to early general elections held in November of 2002. Thus, the party was able to present itself as something new in a time where public confidence in all other parties had been lost. Consequentially, they won 34.3 percent of the national vote and a majority of seats in parliament, as they were the only party other than the Republican People's Party (CHP), with 19.4 percent of the vote, who passed the 10 percent threshold and was represented in government.[37] From then on, the AKP went on to receive a continuously increasing percentage of the popular vote in the following two national elections of 2007 and 2011. This enabled them to maintain their status as majority government, giving them autonomy and the flexibility to pursue widespread reform.

In this line, since it's rise to power, the AKP's main accomplishment has been in undertaking massive economic reforms, privatizing billions of dollars worth of formerly state-owned enterprises, resulting in Turkey's GDP per capita having nearly tripled since 2002. At the same time they pursued widespread infrastructural, educational, and social development programs throughout the country, especially targeting the more rural and underdeveloped regions. This has led the AKP to garner enormous popular support since their ascendance to power, making it a formidable task for the military to take any real action to remove them from government.[38] Realizing that an attempt by the military to intervene would thus lead to massive public protest and a widespread irreversible drastic decline in support and trust of the institution, the AKP has unprecedentedly used its leverage to directly challenge the military. In this line, in the fall of 2010, the AKP stated that they would no longer be taking orders from the NSC. Furthermore, they launched a massive constitutional reform project, directly targeting articles representing various exit guarantees for the military and amending many of the articles of the constitution of 1982, including the abolishment of Article 15. Following the referendum in September 2010, a majority then voted to pass the amendments, signaling public support of the decreasing power and immunity of the military.[39] Thus, for the first time in modern Turkish history, a civilian government was able to use its democratic leverage to dismantle the threat of the military and shift public perception of the role of the military in government. As the military fundamentally derived much of its power from the public support and perception, the AKP government has thus been able to ultimately shift the real role of the military in government as well.

## iii) Turkish Soft Power and International Support for the AKP

Finally, the assertion of regional Turkish soft power, as designed and implemented by the AKP, which has led to widespread international support for the government, has raised the costs of military intervention. The concept of soft power refers to the transformative power of a state on neighbouring states, arising from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies. Given Turkey's important strategic location, especially concerning US foreign policy within the Middle East, its transformative power and ability to set an example, in line with US preferences in the region, is then highly valued by the US and its allies. This then deems the cost of removing the AKP government by the military as two-fold: with regard to public perception as well as that of the international perception, respect, and support of the institution.

There have been two slightly divergent views of Turkey's rising soft power by domestic and foreign actors.[40] The first considers the AKP and the evolution of Turkey's political Islam as an example to show the compatibility of Islam with democracy, demonstrating the possibility of moderation in political Islam. This view emphasizes the importance of the Turkish example as revealing the possibility of moderate Islam and its compatibility with democracy throughout the region and the rest of the world. This is a very important asset, mainly attributed to the AKP, which has served as a solution for the US in addressing the growth of radical Islam. Another view credits Turkey's democratization and secularism for the evolution of Turkish political Islam, demonstrating the importance of democratic and secular norms and the establishment an institutional structure in the evolution of political Islam. This view emphasizes the important example that Turkey sets as a Muslim nation that is democratic, secular, economically well integrated with globalization, and an accession country to the EU. Although this larger framework's appeal cannot be only attributed to the AKP, drawing from Turkey's other characteristics in development before their ascendance to power, it also goes hand in hand with AKP's image of pro-Western modernization. Thus, in both cases, the AKP is seen as the primary designer and projector of Turkey's soft power, highly valued and supported by the US and the EU, amongst much of the rest of the international community.[41]

This soft power attributed to and fundamentally associated with the AKP, and highly regarded by key Turkish allies

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including the US, has in turn had serious implications for Turkish civil-military relations. The resulting international support and respect for the AKP has served to vastly increase the AKP's leverage and bargaining power against the military. As a result of the increasing international status of the government, an attempt by the military to forcefully remove the government would then effectively internationally destroy the legitimacy and credibility of the institution as a trustworthy, respectable institution, with its priority being Turkish national interests. This has then made the possibility of a military coup increasingly unimaginable, and the tradition of military coups in Turkish politics increasingly a thing of the past.

## Conclusion

The unprecedented, drastic and rapid shift in Turkish civil-military relations since 2002 presents us with an interesting case study regarding the relevant factors that determine the degree of civilian control of the military in a given state. The case essentially demonstrates how an exclusive examination of structural factors, namely the relevant external and internal threat environment, is insufficient in its explanatory power regarding the rapid civilianization of Turkish politics and political institutions and subsequent increasing control of the AKP government over the military. This is because the structural perspective essentially disregards the impact of the perception of legitimacy, involving the subtleties and complexities within the relationship between the military and the Turkish public, and thus, crucially overlooks the importance of changing norms and interests relevant to Turkish political dynamics. The combined implications of various interrelated domestic and system-level factors, ultimately leaving the fundamental threat environment as defined by Desch constant, but rather serving to reshape notions of acceptable and legitimate military action, has ultimately led to the redefining of boundaries of real possibilities for military actions and behaviour. Thus, an era like that of the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has become increasingly unimaginable, leading for the chapter of frequent and tumultuous military coups in Turkish history to come to an end.

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[4] Ozbudun, 105.

[5] Kemalism refers to the ideology put forth by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and named after him, which is the fundamental principle that defines the basic characteristics of Turkey. It is characterized by its six foundational pillars: republicanism, populism, secularism, revolutionism, nationalism and statism.

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