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THE LIMITS OF LEVERAGE
U S INFLUENCE AND THE TURKISH MILITARY

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THE LIMITS OF LEVERAGE:
U.S. INFLUENCE AND THE TURKISH MILITARY

Among the important, albeit secondary, tasks of the United States military is to work with selected foreign militaries to help make them more effective security partners. Efforts to this end range from co-production of weapons systems to officer exchanges, and can include, *inter alia*, military sales financing, joint exercises, and professional military education programs. It is often assumed that, the broader the range of such initiatives and the deeper the military-to-military ties, the greater leverage the U S should enjoy. Some observers question whether Washington extracts the full advantage of such policies, and call upon U S to make more determined use of these instruments to influence the recipient country.

In practice, however, the relationship between military ties and U S leverage is not nearly so direct as some might wish. Turkey provides a good example of the resistance that even deeply rooted mil-to-mil contacts with a long-standing ally can encounter when Washington tries to affect the behavior of another country. U S efforts to influence the Turkish military in two main areas of concern, human rights performance and civil-military relations, have often fallen short of the expectations of some in the executive branch, the Congress and the public. These less-than-hoped-for results argue not for the abandonment of mil-to-mil tools, but rather the realistic recognition of their limits.

The prominent position of the military in contemporary Turkish society can be understood only in the context of the historic role of the armed forces. The Treaty of Sevres imposed by the victorious Allies at the end of World War I not only stripped the

Ottoman Empire of its possessions in the Balkans and the Middle East, but divided most of present-day Turkey among occupying powers. Beginning in the Anatolian hinterlands in May 1919, General Mustafa Kemal consolidated rebel nationalist forces into an army that in little more than three years expelled the European occupiers from the country.¹ Upon becoming President of the newborn Turkish Republic in 1923, Kemal took off his uniform, but never lost his military officer's outlook, surrounding himself with his comrades in arms. He more commanded than governed the country, decreeing a new legal code, a new calendar, and a new alphabet, abolishing Islam as the state religion, requiring surnames (the parliament awarded him the name "Ataturk"--"Father of the Turks"), and outlawing such traditional attire as the veil and the fez.² Through such sweeping measures, Ataturk sought to eradicate practices that he thought left the Turks backward and weak vis-à-vis Europe. Over the decades, the Kemalist vision--characterized by adherents as progressive, secular, Western-looking, and ethnically Turkish--was systematically instilled into the military, which was encouraged to see itself as the ultimate guarantor of those essential values.

In the past four decades, the Turkish military has staged three coups: in 1960, 1971 (the "Coups by Memorandum," in which the government complied with a letter instructing it to step down voluntarily or be removed by force), and 1980. In each case, the elected political structure had reached prolonged deadlock, and the threat of violence

¹With the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, which superseded the Treaty of Sevres, Turkey became the only "vanquished" World War I power to successfully challenge the humiliating capitulation terms demanded by the victors.

²Turkish authorities have often taken draconian measures to enforce the Kemalist revolution in *mores*, as recounted in Jeremy Seal's very readable *A Fez of the Heart: Travels around Turkey in Search of a Hat* (New York, Harcourt Brace & Company, 1996).

and/or further deterioration was very real ³ The coups were greeted with relief by much of the Turkish population, and understanding, if not outright approval, by the West ⁴ In each case, the generals returned authority to civilians along a timetable of the military's choosing The actions that accompanied the coups--execution of some politicians, imprisonment of others, banning of still others and their parties, amendment of the constitution to give a military-dominated National Security Council (TNSC) a deciding voice--did not, however, achieve the lasting political stability the generals intended

Turkey's current period of elected civilian government, dating back to 1983, is its longest yet Over the past three years, however, the military has again begun to flex its muscles, warning politicians that they were approaching the boundaries of what the generals considered impermissible The military's view of the threat was bluntly summarized by Gen Cevik Bir, the deputy chief of the general staff, who in April 1997 announced that combating anti-secular Islamic forces had become the military's top priority, outranking even the fight against Kurdish separatists ⁵

The growing public role of Islam in Turkish society was not sudden phenomenon Turgut Ozal, the first elected Prime Minister following the 1980 coup, pursued a policy of cautious liberalization and conciliation with Islamic forces, to the point that, beginning in 1990, the budget of the Ministry of Religious Affairs exceeded that of the Ministry of

³In the months preceding the 1980 coup, the death toll from dueling rightist and leftist political violence had reached more than ten people a day Nicole and Hugh Pope, *Turkey Unveiled: A History of Modern Turkey* (Woodstock, NY: The Overlook Press, 1998), 139

⁴One source quotes Paul Henze, the NSC expert for Turkey at the time, telling a leading Turkish general just prior to the 1980 coup, "I hope that you will not allow things to get out of hand in Turkey," and sighing "That is so, great," when receiving news of the military's move later that week Mehmet Ali Birand, *The Generals' Coup in Turkey: An Inside Story of 12 September 1980* (London: Brassey's Defence Publishers, 1987), 172, 185

⁵Kelly Couturier, "Anti-Secularism Eclipses Insurgency as Turkish Army's No. 1 Concern," *Washington Post*, 5 April 1997, sec. A, p. 22

Education and Health ⁶ In the eyes of the Turkish general staff, however, the coalition government led by PM Necmettin Erbakan of the pro-Islamic Welfare (Refah) Party that came to power in July 1996 represented the first step toward a de-secularized Islamic republic ⁷ Refah's election campaign willingness to offer the Kurds increased cultural rights in the name of "Islamic brotherhood" made the party that much more suspect to the generals ⁸

The military's response took various forms. The army sent tanks through an Istanbul suburb shortly after the Refah mayor of that municipality hosted an anti-Israel rally at which the guest of honor, the Iranian ambassador, called for the introduction of Islamic law in Turkey, the mayor was removed and the ambassador expelled. The TNSC ordered the government to enforce existing bans on Islamic dress, restrict the activities of Muslim-oriented sects and foundations, limit enrollment in religious schools, and investigate Islamic-owned businesses (an important source of funding for Refah). Officers deemed pro-Islamic were cashiered. Finally, in the "soft coup" of June 1997, the military successfully pressured Erbakan to step down. He and his party were banned from politics, although Refah reconstituted itself as the Virtue (Fazilet) Party, which Erbakan continued to control from behind the scenes.

Erbakan's successor as PM, Mesut Yilmaz of the center-right Motherland Party, was repeatedly called upon to prove his secularist credentials through concrete actions. In March 1998 he complied with the general staff's demands to impose harsher sentences on violations of the country's secular dress code, restrict religious schools and

⁶Ben Lombardi, "Turkey – The Return of the Reluctant Generals?," *Political Science Quarterly* 112, no 2 (Summer 1997), 5 (on ProQuest Direct print out)

⁷An impression Erbakan's early official visits to Iran and Libya did nothing to dispel

⁸Pose, p. 344

foundations, and limit the construction of mosques. The military also sought the right to review the accreditation of foreign decrees, thus gaining leverage over Turkish students studying at Islamic institutions abroad. Senior military leaders publicly commended the prosecutor who successfully convicted the Fazilet mayor of Istanbul of allegedly inciting religious hatred at a public rally.⁹

For many observers in the West, the aggressive, often brutal, campaign against those Ankara defined as "Kurdish terrorists" had already earned the Turkish armed forces a reputation for flagrant abuse of human rights. The demonstrated willingness to pressure elected politicians added to this the image of a military disdainful of democratic institutions. The understanding that the generals found in many Western capitals in 1960, 1971, and 1980 was now infrequent and conditional. Here, as in so many other areas, the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union had changed the equation: from their former position of dominance, security concerns became but one of many elements, and a diminished one at that, in relations with Turkey.

In light of this new environment, what are the most effective means to influence the conduct of the Turkish military? Some observers criticize the United States for attaching too great a weight to the security dimension of the relationship and being too quick to overlook abuses, they credit the Europeans with a more principled approach.¹⁰ In fact, Europe presents lessons on how to forfeit influence with Ankara. Most of the two million Turkish *gastarbeiters* in Western Europe are precluded from citizenship in their

⁹The remarks in question were quotations from Ziya Gökalp, an early 20th century writer who became one of the leading ideologists of Kemalism, and who cannot be accused of anti-secularism. Jeremy Salt, "Turkey's Military 'Democracy'," *Current History* 98, no. 625 (February 1999), p. 77.

¹⁰John Tirman, "The Ankara-Jerusalem axis," *The Nation* 268, no. 1 (4 January 1999), pp. 1-2 (on ProQuest Direct print out)

host countries, despite residency that in some cases extends back three generations. The European Union's December 1997 decision to reject accession negotiations with Turkey while welcoming ten other potential member states embittered the Turks, who saw the move as evidence of European hypocrisy encouraged through the baneful influence of EU-member Greece. Finally, the murky role that several European governments played in the flight of Kurdish extremist Abdullah Ocalan strikes most Turks as nothing other than aiding and abetting a terrorist. In sum, although the Turkish elite in general, and the military in particular, desire the West's acknowledgement as Western-oriented themselves, the Europeans through their own policies have reduced their credibility with Ankara.

The United States shares many of the Europeans' concerns, and enjoys important advantages in its relations with the Turkish armed forces. U.S. military cooperation with Turkey has a long history, dating back to the Truman administration. For much of that period, Turkey was a front line state confronting the Soviet Union, it was from Turkey that U.S. missiles were withdrawn in 1962 as the *quid pro quo* for the removal of Soviet missiles from Cuba. Over the decades, thousands of officers passed through U.S.-sponsored training programs and exchanges, and a wide range of modern weapons systems was made available, often on advantageous terms through Foreign Military Financing (FMF). Military assistance peaked during the Reagan administration, which particularly valued Turkey's anti-Communist credentials. Even today, Turkey remains the home of one of the most important U.S. military bases in Europe (a category much reduced since the end of the Cold War).

Visits at a range of levels have underscored the importance of the bilateral relationship. PM Yilmaz was welcomed in Washington in December 1997, a visit the Turkish government valued all the more against the background of the EU rebuff earlier that month. Secretary of Defense Cohen's April 1998 visit to Turkey likewise provided opportunities to reiterate the importance the U.S. attaches to respect for human rights and democratic institutions. In particular, the U.S. has urged the Turkish government to amend relevant laws to 1) broaden freedom of expression by narrowing the current definition of sedition, and 2) make it easier to bring charges against those accused of committing human rights abuses. Clinton administration officials aver that, while much remains to be done, the bilateral dialogue has nevertheless succeeded in heightening Turkish awareness of these issues. As a senior State Department official noted in congressional testimony, the problem of torture is discussed more openly in Turkey than ever before.¹¹

All the same, the pace of Turkey's progress on these issues leaves many dissatisfied, and some strongly advocate using the carrots and sticks of security assistance to reinforce the seriousness of U.S. concerns. Weapons systems would appear to provide an obvious lever for influencing military behavior. Under sustained attack by congressional opponents for many years, Foreign Military Financing for Turkey came to an end in FY 99.¹² Others have sought to tighten the conditions under which Turkey and others acquire U.S. weapons. Congresswoman Cynthia McKinney of Georgia, who was

¹¹John S. Iatuck, Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, in Congress, Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, *Turkey-United States Relations: Potential and Peril. Hearings before the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe*, 104th Cong., 1st sess., 19 September 1995.

¹²In the words of the OSD desk officer for Turkey, "It was no longer worth the fight." John Caves interview by author, author's notes, Washington, D.C., 16 April 1999.

unsuccessful in her 1997 effort to establish a congressionally mandated code of conduct governing such sales, declared "If they are going to be our ally and they also are going to receive our weapons, the least we can do is to suggest to them that they not use the weapons against their own people"¹³ More successful was Vermont Senator Patrick Leahy, who sponsored a law stipulating that the Secretary of State must confirm that there is no credible evidence of human rights violations by specific military or police units before a country is eligible for U S -funded military training, equipment or loan guarantees In accordance with that law, the State Department in December 1998 refused to approve Export-Import Bank loan guarantees for a \$45 million sale of armored vehicles to the Turkish police¹⁴ A Turkish request to purchase \$3.5 billion worth of U S attack helicopters faces similar scrutiny

Has this conditionality brought positive changes the Turkish military's approach to human rights and civil-military relations? Seemingly not, a favorable causal relationship is hard to find, whereas evidence of negative fallout abounds Ankara rejected a compromise under which U S government financing would be delayed six months while the Turkish government implemented anti-torture training and other human rights measures The U S Ambassador to Turkey, Mark Parris, warned in a cable to the State Department, "Turning down the Ex-Im request will essentially marginalize us as a player in the ongoing dialogue on human rights here From this point on, we won't even be able to get in the door to talk to them about torture, accountability, and related

¹³Kevin McKiernan, "Turkey's war on the Kurds," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 55 no. 2 (Mar/Apr 1999), p. 4 (in the ProQuest Direct print out)

¹⁴The manufacturer, General Dynamics, arranged private financing Michigan Senator Carl Levin, in whose state the vehicles were to be manufactured, argued that the State Department far exceeded the letter of the Leahy law, which he said should apply only to equipment used directly for torture Dana Priest, "New Human Rights Law Triggers Policy Debate, Military Aid Restrictions Said to Harm U S Interests," *Washington Post*, 31 December 1998, sec. A, p. 34

questions if we say no to Ex-Im”¹⁵ Resentment of the EU’s rejection has not prevented Turkey from exploring alternate sources of weaponry in Europe¹⁶ Israel is a finalist in the contract for attack helicopters, its aircraft are a competitive alternative to the U S - made machines¹⁷ The Turkish government may increasingly conclude that U S weapons systems come with too many strings attached

This independence is reinforced by Turkey’s keen appreciation of its value as a strategic partner to the U S Turkey is crucial to international efforts to contain Saddam Hussein, and continues to take genuine risks in that regard The safest route for a pipeline to carry Caspian Sea gas and oil crosses Turkey Turkey is one of the few countries in the region on good terms with key U S ally Israel In short, the Turkish authorities recognize that, while they need the U S , the U S also needs them

Moreover, those who are convinced that military assistance gives the U S powerful leverage over the Turkish military underestimate or misunderstand the institution they are trying to change Every Turkish child is taught the indispensable role of Mustafa Kemal and the armed forces in freeing the Turkish Republic from European occupation As the general staff is well aware, the armed forces have long been by far the most respected institution in Turkish society¹⁸ Their responsibility as the ultimate guardians of the Kemalist heritage for the good of the country has been deeply ingrained in generations of officers It is *the* overriding core value of the Turkish military, central

¹⁵Priest

¹⁶Those activists who credit Europe with more high-minded standards than the U S in this area overlook the unabashed *realpolitik* with which some European governments approach weapons sales

¹⁷Tirman, p 3 (on the ProQuest Direct print out)

¹⁸In distinct contrast to the police, who are widely viewed as corrupt, brutal and ineffective It is at the door of the police, rather than the military, that responsibility for many of the human rights abuses in Turkey must be laid

to their identity and mission.¹⁹ On this the general staff sees no possibility of compromise. The Turkish military will do without foreign assistance and weapons before it will sacrifice its defining values.

Recognizing the limits to our leverage, what should the U S do to encourage Turkish progress on human rights and civil-military relations? It is important at the outset to acknowledge that times of change are inherently challenging. The end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union drastically and irrevocably altered the geopolitical environment in which today's senior Turkish officers were schooled. As in so many other countries, a degree of generational change will need to occur before the new paradigm becomes internalized. In that context, current U S programs of officer exchanges and professional military education (including military justice training) are more important than ever, budget cuts in this modestly-funded category²⁰ would be a false economy indeed. The more Turkish officers who have been exposed to U S principles on the role of the military in a democracy, the better the chances that some will attempt to use those values to reform and update Kemalism.

Overall, it is probably a healthy thing that U S military assistance to Turkey has been cut back. Congressional critics who argue that a country with one of the most dynamic, fastest-growing economies in Europe is not a prime candidate for assistance are hard to refute. More important, a lower level of assistance reduces both U S misunderstanding about the extent of leverage actually achieved and Turkish resentment over the conditions recipients must fulfill.

¹⁹As the chief of the general staff told a reporter at a 1996 reception, "If you lose Ataturk and his principles, you will lose the country, the regime, democracy, in short everything. That's why you have to hold tighter to them than ever." Pope, 340.

²⁰A mere \$1.5 million is requested for IMET for Turkey in FY 99.

At the same time, it might be astute to tone down some of the fulsome praise for "Turkey's strategic role" that ritualistically accompanies U S public statements on the bilateral relationship. The Turkish military, political class and elites do *not* need their already robust sense of Turkey's importance inflated still further.²¹

Distortion and exaggeration are not uniquely Turkish faults, but have also clouded some U S perspectives. The fullest, most balanced picture possible is necessary to inform policy decisions on Turkey. To that end, the more congressional delegations that visit that country and examine the situation first hand, the better. Both the legislative and executive branches of the U S government must recognize not only the many serious shortcomings in the Turkish record, but those areas where progress has occurred: the more open discussion of torture and abuses. Staying engaged gains the U S access and a hearing, if not immediate results, in Turkey.

Finally, and most important, the United States needs to acknowledge how much the course of future developments in Turkey is out of our hands. Ultimately, the extent to which the Turkish military abuses human rights or interferes in the political process will depend on the health, strength and maturity of the country's democratic institutions. In this, the armed forces are trapped in a vicious circle of their own making. The Kemalist pattern of governance set the limits within which politicians could operate, and provided the insurance policy of military intervention if elected leaders screwed up too badly. The result was a largely immature political class that was not required to take responsibility for its own actions.²² If the general staff has reason to look down on the fractiousness of

²¹The strong showing of the rightist-nationalist National Action Party in the April 18 parliamentary elections makes rhetorical moderation on the part of the U S even more advisable. The Islamic Fazilet Party fared less well than expected.

²²Pope, 341

the Turkish political class--and it does--that is partly a result of what a limited opportunity elected officials have had to exercise their governing skills

The solution to Turkey's problems in human rights and civil-military relations is a stronger, more vigorous democracy in that country. This is a long-term project that is easier to set back than advance. There is little reason to believe, however, manipulating military assistance to pressure the Turkish armed forces will get us there any sooner.

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(In fairness it should be noted that, while some of the works listed pertain specifically to this paper, others sources which proved to be useful were first consulted in preparation for the Cyprus/Greece/Turkey RSS)

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