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## Unresolved Questions and another Crossroads in Turkey

By Vera Eccarius-Kelly

### Ideological Uncertainty

Ever since Turkey's 1980 military coup, the country's party system has failed to reflect the ideological spectrum within Turkish civil society. As a result, the past two decades have been filled with violent reactions by the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) and highly charged political challenges from Islamists. The unrest has widened existing cracks in the Kemalist paradigm—what many view as an artificial vision of secular and homogeneous Turkish nationhood. Yet despite the growing domestic dissent, representatives of the Kemalist state bureaucracy continue to espouse the same obsolete principles.

Among the leading causes of social conflict is a sense of frustration among the general population with the country's unresolved question of national identity. Additionally, there is widespread disillusionment among intellectual and economic elites that Turkey's chances for joining the European Union (EU) may be slipping away. Nationalists, who support a belligerent interpretation of ethnocentric Turkish nationalism, confront challengers who demand the advancement of socio-political and economic reform packages. In this volatile political environment of ideological confrontation and transformation, one particular issue remains unexamined today—namely the possibility of whether Turkey will embrace a broadly defined liberal-democratic framework.

In this article the author postulates three potential scenarios that may shape Turkey's future: (1) renewed repression, (2) accommodation and multiculturalism, and (3) socio-political paralysis. To contextualize the domestic and foreign policy consequences of each option, the article examines the military's involvement in policy making, the influence of the political class on reform efforts, and the impact of civil society actors. The outcome and future consequences of Turkey's transformative ideological process are highly relevant to policy makers in both Europe and the United States as Turkey asserts itself as an increasingly independent actor in the region.

### A New Social Contract

Turkish civil society has arrived at a crossroads, yet the lack of attention paid by analysts in Europe and the United States demonstrates a failure to recognize and appreciate the critical transformation that is reshaping Turkey. [1] At a recently convened international conference in Montreal, a distinguished Turkish scholar recounted an enlightening experience he had at a British university. [2] When he asked his colleagues in the Middle East Studies field which Turkey-related articles the students were reading in their courses, they stated that "Turkey does not fit well within Middle East studies." His British colleagues then suggested that he check in with the Europeanists. The Turkish scholar then asked European historians and political scientists about their reading selections on Turkey, and they responded: "We don't address Turkey...shouldn't Turkey be integrated into Middle East Studies?" The confused Turkish scholar wondered if Turkey was actually being studied at all.

This anecdote serves to contextualize the reasons why Turkish issues have been overlooked by policy makers in Europe and the United States. Turkey asserts an increasingly independent policy path in the post Cold War era and no longer fits the once neat categorization of Western ally and NATO member, especially since the US war in Iraq. The country straddles a largely undefined political space and pursues its own interests in the Middle East. As Turkey's role in the region continues to grow, both Europe and the United States will be better off paying closer attention to the socio-political developments in Turkey.

The country's domestic and foreign policy choices indicate some potential for increased social unrest and radicalization in the near future. In July 2007, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) garnered nearly 47% of support in the Grand National Assembly. Since then, AKP has consolidated its influence and emerged as the most effective grassroots-based actor in Turkish society by presenting a counterweight to the military establishment. [4] Turkish Prime Minister Recep Erdogan depicts the AKP as a center-right, conservative Muslim party with both a pro-Western and pro-business outlook. However, many Europeans express doubt because they suspect that the Turkish secularist establishment may be correct in asserting that the AKP represents a hidden Islamist agenda. Europe's political class wants to see clearer signs of democratization in Turkey. Despite long-standing disputes over the portrayal of the AKP's true objectives, Turkey's parliamentary elections confirmed the dominant position of the AKP.

Another significant event was the outcome of the 2007 parliamentary election, in which the Kurdish minority's provided an unprecedented and surprisingly strong voice in the new parliament. The emergence of minority representation in parliament signifies noteworthy progress in terms of future opportunities for articulation of ethnic and religious interests in Turkey. For the first time in Turkish elections, independent Kurdish candidates were able to advocate for Kurdish regional interests in the national assembly. [5]

Among the most surprising of the elected Kurdish parliamentarians is Sebahat Tuncel, a young woman who had been imprisoned for separatist activities since the end of 2006 (i.e. she stands accused of affiliation and collaboration with the PKK). [6] Because Turkish law mandates that all parliamentarians enjoy legal immunity while serving as elected representatives, Tuncel was released from prison and installed as a member of the new Turkish parliament. She belongs to the original group of founders of the Democratic Society Party (DTP), which circumvented the rigid electoral regulations by having its candidates run as independents. As a Kurdish successor party to a number of banned forerunners including the People's Labor Party (HEP), the Democratic Party (DEP), and the Democratic People's Party (HADEP), the DTP is perceived by Turkish secularists, and especially the military, as supportive of the radical PKK.

The election presents another indicator that the established framework of the Kemalist state will continue to face political challenges. Over time, as popular support for Kemalism has diminished, it has become more and more acceptable to question the legitimacy and authenticity of the state apparatus. This in turn has increased the frequency of debates over the role of religion in public life, allowed for questions related to the relevance of Kemalism in the post Cold War environment, and invited growing expressions of doubt about the influential role of the military. [7] In essence, Turkish society now enjoys its first realistic opportunity to overcome the long-term damage caused by the military's intervention during earlier decades. Turkish society is engaging in negotiations over a new social contract, but the outcome of this clearly painful process will depend on the conduct of a few influential players.

### **Three Alternative Paths: Repression, Multiculturalism, or Paralysis?**

The most troubling option available to Turkish society is renewed military repression as a response to increasingly violent ideological clashes among political actors, Islamists, and the Kurdish minority. This alternative would establish a sense of order in Turkish society in the short term, but would simultaneously create socio-economic instability and enhance conditions for wide-spread terrorism in the long run. Although the military is clearly cognizant of this side effect, it perceives itself as the guarantor of secular, modern, and positivist Kemalist principles, and therefore, suspiciously observes policies that may weaken the country's ideological heritage. For example, the AKP, as a grass-roots Muslim party, espouses religiously grounded values, which are often construed by members of the military establishment as an affront to pure Kemalist principles. A major topic of debate in Turkey relates to the role of religion in public life, a good example is the familiar headscarves debate—as religious Turks aim to overturn the secularist ban on wearing headscarves in public schools and state buildings. [8]

But the issue that causes concern regarding the possibility of military intervention relates to the Kurdish question in the country. While the AKP-led governments enacted a series of significant reforms with the support of a broad-based coalition of conservative Muslims and urban and economic interests, the political elite did not entirely succeed in marginalizing the military's influence on domestic security concerns. When Kurdish civil society organizations challenge the dominance of the Kemalist ideology, they are confronted with hostility by the Turkish state. For example, dozens of elected mayors from the pro-Kurdish DTP who supported Denmark-based Kurdish Roj-TV faced persecution and threats for sending a signed letter to the Danish government expressing their desire to keep Roj-TV on the air. Turkish state authorities accused the DTP leadership of "knowingly and willingly supporting the PKK", and the mayors experienced a range of judicial harassments according to Amnesty International. [9]

For decades the military has invested enormous political and financial capital in the eradication of the PKK. This has made it almost untenable for the political class to pursue a path toward a reasonable compromise in the Kurdish southeastern provinces. In the attempt to destroy and marginalize the PKK the military unintentionally invigorated Kurdish nationalism, mostly as a consequence of repressive counterinsurgency policies. Over the past year skirmishes between Turkish military units and cadres of the PKK have intensified along the Turkish-Iraqi border region. To the distress of the Turkish military, the US and its Iraqi Kurdish allies appear to

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have ignored PKK units that are deeply ensconced along the border region. From those hideouts in northern Iraq the PKK continues to mount regular attacks on Turkish troops and soft targets inside Turkey.

Turkey faces intensive pressure from the EU to speed up its domestic democratization efforts and must also deal with US demands that they avoid complicating the conditions in northern Iraq. This demand has put the military in a difficult position because Turkey's military is confronting a direct challenge from PKK guerrilla units and the country's civilian political elite must respond to rising levels of domestic nationalism. Ultra nationalists increasingly express anger over the continued attacks by the PKK, engaging in aggressive demonstrations and street protests. [10] Conditions along the border region between northern Iraq and southeastern Turkey are explosive, untenable, and fluid, while the atmosphere in the country reflects growing domestic pressure to assert sovereign control over borders and the management of security issues. The potential for the reassertion of core Kemalist principles exists only if the military regains its status through collaboration with civilian organizations. If the political and business elite accept or encourage an ethnocentric nationalist ideology that could be described as Kemalism on steroids, the military may become more influential; perhaps even a key actor.

The second option for Turkish society is to embrace a social contract based on a larger liberal democratic framework linked to the idea of a multicultural agreement. In 1999, when the EU encouraged Turkey to prepare to apply for full membership status, the Turkish government and many civil society organizations embraced the ideals of multiculturalism and principles of human rights to advance the country's commitment to European integration. Kurdish political parties and their affiliated civil society organizations successfully appealed to EU institutions to push for improvements in human rights norms and advances in terms of minority protections. But many problems remain, such as the military's long standing ability to influence or shape public policy. The Turkish General Staff can still intervene in the political affairs of the country if it considers it necessary to protect the unity or secular ideals of the state. In addition, Kurdish cultural rights remain restricted, including full access to Kurdish language education and broadcasting. Article 301 of the penal code also presents an ongoing problem as it can be used to limit the freedom of expression related to the Kurdish minority and the state's denial of the Armenian genocide as the Ottoman Empire disintegrated.

Turkey's reformers need the support of the EU to continue to make progress toward a negotiated and revised social contract. As long as the military believes that European integration can ensure the protection of secular structures within Turkish society, and as long as the intellectual and business elites see tangible benefits linked to the process of economic and social integration, Turkey has a real chance of pursuing this path.

Embracing a liberal democratic framework also requires discarding the obsolete ideals of Kemalism, which will result in a rise of political violence in the short term. The question is whether the military will show restraint and avoid intervening to establish order, and if the Europeans can see past the immediate rise in violence to support the establishment of a liberal democratic Turkey.

Finally, the third alternative for Turkey can best be described as political paralysis. With a growing sense that Europe may never overcome its multilayered reluctance to open its doors to Turkey, there is confusion within the political class and the military establishment over how to advance the country's position. Europe's lack of enthusiasm relates to the potential flow of labor migrants from Turkey to Europe, followed by a noticeable increase in Europe's Muslim populations, and the fact that Turkey would become a powerful member of the EU because of its large population. In particular, Germany's Angela Merkel and France's Nicolas Sarkozy expressed concern over Turkey's ability to reform sufficiently to gain entry. They cautioned that Turkish society may not be committed or even 'culturally capable' to democratize sufficiently. [11] Echoing criticism articulated in the European Parliament, it is regularly suggested that Turkey made insufficient progress in the areas of freedom of expression, minority rights, corruption, and violence against women. [12]

The potential for violence both in the short and long-terms is high. Should civil society begin to feel that the AKP can not implement the socio-economic progress it was elected to achieve, extremists will become empowered. Political paralysis would encourage frustrated and disillusioned groups to blame opponents for the lack of advancement in Turkey. Ultra nationalists would therefore have a stake in trying to reassert influence, and radical Kurds would find reasons to embrace a new campaign of militancy. At the same time, Islamists would seek strong religious leadership to advance the ideals of a more committed Islamic society.

## Conclusion

Moderate Islamists and members of AKP may disagree with many civil society organizations, including Kurdish groups on the role of Islam in society. Yet they tend to share a common interest by favoring Turkish membership in the EU. The governing AKP perceives the EU as a vehicle to economic prosperity for its constituency, while civil society organizations and Kurdish groups argue that EU membership will strengthen human rights in Turkey. An influential AKP can create the necessary political environment that allows traditionally marginalized groups such as the Kurds to collaborate. But PKK violence in the southeastern provinces has led to a hardening of positions both inside the military and the AKP. The rise of extreme nationalist sentiments across Turkey impeded efforts to advance a version of the multicultural, liberal democratic model. Impending developments in northern Iraq are of utmost significance for the future of Turkey's negotiation over a new social contract. Fears of a divided Iraq or an autonomous northern Iraq will strengthen PKK guerrilla units, reinforce irredentist activities inside Turkey, and fortify the role played by Turkish nationalists and the Turkish military. A full commitment to eradicating the PKK may bring Turkey closer to Syria and Iran rather than strengthen the country's relationship with Europe.

Both Europe and the United States can make a difference and support the preferential path toward further democratization in Turkey. By continuing to assist Turkey in accelerating its transition toward democracy, liberal democracies can inspire a commitment to proceed with reforms. It is important to encourage Turkey's military to accept a subordinate position to civilian leadership, allowing the government to pursue EU membership. Europe, in turn, needs to reward reforms with the possibility of future economic benefits.

In supporting such progress, students and policy makers alike may want to add Turkey to their reading lists—understanding that Turkey belongs as a critical subject in both Middle East Studies *and* European Studies.

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## NOTES:

[1] The concept of Turkey's search for a new social contract was first articulated by Yavuz, M. Hakan in *Search for a New Social Contract in Turkey: Fethullah Gulen, the Virtue Party and the Kurds*, SAIS Review, Vol. 19, No. 1, Winter-Spring 1999, pp. 114-143.

[2] The author paraphrases an account shared by Dr. Metin Heper from Bilkent University at the IMMD Conference in Montreal, CA, on October 26, 2007.

[3] F. Stephen Larrabee and Ian O. Lesser, *Turkish Foreign Policy in an Age of Uncertainty*, Center for Middle East Public Policy, Rand Corporation, 2003.

[4] Total turnout of eligible voters was slightly over 84 percent in the 2007 parliamentary election; Justice and Development or AKP garnered 46.6 percent or 341 seats, the Republican People's Party or CHP earned 20.8 percent or 112 seats, the Nationalist Movement Party or MHP collected 14.3 percent or 71 seats. Independents gained 5.2 percent of the vote or 26 seats. Among the independent parliamentarians are ethno-national Kurds with separatist aspirations.

[5] For a party to be represented in Turkish parliament, it has to gain at least 10% of the national vote. Independent candidates are eligible to run, and can be elected to parliament, yet they need only win 10% of the provincial vote; this strategy allowed Kurdish representatives to enter parliament.

[6] This *International Herald Tribune* article discusses perceptions related to the DTP; <http://www.iht.com/articles/ap/2007/08/03/europe/EU-POL-Turkey-Kurdish-Lawmakers.php>

[7] These comments are based on the author's conversations with Turkish civil society activists and scholars in Istanbul in November 2007.

[8] For additional details on the headscarves debate and the European Court of Human Rights' ruling on related law suits, see <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4424776.stm>

[9] Yigal Schleifer, "Denmark, Again? Now it's under fire for hosting Kurdish TV station," *The Christian Science Monitor*, 21 April 2006. Available at <http://www.csmonitor.com/2006/0421/p01s01-woeu.html>

[10] The comment is related to the author's observations and conversations with Turkish political activists and scholars in Istanbul in November 2007.

[11] For a discussion on European assessments of Turkey's democratization efforts and the Kurdish minority, see this author's article entitled *Political Movements and Leverage Points: Kurdish Activism in the European Diaspora*, *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, Vol. 22, No. 1, 2002, pp. 91-118.

[12] For further information, see the *Turkey 2007 Progress Report*, a European Commission working document, which is available in its entirety at [http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/key\\_documents/2007/nov/turkey\\_progress\\_reports\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/key_documents/2007/nov/turkey_progress_reports_en.pdf)