

Changing of the Guard in Turkey

Is the resignation of Turkey's top military commanders a cause for optimism or concern?

By *per Concordiam* Staff

The July 29, 2011, resignations of Turkey's leading military officers triggered a political earthquake in a country that since its founding in 1923 has looked to its army, navy and air force for stability and secularization. Gen. Işık Koşaner, chief of the Turkish General Staff, relinquished his post to protest what he called the persecution of hundreds of military officers accused of plotting a 2003 coup against the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The heads of the army, navy and air force resigned along with Koşaner, displacing the nation's entire high command. Few doubt that the new military leadership endorsed by Erdoğan will be more closely aligned and integrated with the AKP, ending the Turkish military's 90-year role as an independent government watchdog and power broker.



But opinion is divided over the deeper meaning of Erdoğan's power play with the military. Some maintain that relegating the Turkish armed forces to a secondary role in society is a healthy step for a nation hoping to build democratic credentials for membership in the European Union. As recently as 1980, the Turkish military ousted an elected government and altered the nation's constitution, the third time it had done so. But others wonder whether the AKP, with its roots as a traditionalist Islamic party, is more interested in consolidating power by removing the largest single obstacle to societal dominance. They point out how the Erdoğan administration has jailed journalists, academics and businessmen who publically criticize the government. Hundreds of military officers – including nearly half of the nation's admirals – remained jailed as of late 2011.

"Turkey has been exchanging a military form of authoritarianism for civilian authoritarianism," Gareth Jenkins, a

British security affairs expert based in Istanbul, said in the *Guardian* in February 2011. "What we have seen in the last couple of years is blatant political persecution, suppression of the free press and people being thrown in jail without knowing what they are charged with."

But how will the shifting balance of power between Turkey's government and military affect the country's relationship not just with NATO, but with its neighbors in the region? Turkey's NATO membership dates back to 1952, and many of the imprisoned military officers came of age during a time of close Turkish-Western cooperation. On the other hand, the country's new chief of staff, Gen. Necdet Özel, is a lesser known figure among Alliance members. Even before the recent transition in military leadership, Turkey's foreign policy had begun to tilt more towards the East.

As a columnist in Turkey's *Hürriyet* newspaper wrote in August 2011: "Policy differences between the AKP and the military are likely to melt away, with the two joining around a nationalist foreign policy line incorporating a powerful non-Western stance, which the AKP has implemented to make the country a regional power."

Many scholars, journalists and politicians who track Turkey are not alarmed by the country's seeming about-face. They insist Turkey is resuming its role as interlocutor

between the West and the Middle East, trusted in the Islamic world for its leadership hearkening back to the Ottoman Empire and in the West for being a democratic republic vying for membership in the EU.

Erdoğan, President Abdullah Gül and Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu have pursued what they describe as a "zero problems" policy with Turkey's neighbors. Not only has Turkey taken steps towards normalizing relations with historical rival Armenia, it has negotiated deals in Lebanon, sent provincial reconstruction teams to Afghanistan, promised cultural autonomy to Turkish Kurds and pressed for an end to Syria's dictatorship.

Turkey has welcomed Iraq's new democratic government and is drafting a free trade agreement with Baghdad. In a bid for EU acceptance, the country is striving to improve relations with Greece, including the opening of an international gas pipeline linking the two nations. In the summer of 2011, the government announced it would pay restitution to Armenian, Greek and Syrian Christians dispossessed of their churches, businesses and homes in the early days of

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The EU and Turkish flags fly in front of a mosque in Istanbul. Turkey has applied to join the EU but has yet to meet full requirements for membership.

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the republic, a decision encouraged by the European Court of Human Rights.

In September 2011, Turkey and the U.S. announced they would share leadership of the new Global Counterterrorism Forum, aimed at preventing violent radicalization in countries emerging from authoritarian rule in the so-called “Arab Spring.”

“Although on the surface, it looks like the country is abandoning western leanings, the reality is far more complicated,” scholar Fadi Hakura wrote in a story for London-based think tank Chatham House. “Following the end of the Cold War twenty years ago, some sort of re-alignment was inevitable. Turkey was bound to re-integrate economically and politically into the Middle East and Eurasia.”

But the AKP’s move toward greater civilian control of the military has created anxiety in one of the Islamic world’s most secular nations, where founding father Mustafa Kemal Atatürk installed a staunchly secular form of government in 1923 to replace the old Ottoman sultanate and caliphate.

Traditional turbans and head scarves were forcefully discouraged, and Atatürk adopted the Latin alphabet for a language that had previously used Arabic script.

Despite its reformist agenda that has helped modernize Turkey’s economy, the AKP appears to represent a culturally conservative force in a country that isn’t always tolerant of opposing views. Dozens of journalists have been jailed and accused of conspiring against the government, leading some European media outlets to accuse Erdoğan of “Putinism,” a reference to Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. “The dubious arrests have thrown further doubt on the extent of press freedoms in the EU candidate country,” *Der Spiegel* wrote after one of the latest series of journalist arrests in March 2011.

After winning a third term in office with the parliamentary elections of June 2011, Erdoğan’s immediate goal was to amend the Turkish constitution imposed by the military after the 1980 coup. He has spoken in favor of a system featuring a strong president similar to France’s instead of





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the largely ceremonial presidency now held by Gül. Should Turkey approve the new form of government – a move the EU generally supports – Erdoğan would likely stand for the presidency. Lacking the necessary votes to alter the constitution, the AKP will need to partner with other parties if it wants to complete the job by 2012.

As for Turkey's EU aspirations, the country began negotiating for inclusion in 2005, but as of 2011 had met fewer than half of the economic, political and legal credentials for membership. "Negotiations have been stalled for some time, with no real movement in more than a year," *Der Spiegel* wrote in the summer of 2011. Sticking points have included judicial reform, food safety, environmental policy and agricultural reform. In addition, the recent financial crisis in neighboring Greece likely reduced the EU's appetite for taking on new members, particularly those from the same region. Leading EU members such as Germany have proposed a "privileged partnership" status for Turkey shy of full membership. The sluggish fulfillment of its EU ambitions has likely led Turkey to seek greater economic integration with Eastern partners.

Former Turkish chief of staff Gen. İşik Koşaner, left, attends a wreath laying ceremony with Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan in late 2010. Koşaner resigned in mid-2011 to protest the Turkish government's arrest of military officers. Relatives of Turkish military officers arrested on suspicions of trying to overthrow the country's democratically elected government protest in 2011. Hundreds of the country's top Army and Navy officers have been charged with plotting a coup, charges some Turks insist are politically motivated.



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"This is most visible in the altering foreign trade picture," Chatham House's Hakura wrote. "In 2008 Turkey's trade with the EU dropped below fifty percent for the first time, while that same year Middle Eastern countries accounted for 8.7 percent of its imports and 19.3 percent of its exports – both record figures."

Another disagreement with the EU emerged in mid-2011, when Turkey threatened it would temporarily suspend relations with Brussels to protest Greek-controlled Cyprus' elevation to the rotating EU presidency in July 2012. Turkey occupies the northern part of Cyprus, and the EU has encouraged reunification of the Greek and Turkish sections of the island. Analysts and journalists suggest such disagreements are signs that Erdoğan's government is adopting a more activist foreign policy in the eastern Mediterranean, a supposition bolstered by the AKP's attempts to wrench greater control from the Kemalist military.

"In Turkey, the elected governments have never been the real power," Turkish newspaper editor Yasemin Çongar told *The Washington Post* after the chief of staff changeover. "That's what's changing now. It's kind of an unwritten law that they always abide by the military. It's the founder of the republic, guardian of the regime, guardian of secularism. Now it's changing a bit. But it's a very, very hard process." □