



# Turkey's military bows to the politicians

## KEY POINTS

- The decision of the Turkish military high command to resign en masse on 29 July is one of the most significant events in terms of civil-military relations in the country's history.
- The move confirms the dominance of the political class over the military in a country renowned for military interference in politics.
- Domestic civil-military relations should now be put on a firmer, more stable footing, although this may come at the expense of closer ties with the EU and NATO.

The resignation of Turkey's military high command on 29 July, including the chief of staff and commanders of the army, air force and navy, can be considered as the final step in the 'slow revolution' that Turkey's Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi: AKP) government, a coalition of conservatives, reformists and Islamists, has led against the secular military since coming to power in 2002.

This requires a fresh analysis of the military's role in the country's politics, and foreign policy including ties with NATO. In all these aspects, Turkey is entering a new era, marked by close co-operation between the military and the AKP.

### Kemalist military

In 2007, the AKP authorities initiated court proceedings in which they accused the military, alongside numerous academics, journalists, businessmen and jurists, of being involved in a coup plot against the government.

Four years and hundreds of arrests later, the Ergenekon case has yet to reach a verdict. The military has borne the brunt of these arrests. Altogether, around 200 officers remain in detention in connection with this alleged coup plot, and of the 374 generals and admirals in the military, 43 have been arrested. More specifically, around half of the navy's admirals

When Turkey's military high command resigned en masse in July, it was the culmination of a four-year campaign by the leading Justice and Development Party to gain political ascendance. *Soner Cagaptay* and *Ata Akiner* examine the political and military implications of the new order.

have been jailed. Moreover, all four-star generals of the air force have been linked to the case, despite doubts from military supporters and sympathisers about the strength of evidence against them. Turkey's military promotions board had to promote a three-star air force general to four-star rank during the biannual meeting of the board in early August, so they could then appoint him as the commander of the air force.

The high command was especially disturbed when on 5 July the media suggested that active duty generals and admirals who had been arrested in relation to the Ergenekon case, although not yet indicted, would not only be bypassed in their promotions but also forced to resign. Furthermore, on 29 July before the resignations of the high command took place, police arrested 22 additional officers, including seven generals, blocking their likely promotion. This appears to have been the last straw, and on 29 July the military bowed to the AKP's power.

Historically the most respected institution in the country and the king-maker in Ankara, the military has been losing prestige since the AKP came to power. Coup plot allegations unveiled by anti-militarist newspapers, including assertions by prosecutors that the military was planning to bomb Istanbul's historic mosques to precipitate a political crisis, have hurt the army's standing.

According to the global research project World Values Survey, in 1996, 94% of Turks said they trusted their military, while in 2011 the same polls show that only around 75% say they do.

Resigning just days ahead of the August promotions board, and hence forfeiting their vote in this body, the top commanders of the Turkish military implicitly caved into the AKP's power. The governing party now has the upper hand in Turkey's contentious civilian-military relations that the military previously enjoyed.

### Policy consensus

For the past decade, the military/AKP dichotomy has shaped most analysis on Turkey. Now, a new framework for analysing Turkish politics seems necessary.

Policy differences between the AKP and the military is 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. Accordingly, there is likely to be close co-operation between the government and the military on key foreign policy issues, ranging from Cyprus and the Syrian crisis to ties with Israel and NATO.

Despite previously showing a positive attitude to Cyprus, the AKP is now likely to confront the Greek Cypriots



on oil and gas exploration and drilling projects in the Eastern Mediterranean. Turkey objects to the Greek Cypriots proceeding with plans to issue licences to international companies for oil or gas exploration in the region, saying it violates international law. In a statement on 5 August, Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmet Davutoglu warned Greek Cypriots that if exploratory drilling went ahead, Turkey would react with the “necessary response” against such an action.

This recalcitrant tone on the Cyprus issue sits well with the military. Moreover, it would prove a further stumbling block to Turkey joining the EU. Not only would it provide ammunition to those countries, such as France, that object to Ankara’s membership, but rising tension with the Greek Cypriots, who will take over the EU’s rotating presidency in July 2012, could further harm Turkey’s EU negotiations process.

However, the drive towards EU membership has almost entirely died in Turkey: more Romanians (61%) support Turkey’s EU entry than do Turks (42%), according to a 2011 poll by Eurobarometer, part of the European Commission.

On a variety of other foreign policy issues, the AKP is likely to take the lead, with the military following a nationalist agenda. Turkey’s policy on Syria will be determined by the AKP, likely hardening along the way, with the military helping the execution of this policy. Meanwhile, the Syrian unrest should help align Turkish and Israeli threat perceptions. Nonetheless, relations with Israel, in a downward spiral since the 2010 flotilla incident, is likely to remain tense, with the Turkish government pursuing a policy of cold peace.

On the domestic front, too, there will be close alignment in the security realm. With attacks by the Kurdistan Workers Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan: PKK) increasing, the AKP and the new military will co-operate more closely against the group, including likely potential at-

## Turkish general staff: August 2011

### Chief of General Staff:

General Necdet Özel  
replaced General Isik Kosaner)

### Commander of the Land Forces:

General Hayri Kivrikoglu  
(replaced General Erdal Ceylanoglu)

### Commander of the Air Force:

General Mehmet Erten  
(replaced General Hasan Aksay)

### Commander of the Naval Forces:

General Emin Bilgel  
(replaced Admiral Esref Ugur Yigit)

tacks against the its bases in Iraq.

Given deteriorating relations between the AKP and the Kurdish nationalist Peace and Democracy Party (Baris ve Demokrasi Partisi: BDP), a group that openly sympathises with the PKK, the AKP will push back against the PKK, providing the military with political support to this end. As it leads on foreign policy issues, the AKP may even leave domestic security issues to the military, with the fight against the PKK becoming the military’s chief mission.

## NATO and the Turkish military

Turkey’s new chief of staff, General Necdet Özel, is the first head of the military since 1978 with no experience of dealing with NATO or United States training. The bond of trust sealed by Turkey’s participation in the Korean War resulted in Turkey’s membership in NATO in 1952, and subsequent close military co-operation with both Washington and NATO. Most of the officers who have been arrested, including the generals and admirals, have NATO experience and/or US training, whereas a diminishing number of those who are free have such experience.

More specifically, the navy’s and air force’s ties to NATO and the US might erode. With half of the admirals under arrest, the navy, which has the highest number of NATO-linked officers in its ranks relative to the other forces, will have to adjust to a new relationship with NATO and Washington.

This also goes for the air force, which has cultivated close ties with the US since Ankara and Washington started

to co-operate in building F-16 fighter planes in the 1980s. Now, though, all of Turkey’s four-star air force generals are out of mission. Therefore, candidates for leadership are limited to an ever-smaller purged pool of officers with less experience with NATO and the US, lacking the same level of trust with these parties.

The withering of NATO-trained leadership in the Turkish military could have ramifications for Turkey’s role inside NATO. What is more, with the government and military entering a period of close co-operation, this suggests that, were the AKP to launch more independent foreign policy steps, for instance, deciding to buy Russian weapons or invite the Chinese to a joint exercise in the Mediterranean, it may now find more supportive voices in the military.

## Conclusion

Since 2002, Turkey has been at a turning point in domestic affairs and foreign policy. While the country has been experiencing bumper economic growth and a gradual, if zigzagging, ascent to regional power status, the AKP has emerged as the dominant political force of the country. With the unceremonious removal of what was considered a political check and balance from politics, the AKP’s preponderance in Turkish politics may be reaching its zenith. ■

## Further Analysis

■ **Turkish government moves to strengthen hold on military**

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