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475 Riverside Drive · Suite 1274 · New York, New York 10115-1274
(212) 870-2500 · FAX: (212) 870-2202 · aps@psqonline.org · <http://www.psqonline.org>

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Turkey—The Return of the Reluctant Generals?

BEN LOMBARDI

In 1996 and 1997, the international community has watched political events in Turkey with interest and some dismay. The unusual attention to Turkish affairs is largely because of the electoral prominence of Islam, which has raised questions about the overall stability of the secular state founded by Kemal Ataturk. The West's image of Turkey is, to a large degree, grounded on Ataturk's vision of what his country should resemble—a program that has never entirely been achieved. Since the reforms of the late 1940s, Turkish democracy has repeatedly been confronted by the threat of political extremism, and the armed forces have as a consequence overthrown democratically elected governments on three separate occasions. Many of the conditions that prevailed at the time of the three coups appear to have returned. As Turkey is likely to continue to be confronted by these issues, direct intervention by the armed forces remains a possibility.

DOMESTIC POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS

Since 1924, the country's political life has been dominated by Kemalism, the philosophy of state put forward by Mustafa Kemal. Later awarded the title Ataturk (father of the Turks), he based his political views on a renunciation of the discredited Ottoman legacy. Ataturk believed that Turkey, having lost all of its non-Turkish possessions, needed to develop a nationalism that was secular and statist. Emphasis should be placed, he argued, on the homogeneity of the Turkish people.¹ National and religious minorities were not to be recognized by the state. Ataturk also believed that the transformation of Turkey from an Islamic state into a secular

¹ Ferenc A. Vali, *Bridge Across the Bosphorus: The Foreign Policy of Turkey* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971), 55.

BEN LOMBARDI is with the Directorate of Strategic Analysis in the Department of National Defence, Ottawa, Canada. He has written articles and occasional papers on Central and East European affairs.

republic was essential to the process of modernization. Authority should not, he asserted, rest on its connection to religious faith. The Caliphate and the Shariah, or Muslim holy law, were therefore abolished; education in public schools was to be strictly secular and focused on the pre-Islamic (pre-Ottoman) Turkish past; outward displays of religious faith were prohibited. By the mid to late 1990s, however, many of these Kemalist assumptions about modern Turkey's relationship with its Islamic heritage and Ottoman past appear to be undergoing a series of challenges.

Perhaps the most striking change has been the reemergence of Islam as a political force in Turkey. The noted analyst of Turkish affairs, Feroz Ahmad, has argued that this is a reassertion of the country's Islamic identity. Moreover, this development must be understood as "principally a cultured phenomenon [that] has few supporters who seek to return to the 'fundamentals of Islam' or to a state run according to the Sharia."² Kemalism, it would seem, was not entirely successful in severing the Turkish people from their cultural roots. Promoted through education, which was principally directed at cities and towns, secularism converted only a small minority. Ahmad observes that "this thin urban layer of Turkish society would see every manifestation of Islamic reassertion as reactionary and fanatical."³

Today, the focus of Kemalist concern is on the Islamic Welfare (Refah) party. However, Refah is only the latest incarnation of Islam in the political life of modern Turkey. Founded in 1983, Refah replaced an earlier Islamic organization, the National Salvation party (NSP) that had emerged in the late 1970s. The NSP rose quickly during a period of political change that saw the creation of a Turkish civil society in which organizations possessed an unprecedented level of autonomy from state interference. Asserting a strong, anti-Western viewpoint while espousing the modern goal of rapid industrialization, the NSP argued that "Turkey had a distinguished imperial past which was attributable to its success in combining military power with the building of an Islamic civilisation." Given that it was Westernization that had in its view weakened Turkish society, the NSP "promised a country which would be fully industrialized through economic cooperation with the Muslim world, the prerequisite of which was the return to Islam as the basis of social organization."⁴ Although it drew its support from economic groups on the margin of society, the NSP was sufficiently strong politically that it participated in three coalition governments between 1973 and 1978.⁵

International concern about the growth of Islam in Turkey first emerged as a reaction to the success of Refah in the 27 March 1994 municipal elections.

² Feroz Ahmad, "Islamic Reassertion in Turkey," *Third World Quarterly* 10 (April 1988): 752.

³ *Ibid.*, 755.

⁴ Binnaz Toprak, "The State, Politics, and Religion in Turkey" in Metin Heper and Ahmet Evin, eds., *State, Democracy and the Military—Turkey in the 1980s* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1988), 125.

⁵ Binnaz Toprak, "The Religious Right" in Irvin C. Shick and Ertugrul Ahmet Tonak, eds., *Turkey in Transition—New Perspectives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 230.

Under the charismatic leadership of a political veteran of the NSP, Necmettin Erbakan, Refah took 18.8 percent of the popular vote, more than double its previous total, and gained control of Turkey's two most secular cities, Istanbul and Ankara, twenty-nine other major cities, and 400 smaller towns. As a result, nearly two-thirds of the country's population now live under municipal governments run by Islamic fundamentalists.⁶ In some cities, such as Konya and Diyarbakir, Islamic laws have already been introduced, alcohol has been banned, brothels have been closed, and women have been "encouraged" to wear the chador. Strongly antiseccular, anti-American, and anti-European, a number of Islamic parties have declared their intention to work together in the future as a single political force to realize their common goal of preventing further Westernization.⁷ At a November 1994 rally in eastern Turkey, Erbakan addressed thousands of Kurds as the "descendants of Saladin," a hero to many Turks, and pleaded for their support "to save the world from European infidels."⁸ Under the direction of Refah, Turkish Islamists have followed a different path than their Arab counterparts who have evinced a greater interest in winning the hearts of the population rather than an electoral contest.⁹ Refah is apparently interested in winning both campaigns—for the state and its people—simultaneously.

The 24 December 1995 general election further confirmed Refah's strength. A May 1995 public opinion poll indicated that it had already increased its support to 22.8 percent, while the governing True Path party could muster only 14.3 percent.¹⁰ In the December vote, Refah emerged as the single largest political party in the new parliament with 21.4 percent of the popular vote, which translates into 158 seats in the 550-seat Grand National Assembly.¹¹ The result was not a complete success for Refah, for the two principal secular conservative political parties—Motherland and True Path—garnered 19.6 percent (or 132 seats) and 19.2 percent (or 135 seats) respectively.¹² Nevertheless, Refah's popular vote was substantially higher than in either the 1987 general election in which it received 7.2 percent or the 1991 election, when it obtained 16.9 percent of the electorate's support.¹³

⁶ John Darnton, "Discontent Seethes in Once-Stable Turkey," *New York Times*, 2 March 1995.

⁷ "Various Parties Form Islamic Alliance" (Ankara, *Turkish Daily News* in English, 17 June 1994) in Foreign Broadcasting Information Service—Western Europe (FBIS-WEU-94-120), 22 June 1994, 55–56.

⁸ "Islamic Party Leader Condemns "European Infidels" (Paris, *AFP* in English, 21 November 1994) in FBIS-WEU-94-226, 23 November 1994, 57.

⁹ In a recent analysis, Edward G. Shirley has written that fundamentalists in the Arab world "now aim at constructing an Islamic society independent of the state. Culture, not politics, is the first battleground." See "Is Iran's Present Algeria's Future?" *Foreign Affairs* 74 (May-June 1995): 23.

¹⁰ See "Poll Predicts Victory for Islamic RP in Election" (Ankara, *Turkish Daily News* in English, 18 May 1995) in FBIS-WEU-95-099, 23 May 1995, 42.

¹¹ James Wyllie, "Turkey Succumbs to the Lure of Refah," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, March 1996, 124.

¹² "RP and Secular Rivals Jostle for Power," *Turkish Daily News*, 26 December 1995; and Roman Rollnick, "Turkish Poll Keeps the West Guessing," *The European*, 3 January 1996.

¹³ Wyllie, "Turkey Succumbs to the Lure of Refah," 124.

During their election campaigns, both the Motherland and True Path parties encouraged a “Refah-phobia” amongst the Turkish electorate. Erbakan’s own speeches assisted in confirming some of the worst fears held by Kemalists about Refah. At the start of his campaign, the Refah leader promised to “work for a just order, to liberate Bosnia, Azerbaijan, Chechnya and Jerusalem.” Later, he noted his intention to create “an Islamic United Nations, an Islamic NATO and an Islamic version of the EU. We will create an Islamic currency.” On the day of the election, 24 December, he asserted that “Allah will make these elections the day of deliverance for all the people of our country.” Campaign rhetoric is almost always extreme: it is, after all, a means of defining political distinctiveness. Nevertheless, the common Islamic theme running through Refah’s message can only unsettle those committed to a secular state. It is reasonable to assume, therefore, that the ideological differences between Refah and its secular rivals have led many of the latter group to see the political divide in black and white terms.¹⁴ “Your decision,” then-Prime Minister Ciller noted in a speech the night of the election, “is to choose civilisation over darkness.”¹⁵

Regardless of Kemalist and Western misgivings, the results of the 24 December election have reinforced Refah’s legitimacy. President Demirel’s decision to grant Erbakan the initial opportunity to fashion a government underscores the new political role of Refah in Turkish politics. This heightened profile has not been seriously diminished by Erbakan’s failure to convince either of the leading conservative parties to support a Refah-led coalition. Nor was it undermined by the breakdown of talks with the Motherland party, when its leader, Mesut Yilmaz, was given the chance to form a government. Both these efforts failed because Erbakan was unable to provide his secular counterparts with an adequate guarantee that Refah would respect Turkey’s democratic and secular political order.¹⁶ That said, it is important to note that, unlike Algeria or Iran, Islam in Turkey is expressing itself along legitimate electoral routes. Indeed, prior to forming a coalition with the Ciller-led True Path party, Yilmaz stated:

The main reason why the meetings with the RP [Refah] culminated in disagreement was not a matter of who would hold the chair or the distribution of ministries. The main reason we could not reach an agreement during this long process since our first meetings is that we were not convinced that we would be able to assume such a joint responsibility and run such a coalition in harmony. . . . had we and the RP reached a stage in which we found common ground for conciliation, we would have assumed this responsibility and would not have paid the slightest attention to these campaigns. . . . We believe that the RP is a legitimate party which should be included in the efforts exerted in running Turkey.¹⁷

¹⁴ See “Ciller Cold Shoulders Erbakan,” *Turkish Daily News*, 12 January 1996.

¹⁵ “Turkish Firebrand Dreams of Islamic World Order,” *Turkish Daily News*, 24 December 1995.

¹⁶ Lowell Bezanis, “Turkish Coalition Government Talks Fail Again,” *OMRI Analytical Brief*, 26 February 1996, vol. 1, no.13.

¹⁷ “Turkey: Yilmaz Reports Failure to Reach Accord with RP” (Ankara, TRT Television in Turkish, 24 February 1996) in *FBIS-WEU-96-038*, 26 February 1996, 43.

This endorsement by the new prime minister suggests a recognition that despite its opposition status Refah will likely remain a force in Turkish politics for some time to come. In the near term, the governing Motherpath (Motherland and True Path parties) coalition will have to adjust its policies if it wants to undermine Refah's growing popular support.

Refah's rising political fortunes since 1994 are due to several factors. Turkey's rapid urbanization and the migration of large numbers of rural workers into its cities may be partly the cause for the changes underway. Inflation, rising unemployment, and a general despair about the future offers fertile ground for Erbakan's call for a "just order." An additional factor might also be, as Refah itself has claimed, the public's perception that ethnic Turks and Kurds can only be united under the banner of Islam, thereby rejecting the anti-Kurdish policies of Kemalism and the government. Erbakan has also been particularly strident in asserting Islam as a solution for the growing domestic political malaise, which he blames on Ankara's abandonment of its religious heritage.

The surge in support for Islamic parties likely also reflects the public's dissatisfaction with mainstream political parties, which seem ineffective at solving the country's problems and have been afflicted by numerous corruption scandals.¹⁸ Moreover, the death of former Prime Minister (1983–1989) and President (1989–1993) Turgut Ozal, who was known to be a devout Muslim, as well as a strong supporter of the NSP, effectively removed his Motherland party as a major competitor for Refah's supporters.¹⁹ Following his party's success in the 1987 general election, Ozal deemphasized his linkages with Motherland's Islamic wing, with the result that many Islamists came to regard both him and his organization as opportunistic.²⁰ The commitment of the Motherland party to a secular, Western-style political program was underscored by its inability to form a coalition with Refah following the December 1995 election. Indeed, several newly elected deputies of the Motherland party openly threatened to resign in protest to Yilmaz's effort (sincere or not!) to fashion such a coalition.²¹ Refah has capitalized on challenges to the Motherland's party's claim to be the successor of the NSP.

The West's policy during the civil war in Bosnia has led to a stronger identification of Turkish voters with the Islamic parties. Although only a minority (1 percent of the population) are of Bosnian origin, charges that the West has acquiesced to

¹⁸ Henry Kamm, "Local Elections in Turkey May Set Fate of Sagging National Cabinet," *New York Times*, 28 March 1994; Henry Kamm, "Islamic Party in Turkey Does Well in Local Voting," *New York Times*, 29 March 1994; "Secular Turks' Fears," *Balkan News and East European Report*, 3–9 April 1994; and "Turkey Eyes Islam," *The Economist*, 2 April 1994. Similar views have been expressed since the December 1995 election. See "Turkey: Poll on Political Leaders, Democracy," (Istanbul, *Hurriyet* in Turkish, 17 March 1996) in *FBIS-WEU-96-056*, 21 March 1996, 30.

¹⁹ Binnaz Toprak, "The State, Politics, and Religion in Turkey" in Heper and Evin, *State, Democracy and the Military*, 131.

²⁰ Feroz Ahmad, "Politics and Islam in Modern Turkey," *Middle Eastern Studies* 27 (January 1991): 18–19; and Ahmad, "Islamic Reassertion in Turkey," 767.

²¹ "Government Crisis Jolts Parties," *Turkish Daily News*, 13 February 1996.

the Bosnian Serbs' aggression and atrocities committed against the resident Muslim population generated considerable public sympathy in Turkey. A protest on 29 July 1995 against the Bosnian arms embargo drew a crowd of 50,000 in Konya, and many observers suspected that it was organized by a number of Islamic groups.²² It has even been suggested that Turkish support for UN peacekeeping efforts in Bosnia was undertaken "in the hope of stemming the rising tide of fundamentalism at home."²³ Since the Dayton Peace Accord (November 1995), Ankara has also assumed a leading role within the Islamic world in organizing assistance (money and arms) for Bosnia-Herzegovina. As one analyst noted, Turkey's Balkan policy is pragmatic, but "domestic politics, in which Islamic feeling plays an increasing part, also plays a role."²⁴

Whatever the reasons for Refah's success, it was the secularists who first opened the door to Islamic organizations. This began during the 1950s, when Prime Minister Adnan Menderes had governed with the support of traditional Muslim forces until his overthrow and execution by the military in 1960. Islamic political organizations then adopted a lower profile until the period prior to the third coup in 1980, after which politicians associated with Islamic parties were again arrested. In a marked contrast to the first two coups, in 1980 the importance of religion in the political life of the nation was proclaimed by military authorities.²⁵ The military leaders included obligatory religious teaching within the 1983 constitution and granted the right of sectarian teaching institutions to grant diplomas.²⁶ Undoubtedly, that approach was adopted in an effort to overcome the serious division that then characterized Turkish society and had left more than 5,000 people dead and 20,000 injured from 1977 to 1980. A combination of religion and nationalism was perceived as a means of linking both the moderate right and left wings of the Turkish political spectrum. Nevertheless, that policy let the Islamic genie out of Ataturk's bottle.

This conciliatory strategy was continued when the military rulers were succeeded by the Motherland party of the late Turgut Ozal, who united various political parties under his leadership.²⁷ In domestic affairs, Ozal's government and that of his successor Suleyman Demirel have also endorsed a religious presence in Turkish society and the development of an awareness of the people's Ottoman past. A former French ambassador to Turkey noted that Ozal promoted "a synthesis between Kemalism and what he considered to be the positive aspects of

²² OMRI Daily Brief, 31 July 1995.

²³ Ian Mather, "Turkey breaks Balkan Taboo," *The European*, (7–13 April 1994): 1.

²⁴ "Turkey: Balkan Agenda," *Oxford Analytica Daily Brief*, 13 February 1996.

²⁵ "Islamic Influence in Police Force Viewed" (Ankara, *Turkish Daily News* in English, 14 April 1994) in *FBIS-WEU-94-078*, 22 April 1994, 40.

²⁶ See Oklay Akbal, "Les militaires complices de l'islamisme: Les généraux ont trahi Ataturk au nom d'Ataturk," *Courrier International*, no. 232, 13–19 avril 1995. This article was originally published in *Milliyet*, an Istanbul newspaper.

²⁷ "Islamic Influence in Police Force Viewed" (Ankara, *Turkish Daily News* in English, 14 April 1994) in *FBIS-WEU-94-078*, 22 April 1994, 40.

Ottomanism. He believed that diversity in unity could contribute to strength and stability, just as it had under the Empire.”²⁸ Abandoning Atatürk’s brutal repression of religion, Ankara’s new attitude was summed up in Özal’s statement that “[t]he state is secularized, but I am not; I am a Muslim.”²⁹ As president, Demirel has also embraced this opinion, noting that secularism is not synonymous with atheism when 99.9 percent of the population are Muslims: “I think the application of secularism in the 1930s was a bit mistaken. People may have been satisfied with the application of secularism at the time. Some people may not have liked this, but we have to accept things according to the conditions of those times. There were claims that Islam was not an obstacle to development while secularism was seen as atheism. . . . Secularism is not against Islam.”³⁰ This outlook has given rise to a new dynamic in state-society relations, the result of which has been a deeply rooted re-Islamization of Turkey.

The process of re-Islamization is a very public one. In addition to mandatory religious lessons in publicly funded schools, the number of Islamic or Imam schools has sharply increased in the last decade.³¹ Indeed, since 1990, the budget of the Ministry for Religious Affairs has been larger than that of the Ministry of Education and Health.³² Ironically, the democratization of Turkish politics has also assisted in bringing Islam into the open as politicians have been required to address (or, and perhaps more accurately, play to) the religious aspirations of the electorate. In the public media, Islam has also assumed an important position. At the beginning of 1993, according to the English-language *Turkish Daily News*, “Turkey had no fewer than 290 publishing houses, 300 publications including four dailies, some hundred licensed radio stations and about 30 likewise unlicensed television channels, all propagating Islamic ideology.”³³

Even the economy has not been immune to these developments. The boom that Turkey experienced in the 1980s was fuelled largely by Saudi financiers, who, it is reported, gave preferential treatment to Islamic brotherhoods and

²⁸ Eric Rouleau, “The Challenges to Turkey,” *Foreign Policy* 103 (Summer 1996): 110. The nostalgia for the Ottoman period was not restricted to Özal. In the Turkish press, contributions debate the relative merits of various sultans. During the 1994 campaign, Refah also declared that it wanted to institute the “Ottoman tradition in municipal affairs.” However, they failed to explain what this tradition entailed. Ottoman has, in effect, become a metaphor for Turkey’s golden age.

²⁹ National Defense Academy, “Turkey: Regional Power,” *European Security—European Instabilities* (Vienna: 1993), 204. This chapter was based on an article by Christian Glatz published in *Österreichische Militärische Zeitschrift*, May 1992.

³⁰ “Demirel Cited on Islamic Factor in Turkey” (Ankara, *Turkish Daily News* in English, 21 April 1994) in *FBIS-WEU-94-083*, 29 April 1994, 54.

³¹ For a discussion of the problem posed by the growing numbers and heightened profile of Imam schools, see Cemal Subasi, “Imam Preacher Schools Aim for Government Power” (Istanbul, *Notka* in Turkish, 16–22 April 1995) in *FBIS-WEU-94-102*, 26 May 1995, 23–30.

³² National Defense Academy, “Turkey: Regional Power,” *European Security—European Instabilities*, 204.

³³ Rouleau, “The Challenges to Turkey,” 119.

organizations.³⁴ An Islamic business community has emerged, which some Turkish secularists believe actively assists Refah. Founded in 1990, the Independent Industrialists and Businessmen's Association (*Musiad*) draws its membership from all levels of domestic industry. Musiad actively seeks to support Koranic interpretations of economic and business life. In political affairs, there is a congruence of views with Refah in a number of areas, including relations with the European Union and NATO. Given the electoral strength of Refah, it is reasonable to expect that organizations such as Musiad will become more prominent.³⁵

Despite the increasing prominence of Islam in Turkish society and the growth in voter support for Islamic parties, most Turkish leaders remain cautious about sectarianism. In a 1992 interview, then Prime Minister Demirel rejected any concern about religious extremism in Turkey: "[a]s long as there is poverty, inequality, injustice, and repressive political systems, fundamentalist tendencies will grow in the world and find fertile soil for their development."³⁶ This understanding implies that the growth of an extremist Islamic presence in Turkish society is temporary and is dependent upon a failure of the modernization policies presently being implemented.³⁷ The question that naturally arises, therefore, concerns the degree to which the Turkish state can control the Islamic forces it has permitted to emerge. Demirel's belief that "secularism is the umbrella for freedom of religion and conscience in the Turkish Republic"³⁸ seems dangerously naive given the radical views of Islamic leaders like Erbakan. Relaxation of Ataturk's strict prohibitions on religious expression invites the possibility of determined antidemocratic groups purposefully misusing those freedoms. In the absence of clear electoral success, continued urbanization and the growth of Muslim political power further raise the spectre of political instability.³⁹ One Turkish daily warned that if Ankara does not realistically address the antiseccularist movements and "save the state sector from the increasing threat of fundamentalist tendencies . . . Turkey will inevitably resemble Algiers in the not-so-distant

³⁴ National Defense Academy, "Turkey: Regional Power," *European Security—European Instabilities*, 204.

³⁵ "Turkey: Islamic Business," *Oxford Analytica Daily Brief*, 3 April 1996.

³⁶ "Demirel Interviewed on Pan-Turkism, Karabakh" (Moscow, *Novoye Vremya* in Russian, 29 September 1992) in *FBIS-WEU-92-198*, 13 October 1992, 43.

³⁷ Demirel repeated these views in "Creating a Community of Equals," *Harvard International Review* (Fall 1992): 32–33.

³⁸ See "Demirel Cited on Islamic Factor in Turkey" (Ankara, *Turkish Daily News* in English, 21 April 1994) in *FBIS-WEU-94-083*, 29 April 1994, 54–58; and "Ciller Calls Western Reporting on State 'Biased'" (Vienna, *News* in German, 1 June 1994) in *FBIS-WEU-94-106*, 2 June 1994, 44.

³⁹ Erbakan has been careful not to call for the violent overthrow of the state. His wife, Nermin Erbakan, has not been so reticent: "There aren't twelve million inhabitants of Istanbul, nor the sixty million Turks, but one-and-a-half billion Muslims in the whole world who are waiting for us. I hope that, tomorrow, we will celebrate the revolution." Quoted in Oklay Akbal, "Les militaires complices de l'islamisme; Les généraux ont trahi Ataturk au nom d'Ataturk," *Courrier International*, no. 232, 13–19 April 1995.

future.”⁴⁰ Such an outcome seems at present to be unlikely. Nevertheless, in the hope of avoiding such a confrontation, which has the potential to be extremely violent, Turkish leaders may decide to adopt further Islamic slants to their policies.

It is still too early to be pessimistic about Turkey, although it seems clear that the country has begun to redefine itself by drawing on pre-republican traditions. Nevertheless, sectarian demands have begun to exacerbate general social unrest. Concern about just that scenario accompanied the outbreak of urban rioting in March 1995, when alleged Islamic fundamentalists attacked coffeehouses in Istanbul leaving at least fifty people dead.⁴¹ Demonstrations, organized to protest the attacks, led to clashes with police and security forces, with the result that violence soon spread to other cities, including Ankara. Publicly at least Turkish leaders refused to link the violence to domestic causes and, instead, then Prime Minister Ciller blamed “a very big multi-faceted provocation prompted by foreign circles,” warning Turkish citizens against both right- and left-wing extremism.⁴² This view was later repeated by a senior opposition member of the Grand National Assembly, who argued that the riots “had nothing to do with religious differences. We are seeing a social explosion, exploited by foreign powers.”⁴³ Other observers argued that, while the riots may have been triggered by Islamic fundamentalists, they were as much about the social malaise that presently holds Turkey in its grip.

ECONOMIC PROBLEMS

A major factor in magnifying social discontent in Turkey must be the country’s unstable economic situation. The German daily *Die Zeit* noted that for the Ciller government, 1995 “began with a catastrophe.”⁴⁴ That characterization was not an overstatement. In 1994, inflation reached 149.6 percent, while gross domestic product (GDP) fell by 6 percent and unemployment rose by a comparable figure.⁴⁵ By early 1996, the national debt, largely accumulated during the time when Ozal was premier and used to fund economic modernization programs, stood at U.S. \$67.8 billion.⁴⁶ Although this debt load was disguised for years by foreign investment flowing in to purchase treasury bills, political uncertainty has dissuaded

⁴⁰ “Islamic Influence in Police Force Viewed” (Ankara, *Turkish Daily News* in English, 14 April 1994) in *FBIS-WEU-94-078*, 22 April 1994, 40.

⁴¹ Jonathon Rugman, “Turkish Violence Spreads to Ankara,” *The Gazette* (Montreal), 15 March 1995.

⁴² Quoted in Suna Erdem, “Amid Turkey Riots, Ankara Warns of ‘Provocations’,” *Reuters News Agency*, 16 March 1995.

⁴³ Jonathon Rugman, “Violence a Chilling Reminder of 1980 Chaos, Coup,” *The Citizen* (Ottawa), 16 March 1995.

⁴⁴ Michael Schwelien, “Europa als Lebensretter,” *Die Zeit*, 27 January 1995.

⁴⁵ It is estimated that since 1994, 500,000 people have lost their jobs. See Birgit Cerha, “Madame le Premier Ministre est une piètre politique,” *Courrier International*, no.232, 13–19 April 1995, 11.

⁴⁶ “DYP Issues ‘Early Warning’ to Coalition Partner ANAP,” *Turkish Daily News*, 28 March 1996.

international money markets from continuing to favor Turkey. The failure to implement a tighter fiscal policy led to the major financial crisis of early 1994 and a need by Ankara to turn for assistance to the International Monetary Fund (IMF).⁴⁷

Economic problems are affecting stability in the political arena. By early 1995, the poor showing of the economy ultimately led Demirel to distance himself from Tansu Ciller, whom he once had actively supported. During February 1995 interparty discussions, held to form a new government, Demirel publicly stated that in lieu of early elections he was considering appointing another prime minister. Noting that it was difficult to describe "the government as successful after inflation exceeded 150 percent," Demirel later agreed to reappoint Ciller.⁴⁸ Early elections became necessary when the Ciller government lost its parliamentary majority in late 1995. Many in Turkey's political elite welcomed the December ballot. "With early elections," the president noted, "Turkey would be revitalized. The newcomers would tackle their jobs with enthusiasm."⁴⁹

Demirel's suggestion of political stagnation is valid. Ankara's capacity to promote domestic political harmony depends in part on its ability to manage the economy. However, the recognition of the problem by major political leaders does not mean a solution is in sight. Effective leadership has been dissipated by political infighting. The largest bloc of secularist Turkish voters remains as a consequence divided between the True Path and Motherland parties—a division due to differences over questions of leadership and, importantly, economic recovery policies. Recently, for example, Prime Minister Yilmaz commented that the Turkish economy is "sick." The implicit need for reform in Yilmaz's words drew an unexpected warning from his coalition partner, the True Path party, not to interfere with the "precarious balances" of the economy.⁵⁰

On 7 March 1996, the Yilmaz Government announced its program in the Grand National Assembly. It committed itself to reducing inflation to single digits within five years, with a target of 50 percent for 1996. However, even an agreement within the coalition does not guarantee a clear direction to Turkish economic policy. In the area of economic reform, particularly the effort to cut public expenditure, the government's hands are likely to be tied by its reliance in parliament on the Democratic Left party (DLP).⁵¹ Indeed, the new coalition was able to pass a necessary confidence vote in parliament only with the abstention

⁴⁷ Ziya Onis, "Turkey in the Post Cold War Era: In Search of Identity," *Middle East Journal* 49 (Winter 1995): 64–65.

⁴⁸ "Growing Rift between Demirel, Ciller Alleged" (Ankara, *Turkish Daily News* in English, 8 February 1995) in *FBIS-WEU-95-029*, 13 February 1995, 43.

⁴⁹ "Demirel Comments on Kurdish Issue, Elections" (Istanbul, *Milliyet* in Turkish, 2 May 1995) in *FBIS-WEU-95-089*, 9 May 1995, 53.

⁵⁰ "DYP Issues 'Early Warning' to Coalition Partner ANAP," *Turkish Daily News*, 28 March 1996.

⁵¹ "Turkey's Secular Coalition Gov't Pass First Test With Leftist Help," *New Europe*, 17–23 March 1996.

of the 80-deputy strong DLP faction.⁵² Given the intense personal rivalries within the leadership of the Motherpath coalition and its reliance on a political party that does not necessarily share its priorities, the stability of the Yilmaz Government is questionable.

Without new policies that would reverse the country's fortunes, the economic situation is likely to continue to provide fertile ground for Islamic political parties. There is, nonetheless, a need to recognize that the situation can worsen. One analyst has cautioned that "[o]n the way towards a cautious re-Islamization, a secular and modernistic, but still Islamic state can only be successful if economic success can be achieved fairly soon. . . . Without an economic upswing, a massive increase of radical and fundamentalistic ideas and structures must be expected, both in Turkey as such and in the republics of the former Soviet Union."⁵³

Rather than violently clashing with Turkish authorities, Refah has so far sought to address the worst effects of runaway inflation in what might be termed a social-democratic manner. Seeing that many of their constituents are unable to keep pace with rising prices, Refah-dominated municipal authorities have channelled efforts into ensuring housing and basic necessities for the disadvantaged in the cities. One senior Turkish journalist noted that, "If you can't pay your gas bill or your electric bill, they may call you in and discuss it and forgive it. Once they do that, you'll vote for Refah forever."⁵⁴ Such an approach not only alleviates misery, but also garners a broad-based grassroots support for the party.

THE KURDISH PROBLEM

The second source of discontent is Ankara's treatment of its Kurdish minority. Since 1984, Turkey has been waging what amounts to a civil war against Kurdish nationalism and, in particular, the Partiya Karkaren Kurdistan (PKK) or Kurdish Workers party. The PKK regularly engages in terrorist attacks against Turkish government targets, both military and civilian, and there is a strong suspicion that it has received support from Iran and Syria. A Socialist (possibly Marxist-Leninist) organization, it has grown from a handful of guerrillas to a major political force that Ankara believes could threaten the unity of the Turkish state.

Turkish opposition to the Kurds is based on the refusal by Ankara to recognize the existence of ethnic minorities within its borders. As a consequence, Ankara has refused to consider Kurdish requests for recognition as a national minority or for a degree of regional autonomy. Both Turks and Kurds have been taught

⁵² See "Turkish Economy May Not Find Relief under New Gov't," *New Europe*, 10–16 January 1996; and "Turkey: Economic Hurdles," *Oxford Analytica Daily Brief*, 18 March 1996.

⁵³ National Defense Academy, "Turkey: Regional Power," *European Security – European Instabilities*, 220.

⁵⁴ "Demirel Comments on Kurdish Issue, Elections" (Istanbul, *Milliyet* in Turkish, 2 May 1995) in *FBIS-WEU-95-089*, 9 May 1995, 53.

that they are the descendants of a single pure Turkish race; but the Kurds, isolated in the highlands of eastern Anatolia, lost their true language and identity. In 1983, during the rule by the military, Law 2932 was incorporated into the Turkish constitution. The clear purpose of this legislation was the assimilation of the Kurds into the Turkish nation, and it prohibited the use of Kurdish for use “in the expression and dissemination of thought.” This renewed offensive against Kurdish identity occurred at the same time as Kurds began to migrate into the Turkish urban centers. By the late 1980s, it was estimated that there were between 12 and 14 million ethnic Kurds living in Turkey, with 1.5 million in Istanbul and over one million in Izmir and Ankara.

The sudden death of Turgut Ozal in March 1993 removed from Turkey’s political stage the one figure believed by both sides capable of implementing a new policy based on innovation and compromise. Under Ozal, Kurdish newspapers were permitted, a Kurdish research institute in Ankara was founded, and Kurds were once again allowed to use their ethnic, as opposed to Turkic, names. Since then, the PKK has accused Demirel of offering nothing but words. The PKK proposal for a federal state structure that would permit a degree of Kurdish self-government has continually been rejected by Ankara. Some hope for a resolution of this dispute reappeared early in 1993, when Ciller suggested that a “Basque solution” might be applied to this issue, permitting limited self-rule, a Kurdish education system, and access to state-sponsored broadcasting.⁵⁵ These views were immediately denounced by much of the leadership of the True Path party, and she subsequently withdrew them. Both Demirel and Ciller increasingly permitted hardliners to set the parameters and the pace of Ankara’s Kurdish policy. As a result, the war resumed and reports indicate that up to 30 percent of the armed forces are now engaged in the struggle with the PKK.

A resolution to the Kurdish problem is as remote as ever. Turkish military incursions into Northern Iraq, twice in 1995 and again in early 1996, indicate that Ankara still possesses sufficient will to want to crush the PKK and other separatist sentiment. This is despite the costs to Turkey’s international public image. Alongside the longstanding European disquiet over Ankara’s Kurdish policies, most of the country’s Western allies condemned the March 1995 raid into Iraq, with Germany and the United States using especially harsh language.⁵⁶ Yet, it appears that Turkey sees no other approach to the Kurdish issue. While it is reasonable to assume that the military might be an effective weapon against

⁵⁵ At the time of her accession to the premiership, Ciller stated that she would “embrace” the twelve million Kurds “with a mother’s love.” See Birgit Cerha, “Madame le Premier Ministre est une piétre politique,” *Courrier International*, no. 232, 13–19 April 1995, 11.

⁵⁶ See *Keesing’s Chronicle of World Events*, April 1995, 40522; “Germany Suspends Remaining Military Aid to Turkey,” *This Week in Germany*, 31 March 1995; Steven Greenhouse, “US Support for Turk’s Anti-Kurd Campaign Dims,” *New York Times*, 29 March 1995; and Sami Kohen, “A Little Mideast War Tests Turkey,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 24 March 1995, 7. For the reaction of U.S. political leaders, see the *Congressional Record*, especially speeches by Representative Steny H. Hoyer of Maryland, 20 January 1995, E146 and Senator Dennis DeConcini, 2 March 1994, 52231.

insurrection and for the repression of territorially based ethnic groups, Turkey cannot use sufficient force and the Kurds are no longer so concentrated to accomplish these goals. Ankara's claim to be a European power also precludes the degree and types of violence necessary to solve the Kurdish question. On the other hand, a peaceful solution is equally improbable at this time. At its root, Kurdish autonomy is perceived to be a greater threat to Kemalism than even the re-Islamization of Turkish society. Atatürk's legacy of an all-embracing Turkish national identity would be effectively undermined if ethnic Kurds were granted special status.⁵⁷

The instability threatened by the Kurdish insurrection is not likely to go away and in all likelihood will increasingly complicate Ankara's domestic and external policy agendas. The drain on the Turkish treasury caused by the military operations in Eastern Anatolia will exacerbate the economic situation throughout the country and, as a consequence, will feed the growing body of disaffected—a stratum from which organizations like Refah draw much of their support. Refah also benefits from the government's policy in that many of the new urban dwellers are ethnic Kurds fleeing the heavy hand of military occupation or the fear of PKK retribution. Moreover, beyond the country's borders, particularly in Western Europe, observers watch with dismay as popular support for Islamic parties seems to be eroding Kemalism. Disgusted by Ankara's Kurdish policy and alarmed by the growing political profile of Islam in Turkish politics, European Union (EU) member-states are less inclined than ever to support the country's application for membership,⁵⁸ which undermines the Kemalist objective of recognition as a member of the Western world. With both its internal and external political orientations challenged, Turkey's stability seems very fragile indeed.

INTERVENTIONS BY TURKISH ARMED FORCES

If Turkey is entering a period of serious crisis, what mechanisms can it rely upon to maintain the modern republic? Some analysts have suggested that among national institutions, only the armed forces retain the public trust and respect. Since the end of single-party rule in 1950, they have intervened directly three times in the country's politics. In each instance, civilian control was restored after a transition period during which purported problems were addressed, justice meted out, new constitutions adopted, and economic growth accomplished. A short examination of each of the three interventions might offer some insight into what is the likelihood of another military coup.

⁵⁷ This point is made by Amatzia Baram of the University of Haifa. See Patricia Carley, *Turkey's Role in the Middle East; A Conference Report* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, January 1995).

⁵⁸ See Michael Binyon and Michael Kallenbach, "Iraq Attack Could Harm Turkey's EU Prospects," *The Independent*, 24 March 1995.

The 1970 Coup d'Etat

On 27 May 1960, General Cemal Gursel led a coup d'état that removed President Celal Bayar, Premier Adnan Menderes, and his cabinet from power and dissolved the parliament. Several members of the Menderes government were charged with various crimes ranging from misuse of public funds to abrogation of the constitution and high treason. Arraigned before a joint civilian-military tribunal, a number of those charged were sentenced to prison terms and former Premier Menderes was executed.⁵⁹

The 1960 coup occurred against a backdrop of escalating tension between the government and opposition that threatened to erupt into civil war. First elected in 1950, Menderes built on the liberalization measures that followed Atatürk's death in 1938, including a relaxation of laws that restricted the role of minorities and Islam.⁶⁰ Confronted with strong Kemalist opposition, the government repeatedly passed legislation designed to restrict freedom of the press to print material "designed to damage the political or financial prestige of the state" or "belittling persons holding official positions."⁶¹ By 1959, growing hostilities between government and opposition supporters fuelled by a polarization of public opinion led to violent clashes. In April 1960, a series of large-scale student demonstrations paralyzed university campuses and led to bloody confrontations with police forces. The imposition of martial law in Istanbul and Ankara on 1 May and the confinement of demonstrators in detention camps failed to restore civil order.

Although public unrest had been growing over the previous year, the trigger for the coup appears to have been the 1 May decision to use the armed forces in an effort to regain control of the situation.⁶² While some senior officers supported the government—Istanbul's martial law commander announced that his troops were authorized to fire on "even the smallest public assembly"⁶³—others were not united behind this policy. One week after the declaration of martial law, the commander of land forces, General Gursel, was placed on a compulsory leave of absence. In his farewell message, Gursel urged his troops to steel themselves against the "greedy political atmosphere now blowing through the country." Such sentiments were clearly shared by others as well. Former President and

⁵⁹ See *Facts on File* 20 (29 December to 4 January 196): 481.

⁶⁰ For the Menderes government's programs and the public reaction, see Keesing's Contemporary Archives, 27 May to 3 June 1950, 10725–10726 and 29 May to 5 June 1954, 13598–13598.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 2–9 July 1960, 17501.

⁶² In response to growing opposition, the government requested the Ankara garrison commander to draw up a plan for the defense of Ankara in the event of further unrest. According to contemporary reports, this plan was used as the basis for the military's seizure of power eleven days later. See *ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 17502. It is important to note, however, that while other senior officers did not support government policy, neither did they support the coup. Within the High Command, the chief of staff and Ankara's military governor were arrested the day of the coup. Although replaced, the Istanbul military governor was not detained.

Ataturk colleague, Ismet Inonu, warned that “an oppressive regime can never be sure of the army.”⁶⁴

In a 27 May broadcast, Gursel rejected dictatorship and announced that the government had been overthrown to help establish an honest and just democratic order and to give over the administration of the state into the hands of the nation. In a press conference on 28 May, Gursel emphasized that the “purpose and the aim of the coup is to bring the country with all speed to a fair, clean and solid democracy. . . . I want to transfer power and the administration of the nation to the free choice of the people.”⁶⁵ That same day, the military-dominated cabinet issued a policy statement promising respect for human rights and the abolition of all laws contrary to the Kemalist tradition.

The military dominated the political scene until October 1965. During that time, a series of conservative coalition governments led by former President Inonu held office. When free elections were once again permitted, Suleyman Demirel led his Justice party to victory. Demirel remained in office until the Turkish military forced his resignation in March 1971.

The 1971 Imposition of “Guided Democracy”

On 12 March 1971, the Demirel government was forced to resign after the commanders of the armed forces delivered an ultimatum to the president. Demanding a new government, Turkey’s military leaders asserted the urgent need for a “strong and capable government” that could redress the “anarchical situation” in the country. A refusal to accept this demand, they warned, would result in the armed forces taking over the administration of the country.

The decision by the military high command to impose its will on the government followed three years of political violence and growing economic problems. As early as 1968, demonstrations had become so disorderly that Demirel warned “enemies of the state” that the government would not “allow the destroyers of the legitimate order to strangle democracy in the streets.”⁶⁶ In the following three years, both left- and right-wing violence paralyzed Turkish politics and coincided with the deterioration of the economy. Although the government pursued policies that fostered an annual growth rate of nearly 7 percent, a serious balance of payments deficit had nonetheless emerged. Devaluation of the national currency took place in August 1970, but efforts to redress the economic fall were undermined by chronic inflation (78 percent from 1963 to 1968). Violent demonstrations by leftist forces and trade unions opposed to the government’s economic program began in June 1970 and led to the imposition of martial law in Istanbul.

The use of the armed forces to support an unpopular government was resisted by senior commanders. In July 1970, the air force commander, General Muhsin

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 17503.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 24637.

Batur, sent a memorandum to President Sunay advocating a program of socioeconomic reforms and warning of the consequences if the government was unable to maintain public order. In late November 1970, Batur submitted a second memorandum that called for greater powers for the National Security Council and the convening of a constituent assembly. One month later, chief of the General Staff, General Memduh Tagmac, used his New Year's address to issue a strong warning to "all who may try to destroy the national integrity of the republican regime and Ataturk's reforms." "The armed forces," he stated, "whose mission is to protect the country against any danger from without or within, will smash any action directed against the country." Tagmac added that the drift to civil war could still be stopped "by the responsible constitutional bodies."⁶⁷

Despite these warnings, the government seemed unable or unwilling to restore order, and the first three months of 1971 were characterized by a series of murders, bombings of government buildings, and reports of a planned leftist insurrection. However, the trigger for the military's ultimatum appears to have been the kidnapping of four American servicemen on 4 March and the violent clashes between students and police. On 12 March, Tagmac and the three service commanders handed a memorandum to the president which declared that "Parliament and the Government, through their sustained policies, views and actions, have driven our country into anarchy, fratricidal strife, and social and economic unrest; made the public lose all hope of reaching a level of contemporary civilization, a goal set by Ataturk; failed to realize the reforms stipulated by the [1961] Constitution; and placed the future of the Turkish republic in grave danger." It concluded by asserting that a "strong and credible government" was needed to "neutralize the current anarchical situation" and restore the state. After Demirel's resignation, the president publicly thanked the High Command, declaring that it had acted responsibly and he urged all Turks to support the new government.⁶⁸

Instead of imposing direct rule in 1971, the military leaders saw their role as one of guiding the Turkish democratic process. Formed after consultations with the leaders of the major political parties, the new coalition cabinet governed with the support (and sufferance) of the armed forces. Suppressing violence, it implemented a sweeping set of socioeconomic reforms similar to those urged by General Batur in his November 1970 memorandum. Furthermore, it introduced legislation to restrict those forces on both the left and right wings of the political spectrum that had advocated policies opposed to the spirit of Kemalism.

The 1980 Coup d'Etat

On 11 September 1980, the newly elected government of Demirel was overthrown. Five days later, Chief of Staff General Kenan Evran declared that the

⁶⁷ Ibid., 24638.

⁶⁸ It may be that the action by the service chiefs was less radical than the demands of lower ranking officers. On 16 March, it was reported that more than 200 officers, including four generals and an admiral, had been transferred from their commands or cashiered, fuelling rumours that support for a military coup d'etat was strong within the armed forces. See *ibid.*, 24640–24641.

military was responding to domestic political anarchy. He reinforced this message by laying out the new regime's program, which included civil order, national unity, and a secular state based on social justice and human rights. Planned months in advance, the coup was welcomed by most Turks as an answer to the preceding years of economic and political stagnation. The delay in overthrowing the government seemed to reinforce the claims of the Turkish military — the “reluctant generals” — that they were sincere in their desire to prevent civil war and preserve the Kemalist republic.⁶⁹

This coup was a response to an unstable political situation that the elected government seemed powerless to remedy. Extremists on both sides of the political spectrum, including Kurdish separatists, resorted to murder and other forms of violence. Prior to the coup, political leaders, rather than attempting to repress this antidemocratic behavior, reacted selectively: Demirel tended to excuse rightist violence, while Ecevit viewed leftist attacks as legitimate reactions to social injustice. Moreover, the economy, which had been expected to improve beginning in 1979, failed to do so. Instead, that year, inflation reached 117.4 percent, unemployment increased from 20 to 25 percent, and industrial production fell by almost 3 percent. The deteriorating economic situation meant that Ankara had to renegotiate agreements with the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the IMF, and was required to introduce measures — including liberalization of foreign investment laws — that many of Turkey's statist-minded leaders felt threatened national independence.⁷⁰

More immediate to the coup was the legislative incapacity of the Turkish parliament. Between January and August, the legislative process was derailed by an increasingly bitter dispute between Demirel's ruling conservative Justice party and the more left-wing Republican People's party led by Bulent Ecevit. Furthermore, concern was growing about the radical demands by both the Islamic fundamentalist National Salvation party (NSP), led by Necmettin Erbakan and the extreme right-wing National Action party of former General Alparslan Turkes. The perception that political squabbling was taking precedence over the national interest was reflected in parliament's inability after more than 100 ballots to elect a new president of the republic. Frustration levels among Turkey's political leaders led to a number of intrigues to replace the Demirel government.

The armed forces were also affected by these developments. Martial law, imposed in December 1978 in thirteen of Turkey's sixty-seven provinces, was extended a year later to nineteen provinces, and by September 1980 was in effect in twenty. While targets for extremist violence were generally police officials, judges, and prominent politicians, in the six months prior to the coup, members of the armed forces also became subject to a number of attacks. By early September 1980, it was estimated that approximately 25 percent of the 475,000-man army

⁶⁹ Kenneth Mackenzie, “Turkey Under The Generals,” *Conflict Studies*, January 1981, 3.

⁷⁰ *Keesing's*, 31 October 1980, 30541.

was involved in maintaining civil order, a role not welcomed by the High Command.

Moreover, as Mehmet Ali Birand notes, it would have been impossible to expect them “to remain immune to the divisions and stirrings which had rent asunder the fabric of civil society.” By early 1980, senior officers were becoming increasingly alarmed that the country’s political polarization had begun to “seep into” the armed forces. Younger officers and NCOs were especially vulnerable to the right- and left-wing ideological exchanges. According to Birand, many of the new NCOs were former student political activists who had enlisted to escape death threats. Once in uniform, they proceeded to propagandize their views within the ranks and among the junior officers.⁷¹

While the coup was a response to a number of issues, as early as 1975, many officers had become convinced of the unworkability of the existing constitution.⁷² It was not until December 1979, however, that Turkey’s senior military leaders began to organize themselves to take political action. They decided to adopt a similar approach to that employed in 1970. On 27 December 1979, the High Command sent a letter to the president urging the country’s leaders to “seek solutions and take measures jointly within an Atatürkist national perspective and within the current parliamentary democratic regime.”⁷³ On 1 January 1980, a letter from General Evren was released to the public urging the formation of a broadly-based coalition government and parliament’s speedy passage of antiterrorist measures. A week later, Evren published a list of over sixty political demands that the armed forces felt were necessary—demands that Demirel accepted but was subsequently unable to legislate because of the continuing partisan squabbling in the legislature.⁷⁴

Throughout the ensuing nine months, a sense of crisis took hold of Turkey’s political system, although the trigger for the coup appears to have been the fear of left-wing and Islamic extremism. Negotiations between Ecevit and Erbakan raised the fear of an anti-Western, pro-Moslem government. On 6 September, Erbakan attended a public rally of Islamic fundamentalists at which he called for the restoration of the Shariah. The next day, Ecevit gave a speech to a trade union gathering in which he urged the members to take violent action if they felt injustice existed. The government seemed powerless to respond to these provocations. On 7 September, Evren and the four service commanders decided that they would overthrow the civilian government on 11 September.

The Turkish military perceived their role as custodians of national legitimacy, restoring public order while preparing the country for a transition to a functioning

⁷¹ Mehmet Ali Birand, *The General’s Coup in Turkey—An Inside Story of 12 September 1980* (London: Brassey’s, 1987), 62.

⁷² Mackenzie, “Turkey Under The Generals,” *Conflict Studies*, January 1981, 6.

⁷³ For a complete text of the letter, see Birand, *The General’s Coup in Turkey*, 100.

⁷⁴ Mackenzie, “Turkey Under the Generals,” 13.

democratic system.⁷⁵ With little resistance, the armed forces took administrative control of the state through a five-member National Security Council (NSC) and appointed a civilian cabinet. Martial law was extended to all sixty-seven of Turkey's provinces. In an effort to clean-up Turkish politics, the military also ensured that those they regarded as accessories to the problems leading to the coup were no longer able to influence events: a 1981 decree by the NSC prohibited persons, such as Demirel and Ecevit, from participation in politics. The transition to civilian rule began when a new constitution was accepted by a popular referendum in 1982. The end of military rule came on 6 November 1983, when a general election yielded a victory for the Motherland party, with Turgut Ozal becoming prime minister.

THE ARMED FORCES AND THE CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL SCENE

This brief examination of the three coups suggests that the Turkish armed forces have intervened when either of two conditions prevail. The first involves threats to the legitimacy of Kemalism as the state ideology. Defense of Kemalism does not imply that Turkey's military leaders are necessarily supportive of democracy as a form of government. Under Ataturk, and until the democratic reforms of the late 1940s, Kemalism represented a form of authoritarianism. The military is, nevertheless, sensitive to threats directed at Kemalism, since that ideological framework is their source of legitimacy. In other words, the system of values inculcated by the armed forces is deemed to be inseparable from Ataturk's conception of the secular state. When those ideals have been threatened, or public order threatens the stability of the Kemalist republic, senior military officers have felt it necessary to intervene.

Defense of Kemalism is perhaps the most obvious impetus, and in all three coups public disorder suggested a broader political clash was in the offing. In 1960 and 1971, the differences between the government and opposition, and among the various opposition parties, appeared to be leading to anarchy. In 1980, the political elite was once again divided and incapable of governing effectively. The result was that a growing threat of insurrection by forces inimical to Kemalism, both Islamic and socialist, was halted by the coup. The armed forces appear to have seen their role as filling a void, a situation created by the incapacity of the otherwise legitimate authorities. To this day, public opinion holds that the military is the only remaining Kemalist institution.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Evren kept a diary beginning in late December 1979. The entry for 3 January is: "Returned from the weekly meeting with the President. Told me that Demirel was very dejected upon receiving the letter and contemplated resignation. I said, in return, that the letter wasn't designed to change the government or cause a political crisis. It wasn't addressed specifically to this government. I said that the intention was to alert all political parties, including the one in power, as well as all constitutional bodies." Quoted in Birand, *The General's Coup in Turkey*, 110.

⁷⁶ This point is made by Michael Schwelien, "Europa als Lebensretter," *Die Zeit*, 27 January 1995.

The second cause for intervention appears to represent a rejection of the government's use of the armed forces to support explicitly partisan political objectives rather than the national interest. That military leaders have sought to avoid any measure of association with partisan politics fits well with the institution's image of its own place in Turkish society. Enjoying broad public support, the armed forces clearly have nothing to gain by becoming involved, except in the most exceptional situations, with the questionable antics of daily political life. The claim to being the custodians of national legitimacy could not be upheld were they to play an active political role. This factor was most clearly evident in the 1960 coup, when Menderes attempted to rely on martial law as a means of governing. Nevertheless, both the other coups were also heavily influenced by a growing concern that the armed forces were being drawn into partisan politics. In 1971, for example, only one month after the imposition of martial law in Istanbul, General Batur submitted his first memorandum to the president. The coup was launched six months later after two further, and increasingly explicit, warnings by military authorities. Although to a lesser degree, the 1980 coup was also presaged by a similar concern, expressed in reaction to the targeting of military officials by the PKK and the onerous demands of martial law.

Is it likely that the military will again intervene in Turkish politics? The factors that led to the three coups have clearly reemerged. The growing political prominence of Islam and the re-Islamization of Turkish society threatens to undo much of Ataturk's legacy that the armed forces have in the past sworn to protect. Yet, it must be recalled that the army leaders themselves gave a gloss of respectability to political Islam shortly after the 1980 coup. Nevertheless, that attitude may not be as acceptable in today's political climate.

Some observers of Turkish affairs have observed a growing concern, shared by a large segment of the officer corps, that Islamic fundamentalist groups have penetrated "Ataturk's" army.⁷⁷ This issue was first aired by Evren in January 1987, when a large number of cadets at military academies were expelled for Islamic activities.⁷⁸ In fall 1994, fifteen navy personnel were suspended and charged for similar offenses.⁷⁹ The new chief of the General Staff, General Ismail Hakki Karadayi, is reputed to be extremely intolerant of any Islamic presence in the armed forces. Since Karadayi assumed command in late 1994, several officers and NCOs have been removed from the military's ranks. In December 1994, thirty-five officers were forcibly retired "for their reactionary activities." In December 1995, a further fifty officers were dismissed when it was discovered that they had actively engaged in proselytizing fundamentalism.⁸⁰ The govern-

⁷⁷ "Differences between Ciller, Chief of Staff" (Istanbul, *Ozgur Ulke* in Turkish, 4 January 1995) in *FBIS-WEU-95-007*, 11 January 1995, 71.

⁷⁸ Feroz Ahmad, "Islamic Reassertion in Turkey," *Third World Quarterly* 10 (April 1988): 751.

⁷⁹ See "Religious Radicalism Infiltrates Turkish Armed Forces," *International Defense Review* 2 (1995): 9.

⁸⁰ See "Fundamentalist Personnel Withdrawn from Active Duty" (Istanbul, *Milliyet* in Turkish, 5 December 1994) in *FBIS-WEU-94-238*, 12 December 1994, 70.

ment's desire not to alienate Islamic voters has not swayed the military from this policy. Indeed, it is reported that surveillance of "religious officers" was continued by personal order of Karadayi, contrary to former Prime Minister Ciller's request not to do so.⁸¹ Moreover, in early 1996, both the armed forces and Interior Ministry ordered officers "to stay away from mosques used by soldiers, and to pray either at home or in public mosques, but never in uniform."⁸²

The incapacity of the government to formulate effective economic policy continues to undermine civil and political stability. The former Ciller government's half-hearted effort to reform the economy and the questionable stability of the new Motherpath coalition suggest that little will be accomplished in the near term. Given its hostility to Ankara's Kurdish policy, it is also likely that the European Parliament will continue to vex relations between Europe and Turkey. The hoped for growth in Turkey's European exports will probably be adversely affected, as will the revenues from the transit of oil, a project still mired in the politics of post-Soviet Central Asia.

Despite these factors, there is another element that Turkey's military commanders must also consider prior to directly intervening in the country's politics. The end of the cold war has altered the geopolitics of the Near East. Turkish commentators are well aware of this and have argued that Turkey is no longer as important an ally as it was during the West's confrontation with the USSR. If this is true, and the matter is debatable (one need only examine current U.S. attitudes toward Turkey to see the varying perspectives), the question of the international community tolerating the overthrow of a democratically-elected government is worthy of consideration. In 1991, the West supported the coup in Algeria in an effort to prevent Islamic fundamentalists coming to power through the ballot box. Nevertheless, there is now a growing belief that military rule there will not stop the Muslim tide and that the West's interests are better served by arriving at a *modus vivendi* with fundamentalism. Fear of replicating the Iranian revolution and the intolerance of the Western liberal media and elite opinion for undemocratic practices have generated a revulsion for even pro-West military regimes. Turkish generals must, therefore, consider a paradox—the possibility of international isolation fomented by Western states as a consequence of seeking to save Ataturk's republic. After all three previous coups, the West responded quickly by recognizing the military authorities as the new government in Ankara. It is not clear that the same alacrity would, if at all, accompany another coup.

Even if the leadership of the Turkish armed forces does not yet believe that the conditions are ripe for directly intervening in the country's politics, the discussion of the possibility of another coup is in the political wind. On 3 January

⁸¹ "Difference between Ciller and Chief of Staff" (Istanbul, *Ozgur Ulke* in Turkish, 4 January 1996) in *FBIS-WEU-95-007*, 11 January 1996, 70.

⁸² Celestine Bohlen, "Turkish Army in New Battle In the Defense of Secularism," *New York Times*, 30 March 1996.

1994, a warning letter signed by “Ataturkist officers” was sent to the cabinet and to all members of parliament. Stating that “the secular Turkish Republic . . . has been coming under major threats recently,” the letter noted that “Ataturkist officers, who are duty bound to protect and defend the Republic” were seriously “perturbed.”⁸³ Most commentators have dismissed this letter as not being the work of senior military officers. Nevertheless, in early 1995, Mesut Yilmaz noted that the state of the country was meeting all the criteria for a coup and added a warning: “If Turkey holds a two-round election this year, there will be no military coup of any sort; but if they keep up this gridlock and “me-you” squabbling, they will be the ones asking for a coup.”⁸⁴ This concern is probably well founded. The three months it took to create a new government following the December 1995 election underscores the types of problems Yilmaz identified.

Naturally, the Turkish High Command is not unaware of what is happening. In an interview with retired General Kenan Evren, the leader of the 1980 coup stated the willingness of the army to intervene if Kemalism were seriously threatened: “If a danger should threaten to alter completely the Republic and its character, our reaction will be legitimate. In such a case, one abandons the principle of keeping the army out of politics. If a system based on the Shariah is advanced, even by democratic means, the Turkish armed forces would know not to remain spectators.”⁸⁵

It is not coincidence, therefore, that Karadayi chose the day before the 24 December 1995 general election to issue a veiled warning to Turkish leaders: “the Turkish Armed Forces are the most effective guarantor of the republic in Turkey, which is a secular, social and lawful state.”⁸⁶ By early January 1996, the president was made aware of the “deep concern” of military commanders about Refah’s electoral performance. Having twice been toppled by coups, Demirel was thereby prompted to issue a public statement on 5 January 1996 in which he advised the armed forces that, “there is no need to fear or feel concern. You may dislike or regret the outcome of the election, but you should act in accordance with its consequences . . . Therefore, acting with suspicions and prejudice could threaten peace in society. Let us believe in ourselves and our state.”⁸⁷ Later, in a March 1996 interview, Demirel stated that, while there was no evidence of military intervention in the discussions leading to the formation of the Motherpath

⁸³ “Coup Rumors Abound After Ataturkist Officers’ Letter” (Istanbul, *Yeni Gunaydin* in Turkish, 5 January 1995) in *FBIS-WEU-95-006*, 10 January 1995, 60.

⁸⁴ See “Politicians Said Expecting Military Coup” (Istanbul, *Milliyet* in Turkish, 17 January 1995) in *FBIS-WEU-95-030*, 14 February 1995, 42.

⁸⁵ Quoted in Oklay Akbal, “Les militaires complices de l’islamisme,” *Courrier International*, No. 232, 13–19 April 1995.

⁸⁶ “Chief of Staff Warns of ‘Reactionary Elements’” (Istanbul, *Sabah* in Turkish, 23 December 1995) in *FBIS-WEU-95-247*, 26 December 1995, 27.

⁸⁷ “Demirel Told of Military Concerns About a Welfare-led Government,” *Turkish Daily News*, 9 January 1996.

coalition, he nonetheless told the chief of the General Staff that there was a “need to remain calm”⁸⁸

Despite concerns by Turkish policy makers, the end of the cold war has not reduced the geostrategic importance of Turkey, even if the ensuing complications of the new era have focused the attention of the Western powers elsewhere. Nevertheless, if a sustained focus on Turkish affairs is not forthcoming, the West may be confronted with a situation in which failure to comprehend the complexities of Turkey’s internal political dynamics will lead to surprises for policy planners in Western foreign and defense ministries. All seem to be setting the stage for a return to military rule. As all of the causes—ineffective political leadership, the growing challenge of Islam, economic malaise, and PKK terrorism—for the three military interventions in the past figure prominently in Turkey today, one of these surprises could very well be another coup d’état.

POSTSCRIPT

The current turbulence in Turkish politics means that analysis is always being superseded by the latest events. The thesis and conclusion of this article nonetheless remain valid. Since this article was written, perhaps nothing has so shaken the Kemalist elite in Turkey as the accession of Erbakan to the premiership. After six months of wrangling among political leaders, in June 1996 Refah and True Path agreed to govern together. Their program is a curious blending of Refah’s Islam-based social justice and closer relations with the Muslim world, alongside True Path’s commitment to Western values and the country’s long-standing alignment with NATO, Europe, and the United States.

Since assuming the reins of power, the Erbakan government has displayed a relatively moderate outlook. An early decision by the coalition to increase public sector wages (by 50 percent) earned it some public support while seriously threatening the economic recovery of the past year. However, evidence of pragmatism might not indicate any abandonment by Erbakan of his Islamist principles or the political objectives that he has long espoused.⁸⁹ Certainly, at the municipal level, Refah mayors have not hesitated to impose Islamic guidelines when they had the power to do so. In Erbakan’s home-town of Konya, where Refah has governed since 1989 and garnered 41 percent of the vote in the 1995 municipal election, alcohol is prohibited, women’s dress regulated, new mosques constructed, and recently several Western films were banned.

The Refah-True Path coalition agreement has a duration of four years. It is interesting to note that in the distribution of cabinet responsibilities, Erbakan and Refah have acquired control over most of the government departments (housing, public works, highways, and family affairs) directly involved in the disbursement of monies for public welfare. The True Path party retains control over the Finance,

⁸⁸ “President Suleyman Demirel,” *Turkish Daily News*, 15 March 1996.

⁸⁹ See the interview with Erbakan in *Der Spiegel*, 17 June 1996.

Defense, and Foreign Ministries, in addition to the more controversial Religious Affairs portfolio. If Refah's public support grows, Erbakan might be inclined to seek a new mandate at the end of the initial two years thereby ending the coalition. Should Refah find sufficient electoral support to govern on its own, the political moderation it has so far exhibited might well disappear. At present, it is extremely unlikely that Refah could win a majority in a new general election, as the secularist forces are too strong. However, it is likely that Refah will see its support grow should the coalition provide good government and offer some redress to the social ills in the country.⁹⁰ So far, neither of these goals has been accomplished and corruption in government is a more pressing public issue than ever before. That said, Refah's future influence should not be underestimated, as only a year ago most analysts regarded an Erbakan government as improbable.

Reports suggest that there is considerable hostility between the two coalition parties and their leaders. Nevertheless, it is strongly believed that Ciller is continuing to support Refah in order to prevent a parliamentary inquiry of corruption charges against her. If this is true, True Path's support will only last as long as she retains authority in the party. Cracks are beginning to appear; however none of these challenges has yet been sufficient to undermine her leadership.⁹¹ Refah, for its part, continues to push an agenda laden with political symbolism. In late 1996, Erbakan urged the building of mosques in prominent Istanbul locations and stated he was prepared to introduce legislation to permit female civil servants to wear head scarves.

The Kemalist reaction to Refah's efforts has invariably been hostile. Reports suggest that the armed forces are keeping a close watch on the direction the government takes. Evidence of this concern can be found in the response to a political rally convened in the city of Sincan in early February 1997. The morning after a speech by the Iranian ambassador calling for the reimposition of the Shariah, the military diverted a column of tanks through the core of that city.⁹² The mayor of Sincan was subsequently arrested and the Iranian ambassador expelled. Given the military reaction to a similar event in 1980, the meaning of the army's message was not lost on Erbakan.

Since Refah first came to power, the chief of the General Staff has repeatedly declared that the armed forces will not allow the secular state to be dismantled.⁹³ At the same time, senior military commanders have declared that a military coup

⁹⁰ See "Erbakan Says Gov't Keen to Probe Security Scandal," *New Europe*, 1–7 December 1996; "Erbakan's Comments on 'Sacrifice Hides,' Mosques" (Istanbul, *Türkiye* in Turkish, 5 February 1997) in *FBIS-WEU-97-026*, 5 February 1997; and Stephen Kinzer, "The Islamist Who Runs Turkey, Delicately," *New York Times Magazine*, 23 February 1997.

⁹¹ "Ciller Warns Deputies to Keep Quiet on Coalition's Future," *Turkish Daily News*, 11 April 1997.

⁹² "Sincan Meeting Seen Angering Military Forces" (Istanbul, *Hürriyet* in Turkish, 4 February 1997) in *FBIS-WEU-97-024*, 4 February 1997; and "Tanks Roll Through Sincan in 'Show of Strength'" (Istanbul, *Hürriyet* in Turkish, 5 February 1997) in *FBIS-WEU-97-024*, 5 February 1997.

⁹³ Umit Enginsoy, "Islamic Rift in Turkey Will Deepen," *Defense News*, 10–16 March 1997.

will not occur.⁹⁴ They have rightly argued that were the military to overthrow the government, Turkey's prospects of membership in the EU would be irreparably damaged. Nevertheless, throughout the first half of 1997, there were very real concerns that the military's patience with the government was wearing thin and that a coup was in the offing. Indeed, on 28 February 1997, the National Security Council (MGK), which is dominated by the armed forces, demanded that Erbakan curtail the "tide of radical Islam."⁹⁵ It is too soon to predict the outcome of this latest intervention, but the Turkish media, recalling the events of 1971, referred to the outcome of the MGK meeting as a "soft coup."^{96*}

⁹⁴ "Former Army Chief Rules Out Coup d'Etat" (Milan, *Corriere della Sera*, in Italian, 24 February 1997) in *FBIS-WEU-97-036*, 24 February 1997.

⁹⁵ See *Turkish Daily News* from 28 February until 15 March 1997. Numerous articles on the growing tension between the government and the military, and the possibility of a coup, were printed.

⁹⁶ "Top Generals Stage 'Soft Coup,'" *New Europe*, 9–15 March 1997.

* This article expresses only the author's opinions and should not be construed as in any way representing the policy or views of either the Department of National Defence or the government of Canada. I wish to thank Pierre Allard, Leanne Fischer, and Michael Margolian for their comments on earlier drafts of this article.