

In wake of US reprimand

## Threat of military coup grows in Turkey

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Just a few weeks after US Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz criticised the Turkish military for failing to veto the elected civilian government's position on the war in Iraq, there are growing concerns in Ankara about a possible military coup.

In mid-May, Turkish newspapers published reports on a study made by the British think tank, International Institute for Strategic Studies, which stated that the army would overthrow the Justice and Development party (AKP) government of Prime Minister Recep Tayip Erdogan should it undertake measures backed by Islamic fundamentalists. The newspapers reported that dissatisfaction with the government is especially pronounced amongst young army officers, who traditionally regard themselves as the guardians of secular society.

A few days later, a confidential letter to Erdogan from General Tuncer Kilin, a member of the powerful National Security Council, was published that made clear the army is motivated less by the issue of secularism and far more by fears of too much democracy. In his letter, the general declared his opposition to any change in the notorious Article 8 of the anti-terror laws, which provides for harsh punishment of "crimes of conscience". He also warned against allowing foreigners to observe elections, any licensing of a private television channel for Kurds and any change to an existing law that allows the military-dominated Security Council to send a representative to meetings of the body supervising the media (RTÜK). It has been suggested that the government itself leaked the letter to the press in order to make public the views of the general.

The response by the military was immediate. Army chief of staff Hilmi Özkök spoke in person to Prime Minister Erdogan and read him the riot act. Erdogan sought to play down the conflict. The government and the army work together in "complete harmony", he stated; any other suggestion is a malicious invention of the press,

which is "jealous of the beautiful developments in the country". After indications that the army would not comment on his version of the talks, Erdogan declared with embarrassment that the chief of staff would "make the necessary statement at an appropriate time".

In fact, just one week later, General Özkök convened a press conference at army headquarters for a group of hand-picked journalists, excluding representatives of left-leaning, Islamic or Kurdish newspapers. The choice of journalists was subsequently reflected in the newspaper reports and commentaries, which were then taken up by most western media sources.

Fikret Bila commented in the May 28 issue of the *Milliyet* newspaper: "We saw recently that we can't achieve success in the foreign policy arena without TSK (Turkish Armed Forces) support. In order not to face this problem again, Turkey shouldn't sacrifice its economy or military through domestic disputes. Guarding against this is mostly the duty of our political leadership."

This oblique comment referred to the Turkish parliament's decision to reject a US demand for permission to deploy its troops on Turkish soil in preparation for invading Iraq. It was this vote, reflecting in a distorted fashion Turkey's overwhelming popular rejection of the Iraq war, that inspired Wolfowitz's criticism of the Turkish military. The Pentagon's number two man said of Turkey's generals: "For some reason they did not take the powerful leadership role on this issue which we expected of them."

It is necessary to read between the lines in order to understand the message from Bila, who is merely repeating the views of the generals and the US: When Washington decides on its next invasion—whether it be Iran or Syria—it can rely on the mercenary support of the Turkish army, irrespective of any democratic considerations or displays of opposition on the part of the Turkish people.

The majority of the Turkish and international media have gone to some lengths to play down any fears of the military seizing power. According to the *Washington Post*, Özkök had “pointedly rebutted” any fears of a coup and assured the press that any differences “between the army and the government would be resolved in the appropriate constitutional Turkish institutions”. The general had simply expressed his “concern” that the AKP has installed many of its own supporters in state positions—a practice that is as commonplace in Turkey as anywhere else in the world.

Özkök went further, however. He made clear that despite calls for reform, the military had no intention of surrendering its role. As prerequisite for membership of the European Union, the EU has demanded a reduction in the influence of the army in Turkish politics—in particular through its role in the National Security Council. Özkök also made a point of emphasising that dissatisfaction with the government was not just limited to young officers—in fact all ranks were “sensitive” on this point.

According to a report in the *Guardian* newspaper, Özkök recalled the fate of the government of the Islamic Welfare Party (RP) led by Necmettin Erbakan. In 1997, this government was overthrown by the army in a “bloodless coup”—the fourth such military overthrow in as many decades—after establishing relations with Libya and Iran. Erbakan was subsequently sentenced to jail and banned from taking part in political life. His party was made illegal. Many AKP deputies, including Erdogan, are former members of the RP.

According to Özkök, the coup at that time was a matter of “cause and effect”. He went on to say: “When the cause is there then the effect will also be there.” When asked whether this meant that the Turkish army was prepared to carry out a similar intervention in the country’s political life, he refused to elaborate.



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