Turkey: military's nationalist campaign conceals rapprochement with US

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During the past seven weeks a wave of chauvinism has swept through Turkey. Initially aimed against the Kurds, its real target is the AKP (Justice and Development Party) government of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and its orientation towards membership in the European Union (EU). The nationalist hysteria has not emerged spontaneously from the population, but has been manufactured by a faction of the state apparatus, especially the military and security forces, supported by organized fascistic bands.

The campaign was triggered by an event during the Kurdish New Year's celebration in March. In the city of Mersian, some Kurdish children tried to burn a Turkish flag at the fringes of the festivities. They had neither support nor success, and were immediately arrested by police.

The episode went largely unnoticed, until the general staff of the armed forces issued a strongly worded statement two days later, denouncing it as an act of "treason" by "so-called citizens." The army would stand ready to "fight until the last drop of blood to protect the country and its flag," the statement added. President Ahmet Necdet Sezer also condemned the incident. The leadership of the University of Istanbul published a statement in major newspapers declaring its "disgust" over the incident. All well-known Kurdish nationalist politicians distanced themselves from the attempted flag burning.

The country was then virtually drowned in Turkish flags, which had to be displayed at all shops, public places and buildings. Gangs of the fascist "Grey Wolves" roamed the streets and the media created a nationalist hysteria close to a pogrom atmosphere against Kurds.

During the same general timeframe, the internationally renowned writer Orhan Pamuk became victim of a witch-hunt by media outlets and politicians. After he remarked during an interview about his book *Snow* that "in Turkey, one million Armenians and 30,000 Kurds were killed" during World War I, regional politicians called for his books to be burned. Pamuk was accused of "insulting the state," newspapers branded him a "traitor" and he could not appear in public due to numerous death threats.

In April, right-wing extremist groups staged provocations and physical attacks against leftists in various cities, especially in the Gazi neighborhood of Istanbul and the northern city of Trabzon. At least one person, Esat Atmaca, a member of the minority Alewite population, was killed and several more injured by the ultra-nationalists. Mobs attacked supporters of TAYAD, an organization of relatives of left-wing political prisoners, most of whom are in solitary confinement. On each occasion, the TAYAD supporters, who had done nothing else but peacefully distribute legal leaflets, narrowly escaped being lynched after police intervened. Nevertheless, the police detained the victims for "provoking the public."

The military then escalated its campaign. On April 20, Chief of General Staff Hilmi Özkök gave a political speech at the War Academy in Istanbul. His remarks were by no means limited to military matters, but ranged over every major issue of domestic and foreign policy, opposing the positions of the elected moderate Islamist government on virtually all questions.

Turkey was neither a moderate Islamic state nor an Islamic country, he emphasized, warning that the "Turkish people" would block any effort to lead the country in such a direction. This served as an ominous reminder of the military-instigated overthrow of the government of Necmettin Erbakan in 1997. The general went on to exclude any concession towards Greece on the questions of the Aegean Sea or Cyprus. Cyprus was still of such vital strategic value that Turkish troops had to stay there, he said. After all, Özkök remarked, Britain had a military base on Cyprus for this reason as well.

The head of the army also demanded a tough line against Armenia. Armenia, first of all, had to respect international law. Turkey accuses Armenia of illegally occupying Nagorno-Karabakh, a predominantly Armenian enclave within Azerbaijan, as well as a corridor between Karabakh and Armenia. For Ankara, the "return" of all former Azerbaijani territories has always been a precondition for establishing diplomatic relations with Armenia. In addition, Turkey wants Armenia to stop its demands for recognition of the atrocities committed against the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire in 1915. In his speech, Özkök again explicitly denied that the Armenians had been the victims of genocide.

Erdogan, who also denies the genocide, has proposed to establish a common commission of historians before establishing diplomatic relations, in order to "find out the historical truth." This proposal, praised by some Western governments as a gesture of conciliation, is actually an affront against Armenia. For Armenians, as for most historians, it is well established that the events of 1915 constituted genocide. Recently Erdogan has indicated that political relations could be established independently of the work of an historians' commission, a course which seems to differ from Özkök's hard line.

Özkök also went into detail on the Kurdish question. The activities of the PKK (Kurdish Workers Party) had increased dramatically, he claimed, accusing the EU of acting as a mediator for the PKK. EU membership would be "no blessing," he said, and it would not be "the end of the world" if Turkey did not become a member.

The chief of staff demanded that the US move against the PKK, which has many fighters based in northern Iraq. The general also warned that the northern Iraqi city of Kirkuk was "on the brink of an explosion." Kirkuk, which is the estimated to hold up to 25 percent of

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Iraqi oil, is claimed by Kurdish nationalists as the capital of a future autonomous or independent Kurdish state. Under the eyes of the American occupiers, they systematically moved Kurds from other parts of Iraq into the city, which has Turkmen and Arab citizens as well. The Kurdish nationalists claim the new settlers to be exclusively those Kurds who had been driven out of the city under the former Baathist regime. It is, however, almost impossible to verify this.

The background to the military's aggressive stance is the deep crisis of the Turkish government caused by developments both in the Middle East and in Europe.

Since March 2003, when the Turkish parliament opposed the use of Turkish territory as a staging ground for American troops to attack Iraq, Erdogan has tried to repair relations with the US. The aggressive policy of Bush and Israeli's Sharon, however, was a source of great concern in the Turkish population, especially among Erdogan's electoral base. This has escalated with the US threats against Iran and Syria.

While Erdogan has tied his political future to EU membership, the EU euphoria has markedly faded since the EU summit of December 17, when Turkey was offered the opening of membership negotiations this year. In particular, the French decision to hold a referendum over Turkish membership has nurtured the suspicion that the EU demands a lot of things, but in the end is not very serious about Turkey's membership. At the end of February, the French national assembly adopted a change of the constitution, dubbed the "Turks' article," which says that every future expansion of the EU must be subjected to a referendum by the French electorate.

In Germany, the conservative parties CDU (Christian Democratic Union) and CSU (Christian Social Union)—which might well be in government next year—vehemently oppose full EU membership for Turkey. The suspension of Croatia's entry and the discussion about Ukraine, whose demand for membership has so far been rejected, were all closely followed in Turkey. Right-wing forces are using the disappointment over the perceived dishonesty of the EU, along with social discontent over the consequences of the AKP's right-wing economic policy, in an attempt to destabilize the government. More than a dozen MPs have left the AKP faction in parliament during the last three months, many of them joining right-wing parties.

For the military, the developments in Iraq are especially alarming. Turkey is among the countries that have criticized the results of the January 30Iraqi elections, which have strengthened both the Kurdish nationalists and Shiite fundamentalist parties, both of which are perceived as a threat to Ankara's interest. If Kirkuk were to come under Kurdish dominance, it could become the base for a Kurdish state and encourage separatist Kurdish tendencies in neighboring states as well.

Two recent articles by American authors also caused alarm in Ankara. Writing in the *Wall Street Journal* in February under the headline "The sick man of Europe—again," Robert Pollock sharply attacked Turkey for "anti-Americanism." In the second article, Michael Rubin, a former Bush administration advisor associated with various right-wing think tanks, warned that in the case of insufficient Turkish cooperation, the US might decide to build a military base in Iraqi Kurdistan.

The PKK, which in the last five years has done all it could to distance itself from its militant nationalist past and demonstrate its readiness to loyally support the Turkish state, has recently shown signs of renewed radicalism. Just a few weeks ago they readopted their old name, after renaming the organization several times previously. Their leader Abdullah Öcalan has developed a perspective of a "Democratic Confederation," encompassing the Kurds of the whole region, including Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria. The PKK claims that the Turkish army has carried out major military operations against them.

The generals fear that the discussion about the Armenian genocide, the EU's insistence on Kurdish rights and the situation in Iraq may revive the question of oppressed nationalities, undermine the nationalist state ideology of Kemalism and destabilize the Turkish state.

They aim to counter these dangers by strengthening Turkish nationalism and simultaneously aligning themselves more closely with the US and Israel. During a visit by Erdogan to Israel earlier this month, Ankara and Tel Aviv agreed to closer collaboration on intelligence. After their meeting in Jerusalem, the Israeli prime minister and his Turkish colleague revealed that they had installed a direct telephone line between their two offices to facilitate this relationship.

In addition, the two countries are reported to have agreed signed a deal worth US$400-500 million to modernize Turkish fighter jets. In April they concluded a contract for the delivery of spy drones and other reconnaissance technology.

Turkey recently concluded a $1.1 billion contract with the US for the modernization of its 117 F-16 fighter jets. In addition, Turkey extended a treaty for the use of the Incirlik base by the US. Both contracts were concluded only after April 24. The Turkish government wanted to see whether Bush would utter the word "genocide" in his commemorative address on the 90th anniversary of the Armenian genocide. He did not.

There are other indications that the US is trying to improve relations with Turkey. Citing "highly placed Kurdish sources in the Baghdad government," the English-language Turkish newspaper the *New Anatolian* reported May 2 that the US, and in particular the Pentagon, is pressuring the new Iraqi regime to move against the PKK in northern Iraq. US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld demanded this action during his recent visit to Iraq, the paper reported.

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