

Former Turkish army chief of staff arrested

Peter Schwarz
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The former chief of staff of the Turkish army, Ilker Basbug, was arrested last Friday in Istanbul, interrogated for seven hours, and transferred to detention. He is accused of leading a “terrorist organisation” and planning to overthrow the AKP (Justice and Development Party) government of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Basbug, the head of the Turkish armed forces from August 2008 to August 2010, is the highest-ranking officer to have been arrested in connection with the so-called Ergenekon affair. The name refers to an ultra-nationalist conspiracy that had sought to destabilise the country through bombings, the assassination of celebrities, and other terrorist activities—thus creating the conditions for a military coup.

There are now around 300 persons, including 200 active and retired officers, in custody on suspicion of membership in the Ergenekon network. So far, however, the judiciary had not dared to arrest such a high-ranking figure.

The Erdogan government also faces accusations of using the Ergenekon trial to persecute its political opponents. A report by the Council of Europe accused the Turkish judiciary this week of having blurred the “frontier between terrorist acts and the rights to freedom of thought, expression, association and assembly”. Roughly 100 journalists are in custody, including a number who supported the investigations against Ergenekon.

Basbug is accused of having masterminded a campaign to discredit the ruling AKP. To this end, he allegedly authorised the creation of web sites to publish anti-government propaganda. The General Staff had sought to shift responsibility for these web sites to individual officers. In a current judicial proceeding, however, these officers claim they were merely following orders, and that full responsibility lay with the military leadership.

Informed sources have no doubts that there is an element of truth to the allegations made against Basbug.

He made no secret of his dislike of the AKP government.

In May 2008, shortly before the Constitutional Court heard a case on whether to outlaw the AKP, Basbug secretly met with the country’s second-highest judge, Osman Paksut. The AKP ultimately escaped a ban only by a single judge’s vote. At the time, Turkish media carried reports of detailed plans of the General Staff to destabilise and overthrow the government.

Basbug has also publicly defended officers and soldiers involved in terror attacks. The European Commission accused him in 2009 of putting pressure on the judiciary. In a newspaper interview, Basbug threatened critics with revelations “if we lose our patience.”

A bitter power struggle has been raging for years between the old Kemalist elite, which is closely tied to the military, and the AKP. Since the founding of the state by Kemal Ataturk 90 years ago, the Turkish military functioned as a state within a state. It stood above elected governments, and on three occasions—in 1960, 1971 and 1980—took power through a coup. In a “cold coup” in 1997, it forced the resignation of the government of Necmettin Erbakan of the Islamist Welfare Party, from which Erdogan’s AKP later emerged.

The military have their own business empire and are closely associated with the traditional layers of the Turkish bourgeoisie. The AKP, on the other hand, draws its support from the so-called Anatolian bourgeoisie, business circles active outside the major cities and which developed independently of the Kemalist establishment.

The rise to prominence of the AKP began 10 years ago, when the country was rocked by a devastating economic crisis at a time when the Kemalist elite was deeply implicated in corrupt and criminal practices. In 2002, the AKP won its first parliamentary election and was re-elected in 2007 and 2011.

The power struggle, however, was by no means decided. As recently as 2007, the military tried to prevent the election of AKP member Abdullah Gül as president, and in 2008 six out of ten constitutional judges voted to ban the governing party. A verdict in favour of a ban required seven votes, however.

Since then, the AKP has increasingly gained the upper hand. When in the summer of last year, Erdogan refused to promote detained officers, Basbug's successor as the head of the General Staff, Isik Kosan, and the commanders of three branches of the armed forces tendered their resignations.

The more Erdogan gained the upper hand against the military and the Kemalists, the more he adopted their policies. Despite his Islamist origins, he never questioned the country's membership in NATO, its alliance with the United States, or its close cooperation with the EU. But he has used his Islamic credentials to conduct a foreign policy offensive under the motto "zero problems with our neighbours."

He took advantage of the weakening of the US in its wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to develop close political and economic ties both with the allies of the US—Israel, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states—and its opponents—Iran, Syria, and Russia. On this basis, Turkey's exports have grown from US\$32 billion to US\$132 billion since 2002; Turkey now has the 15th largest economy in the world. This has assured Erdogan the support of a growing layer of the Turkish bourgeoisie.

Although he always sought to maintain good relations with the US and repeatedly offered his services as a mediator in the Middle East, Erdogan's foreign policy provoked mistrust in Washington—for example, when the AKP majority in parliament refused to allow American troops to pass through Turkey during the Iraq war; when Erdogan received the Iranian president Ahmadinejad in Ankara in 2008; when Turkey's relations with Israel deteriorated after the latter invaded Gaza in 2009; or when Turkey refused to support sanctions against Iran in the UN Security Council in 2010.

Rising social struggles in the Middle East have undermined the policy of "zero problems with our neighbours". Initially, Erdogan exploited the uprisings in

Tunisia and Egypt and was praised as a hero by the local Islamists, but during the Libyan war, he carried out an about-face.

He had initially rejected the war plans of NATO against Libya, a close economic partner of Turkey. Turkish firms had contracts in Libya amounting to US\$32 billion and employed around 25,000 Turkish workers in the country, who were forced to leave when the war began. But after the war began, Erdogan called for the resignation of his former Libyan ally, Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, and eventually welcomed the leader of the National Transitional Council, Mustafa Abd al-Jalil, in Ankara.

A similar reversal has taken place in Ankara with regard to Syria. For some time, Erdogan had sought to work as a mediator for the Syrian regime, but Turkey now supports and gives practical aid to the armed resistance against Assad, working closely with Washington. As a result, however, Turkey's relations with Iran, which is closely allied to Syria, have deteriorated. Iran is also one of the most important trade partners of Turkey. The volume of Turkish-Iranian trade rose in the past year to US\$20 billion and was expected to soon reach US\$30 billion.

The rapprochement with the US in recent months probably explains Washington's restrained response to Basbug's arrest. US State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland commented: "The Turkish government obviously knows that we're monitoring this closely, and that we want to see the Turkish constitution upheld and international standards upheld."

Like most Turkish generals, Basbug enjoyed close relations with the US military. In the 1970s and 1990s, he had served in the NATO headquarters (SHAPE) in Belgium; between those periods, he taught at the elite British military academy, Sandhurst.



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