

Erdogan, the Military and Turkey's Future

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Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's tense relationship with the country's military seems to have settled down after the climactic and



theatrical resignations of the service's commanders at the end of July. After avoiding a direct confrontation with them for much of his tenure since 2002, Erdogan has called the generals' bluff, accepted their resignations and quickly appointed their replacements who undoubtedly will finally accept the supremacy of the civilian leadership in deciding state affairs. Coming at a time of momentous change in the Middle East, itself made possible by successful uprisings against military regimes in the Arab world, Erdogan's challenge to the established military hierarchy has much more domestic and international impact than is readily apparent.

At the outset, and for all intents and purposes, Erdogan's steady handling of the departing generals has established a definite end to military interference in politics in

Turkey, and a firm democratizing process is allowing untrammelled civilian control of the military. His move culminated other constitutional and parliamentary manoeuvres that robbed the generals of age-old privileges that had been a burden on civilian governments since the beginning of the republican period in the 1920s. From amending the law governing the powerful National Security Council, to changing the rules of the military budget, to preventing military courts from trying civilians, civilian authorities from Erdogan onwards now have enough institutional arrangements that check the generals and allow democratic governance to proceed unimpeded.

Concomitantly, the challenge Erdogan mounted to the military's wishes allowed for a closer implementation of the rule of law as unsurpassed democratic doctrine. The resignations of the top brass, highest-ranking of whom was the (former) Chief of Staff General Isik Kosaner, were prompted by the



Prime Minister's refusal to consider promoting hundreds of officers pending trials for their alleged involvement in two operations deemed coup plots, Ergenekon and Sledgehammer. While the sluggish Turkish legal process has delayed prosecutions and made military operations more difficult pending clearing the officers'

names, it was hard for the Prime Minister to simply accept the military's demands to promote suspected conspirators. The fact that the legal process, as it is, serves Erdogan and his Islamist Justice and Development Party's (AKP) agenda to govern a historically-secularist Turkey, should not prejudice the principle that the rule of law and not the military's wish should come to pass.

Externally, the success of Prime Minister Erdogan and his party in controlling a reluctant military institution that only in the late 1990s toppled another Islamist Prime Minister, Necmettin Erbakan, will be seen as another step toward granting Turkey a coveted seat in the European club of nations. Not that the French, Germans, Dutch, and others are anxious to admit the heir of the Ottoman Empire to the European Union, but



a fully-democratic and economically-successful capitalist Turkey leaves them little ground for refusing to do so. The tolerant social policies that have so far characterized AKP's domestic agenda vis-à-vis the different religious and ethnic communities in the country go a long way to

satisfy the EU's proclamations in this area, although the ongoing conflict with Kurdish nationalism is still a serious concern. The fact that Turkey boasts the 16th largest economy in the world, and one that has shown great resilience in today's global financial crisis, actually makes membership in the EU a desired *European* outcome. As a nation bridging the established West and an ascendant East, Turkey is in very good shape to even choose whether it still wants to join Europe or look to establish itself as leader of a new Middle Eastern alliance.

Most importantly, however, is the ultimate outcome of the confrontation between Prime Minister Erdogan and his AKP and the military establishment regarding where Turkey is heading amid the turmoil and uncertainties of the future Middle East. After all, domestic success cannot be arrested at the border, especially when opportunities abound in many countries and Erdogan himself has become an icon to many rebellions. On this regard, there are many probabilities.

First, Erdogan and his AKP, as symbols of moderate Islamic democracy, are likely heading toward electoral victories for years to come; victories that will give them the opportunity to re-shape the Turkish polity for generations – a possibility real enough to scare Turkish secularists. Second, Turkey will likely become, but with some variations on the theme, the only model for the nascent movements of change in the Arab and Islamic worlds. Third, and the latest diplomatic spat with Israel over the latter's

exaggerated response to last year's 'Freedom Flotilla' to Gaza, is a case in point. Turkey is heading toward a strategic Middle Eastern re-alignment that may for all intents and purposes result in severing ties with Tel Aviv which the now 'defeated' Turkish military has nurtured for years. Fourth, and partly because of its criticism of the Syrian regime's dealing with its opposition, it does not seem so strange to suggest that despite what appears to be cordial relations with Tehran, Ankara may very well be on the way to challenging the Islamic Republic of Iran's agenda for the Middle East.

Controlling political institutions and asserting their version of governing ideology in Turkey, have always been Erdogan's and his AKP's goals when confronting the powerful military. But mastering the



domestic political landscape also affords them the chance to push ahead with a much more involved regional role. And, the promising movements of change in the Arab world, both the successful and the ongoing, provide numerous opportunities to the Turkish Islamists for shaping a new Middle

East that they will at least share in leading or, at most, entirely design.

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Erdogan image:

<http://mycatbirdseat.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/Erdogan-standing-tall.jpg>

Kosaner image:

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EU-Turkey image:

<http://turkeymacedonia.files.wordpress.com/2010/07/turkey-eu-european-union.png>

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