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The Significance of the 1980 Coup within a Culture of Military Intervention as a Means to
Reform in Turkey

This paper looks at the successful military coup that occurred in Turkey in 1980, discussing different causes and focusing on the culture in Turkey that encourages military uprising. In 1980, the Turkish military staged a coup in response to domestic terrorism and a suffering economy that completely overhauled the government, introducing a new Constitution, new laws, and new political parties.¹ This period was characterized by violence, radical reform, and suppression of individual rights. Tracing military involvement in Turkish society and politics from the time of the Ottoman Empire through to the attempted military coup in July of 2016, I argue that the culture of military intervention in Turkey remains deeply engrained but is evolving so that the military is no longer viewed as the infallible defender of the people. This argument is in direct critical conversation with Ersel Aydinli in his 2009 paper, “A Paradigmatic Shift for the Turkish Generals and an End to the Coup Era in Turkey.”² I respond, in light of the 2016 coup attempt in Turkey, to Aydinli’s thesis that “Turkey may very well be leaving the coup era behind.”³ I consider the role that the 1980 coup played in reframing the relationship between the people and the military and attest that the intervention revealed the dangers of a people placing full confidence in the military to represent them, defend them, and fight for reform through

¹ Birol Ali Yesilada, “Problems of Political Development in the Third Turkish Republic,” *Polity* 21 no. 2 (1988): 345-354.

² Ersel Aydinli, “A Paradigmatic Shift for the Turkish Generals and an End to the Coup Era in Turkey,” *The Middle East Journal* 63 no. 4 (2009).

³ *Ibid.*, 581.

repeated takeover. Ultimately I provide evidence that the 1980 coup was the turning point in Turkish society that foreshadowed the declining coup era, but I counter Aydinli by suggesting Turkey's history of military intervention is steeped in social and political tradition which will not easily be left behind.

Historical Context: The Coup, Repeated

The sentiment that powered Turkey's 1980 military coup did not simply spread overnight. Rather, a history of military involvement in Turkish politics paved the way for the military takeover. The 1980 coup was the third military coup the Turkish republic has seen; it was predated by coups in 1960 and 1971.⁴ However, the military has had a significant political role throughout the entire history of Turkey, predating the establishment of the republic.⁵ Over time, the Turkish people have created a connection with and found an empowerment in the military, largely as a result of its separation from the government, its prominent role in society, and its dedication to representing and defending the people.

Part of the Turkish military's importance is derived from the importance placed on the military in Islam; Muslim culture views "the military as an arm of the community."⁶ The Turks' military power is what first earned them their established place in the Muslim world.⁷ Nejat Muallimoglu, who published "Meaning of the Coup D'état in Turkey" in 1960 following Turkey's first military coup, traces the cultural importance of the military back to Selim III, who

⁴ Frank Tachau and Metin Heper, "The State, Politics, and the Military in Turkey," *Comparative Politics* 16 no. 1 (October 1983): 18, 21, 23.

⁵ Tachau and Heper, 18.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

became Sultan of the Ottoman Empire in 1789.⁸ Selim believed in “drastic reforms” as a means to “reform and progress.”⁹ The tradition of military prominence and revolutionary spirit carried over into Turkish society after the first republic was founded in 1923.

The establishment of the first Turkish republic and the Kemalist regime redefined and contributed to the political and societal importance of the military following World War I.¹⁰ Mustafa Kemal, a military leader, became the first president of the Turkish republic and ruled until his death in 1938.¹¹ Kemal’s regime was characterized as nationalist and secular; notably, Kemal withdrew the military from regular political proceedings, leading the charge to disallow active military officers from running for political office and removing the military from the instability of democratic politics.¹² However, ties between political leaders and the military remained strong.¹³ Kemal proclaimed the close relationship between the Turkish people and the military in 1931, explaining that “the Turkish nation has... always looked to the military... The Turkish nation... considers its army the guardian of its ideals.”¹⁴ Frank Tachau and Metin Heper weigh in on this strong link between the Turkish people and the military, arguing that “military-civilian relations in Turkey have been virtually unique by comparison with other developing societies.”¹⁵ In his paper “A Paradigmatic Shift for the Turkish Generals and an End to the Coup Era in Turkey,” Ersel Aydinli further explains that, traditionally, the Turkish people maintain “a

⁸ Nejat Muallimoglu, “Meaning of the Coup D’état in Turkey,” *Pakistan Horizon* 13 no. 3 (1960): 190.

⁹ Muallimoglu, 190.

¹⁰ Tachau and Heper, 19.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 19-20.

¹² *Ibid.*, 19.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

direct, special bond with its military, keeping politics and politicians in a secondary position,” and hold “the military as the country’s most prestigious and trusted institution.”¹⁶

Muallimoglu explains that Kemalism was founded in six primary principles, including “*Revolutionism*,” or “the determination to depart radically from tradition and precedent if they did not serve national interests.”¹⁷ This principle of *Revolutionism* is strongly reminiscent of the reformist ideology promoted by Selim III under the Ottoman Empire. It is not hard to imagine a military, empowered by *Revolutionism* and a strong connection to the people, staging an intervention as a means of defending the people from a government that was not serving their best interests. That is exactly what the military did; for the first time in 1960, the military staged a coup and took on a “guardianship role” to protect the people from an increasingly authoritarian government.¹⁸

That link between the people and the military became more complicated during and following the 1960 military coup. During the Kemalist regime, the Republican People’s Party (RPP) maintained political control; the period was marked by social peace, a growing economy, and the rise of a middle class and expanded career opportunities beyond military service.¹⁹ As a result of this growth, however, there were fewer military leaders among the political elite and in 1950 the Demokrat Party was elected into power.²⁰ When political relations between the ruling party and the opposition (the RPP) became hostile, the military sided with the opposition, feeling that they had lost standing (politically and socially) under the Demokrat Party.²¹ When ordered

¹⁶ Aydinli, 581.

¹⁷ Muallimoglu, 194.

¹⁸ Aydinli, 582.

¹⁹ Tachau and Heper, 20.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, 21.

to put down opposition protests in 1960, the military felt that the government was failing the democratic power of the people and staged the first Turkish coup.²²

Following the 1960 military intervention, coup leader General Gürsel was elected president.²³ In effort to prevent another authoritarian, single-party regime, in framing Turkey's new constitution in 1961, the writers added significant checks on government power.²⁴ During the next two years, with tension still high and little political stability, there were two further coup attempts; these attempts were unsuccessful, but speak to the strong culture of military involvement and repeated takeovers.²⁵ The societal unrest that inevitably results from repeated coup attempts encourages the question: how did the Turkish people maintain such a strong connection with their military? Did they not become despondent in the turmoil? Aydinli answers this question by highlighting societal faith that the military was truly acting on their behalf; even if military intervention spread chaos, the people felt that the military was on their side.²⁶ Muallimoglu speaks to this sentiment as well. Muallimoglu voices his own faith in 1960 that the military acted with no intention of keeping power for itself, but rather to "pass the power on to the elected representatives of the people" and ensure "that no party or man in future will try to assume dictatorial powers."²⁷ Of course, the second regime was not as successful as Muallimoglu and many others had hoped.

²² Tachau and Heper, 21.

²³ *Ibid.*, 23.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

²⁶ Aydinli, 581-582.

²⁷ Muallimoglu, 201.

The second successful coup occurred a decade later, in 1971.²⁸ This coup might be characterized instead simply as a military intervention, as the military did not remove the government.²⁹ Instead, the military demanded amendments to the constitution that would give the government more power and allow it to respond and put an end to increased violence at the hands of militant groups.³⁰ After the 1971 coup, however, Turkey only saw a continued increase in the political fragmentation and polarization which had led to the intervention.³¹

The 1980 Coup

This fragmentation and polarization built until Turkey was thrust nearly into civil war, with 3,500 people dead by 1980 as a result of domestic militant violence.³² Political figures, journalists, and professors were assassinated.³³ The population was divided by religious and ethnic fighting, and high inflation and shortages of goods caused the economy to fail.³⁴ When Turkey found itself in “its deepest sociopolitical and economic crisis since the founding of the Republic,” the public anticipated military intervention.³⁵ The people turned, in the midst to turmoil, back to the military as a trusted and tested means to government reform.

On the morning the 1980 coup took place, General Kenan Evren issued a statement explaining the military action, stating that the coup was aimed to “prevent the existence and the possibility of civil war and internecine struggle” and “re-establish the existence and the authority

²⁸ Tachau and Heper, 23.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, 24.

³² Yesilada, 346, 351.

³³ Tachau and Heper, 25.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Yesilada, 346.

of the state.”³⁶ The military intervened strongly in defense of a people that was divided and suffering. Their fierce action and determination to completely overhaul the government and the Constitution contrasted with their softer hand in 1971, which clearly had not been effective. The people had faith in the military and were relieved when the coup was announced.³⁷ On September 29, 1980 *Time Magazine* noted that “the country allowed itself to settle into a state of unaccustomed relaxation” after the coup.³⁸ Excited civilians reportedly “waved at tanks” and “shook hands with soldiers,” while the *Turkish Daily News* proclaimed “life back to normal throughout Turkey.”³⁹ However, efforts to restore “authority” to the state, as Evren put it, went far.

Birol Ali Yeşilada testifies in “Problems of Political Development in the Third Turkish Republic” that, as with the 1971 coup, the government established in the wake of the 1980 coup was rampant with “the same seeds of political instability which leaders of the 1980 coup had hoped to eradicate.”⁴⁰ The 1980 coup also demonstrated a breakdown in the military’s dedicated defense of the people by failing to return power fairly to the people or preserve their civil liberties under the new regime.

After 1980: A Coup-Culture Corrupted

Yeşilada articulates that the military maintained control of Turkey from 1980 until 1983, when they instituted “an authoritarian [new Constitution] that gave the state extensive powers”

³⁶ Tachau and Heper, 26.

³⁷ Lily Rothman, "A Short History of Modern Turkey's Military Coups." *Time* (July 2016), accessed December 2016, <http://time.com/4408850/turkey-coup-history/>

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Yesilada, 345.

and greatly diminished the rights of individuals.⁴¹ New laws disallowed grade school students, government workers, teachers, and soldiers from forming associations, and placed the government in control of universities.⁴² The military also completely disbanded the existing political parties and created new ones.⁴³ Even when the military relinquished its control over Turkey in 1983, it was by dubious means designed not to give the people any real power. General Evren ran for president in November of 1982 unopposed; the same ballot ratified the new Constitution.⁴⁴ Yeşilada explains that this process allowed the 1982 Constitution to be ratified without dissent.⁴⁵

Gerassimos Karabelias explains in “The Evolution of Civil-Military Relations in Post-War Turkey, 1980-95” that the 1980 coup was different than those that preceded it.⁴⁶ According to Karabelias, “the co-operation of the existing political leaders was not” considered important in 1980; “The military leadership was in control of developments inside Turkey.”⁴⁷ This speaks to the increased willingness of the military to maintain control. Along with that comfort keeping political power, the military was very comfortable using force in the 1980 coup. Excessive purging and imprisonment in the aftermath of the 1980 coup only contributed to a culture of tension, distrust, and rebellion. Following the coup, over 39,500 people were sentenced to

⁴¹ Yesilada, 352.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 352-353.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 345.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 354.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 354.

⁴⁶ Gerassimos Karabelias, “The Evolution of Civil-Military Relations in Post-War Turkey, 1980-95,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 35 no. 4 (October 1999): 133.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

prison.⁴⁸ Those imprisoned were out of approximately 600,000 people who were arrested.⁴⁹ 50 more people were put to death by the military and many people disappeared.⁵⁰ One political prisoner, Zülfikar Tak, who was detained and tortured at the Diyarbakir prison, drew a number of black and white sketches of the pain he experienced and witnessed.⁵¹ His drawings depict officers spraying people with hoses, chaining them up, beating them, and sexually abusing them.⁵² Tak's graphic drawings are horrific and add a deeper, more personal layer of understanding to the statistics about violence following the coup. The amount of force used by the military following the 1980 coup is shocking and indicates that the military was not acting entirely in defense of the people.

A Culture of Military Uprising?

Aydinli observed in 2009 a political and military dynamic in Turkey that was changing.⁵³ He notes in his paper that in 2007 the people elected into power the pro-Islamist Adalet ve Kalkinma Party (AKP) and the military did not intervene though it did not support the new regime.⁵⁴ Aydinli questions whether this indicated a changing relationship between the people and the military, an increased value placed on democratic electoral politics in Turkey, and a readiness of the military "to go along with this paradigm shift."⁵⁵ Aydinli notes that Turkey saw

⁴⁸ Yesilada, 351.

⁴⁹ Constanze Letsch, "Leaders of 1980 military coup in Turkey are jailed for life after showcase trial." *The Guardian* (June 2014), accessed November 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/19/turkey-coup-leaders-trial-jailed>

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ "Diyarbakır Cezaevi: Büyük Kapatma." *Benhayattayken* (May 2015), accessed December 2016, <http://www.benhayattayken.com/2012/07/diyarbakir-cezaevi-buyuk-kapatma.html>

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Aydinli, 581.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 582.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 581-582.

a period of stability and faith in the government in the 2000s, arguing that in response the people began to separate itself from and become less dependent upon the military.⁵⁶ This understanding of a changing political and social landscape is echoed by Sefa Şimşek in “New Social Movements in Turkey since 1980.” Şimşek published his paper in 2004, describing a peaceful Turkish society; he was confident that “Islam and secularism [were] likely to cohabite” and he suggested that progressive ideologies, such as feminism, were gaining credibility.⁵⁷ Furthermore, he explains that globalization and transnationalism were creating “substantial transformations and re-structuring in Turkish society and politics.”⁵⁸

As Aydınli articulated, in 2009 the Turkish military seemed prepared to put progressive ideals and modernization first and defer to the democratic political process in an effort to build the people’s faith in the government.⁵⁹ This deference would have meant a breakdown of the “direct bond” between the people and the military in favor of “an indirect one under civilian oversight.”⁶⁰ The government also seemed to be promoting this shift in the Turkish social and political arena. In 2014, General Evren, who was then 96 years old, was sentenced to spend his last days in prison for his involvement in the 1980 coup.⁶¹ At the time, the trial was recognized as an attempt by President Erdogan to bring an end to the tradition of military intervention in politics.⁶² However, on the night of July 15, 2016 the military attempted its most recent coup

⁵⁶ Aydınli, 586-587.

⁵⁷ Sefa Şimşek, "New Social Movements in Turkey Since 1980," *Turkish Studies* 5:2 (2004): 135.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 136-137.

⁵⁹ Aydınli, 595.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Letsch, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/19/turkey-coup-leaders-trial-jailed>

⁶² *Ibid.*

against Erdogan's government, proving that the culture of military intervention is not dead in Turkey.

During the 2016 attempted military coup, the military drove tanks down the streets and fired bullets from the air.⁶³ Hundreds of people lost their lives while thousands were injured.⁶⁴ Officers even attempted to stop the media from covering the coup, and President Erdogan spoke from facetime, encouraging the people to go out into the streets and confront the military.⁶⁵ What is impressive is how many followed the command, putting their lives in danger to defend the government against the military, the body which for so long represented the people. This shows that there has been significant change in the political and social structure in Turkey in recent years.

A sentiment so deeply rooted as the trust between the Turkish people and the military cannot be deconstructed easily. There is a long history of military importance in Turkish society that will not be overturned by small efforts, such as sending aged military officers to prison to make an example out of them. As the July 2016 attempted coup shows, the culture of reform through military intervention is still strong. Yet, that culture has changed. Neither in 2007 nor 2016 did the military have the same unwavering faith from the people that it was given by

⁶³ CNN, "A night of gunfire and explosions during Turkey coup," Filmed [July 15 2016]. Video, 1:33. Posted [July 18 2016]. <http://www.cnn.com/videos/world/2016/07/16/turkey-coup-attempt-wrap-moloney-pkg.cnn/video/playlists/turmoil-in-turkey/>

⁶⁴ Kareem Shaheen, "Military coup was well planned and very nearly succeeded, say Turkish Officials," *The Guardian* (July 2016). <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/18/military-coup-was-well-planned-and-very-nearly-succeeded-say-turkish-officials>

⁶⁵ CNN, "A night of gunfire and explosions during Turkey coup," <http://www.cnn.com/videos/world/2016/07/16/turkey-coup-attempt-wrap-moloney-pkg.cnn/video/playlists/turmoil-in-turkey/>

Muallimoglu and much of Turkish society in 1960. The memory of violence and oppression at the hand of the military remains strong; while Turkey has not seen an end to “the coup era,” the tie between the people and the military is evolving and such an end is foreseeable.

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