



Foreign Policy as Domestic Power Struggle: The Northern Iraq as a Battlefield Between the AKP and the TAF in 2007-8

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Abstract

The issue of rapprochement with Kurdish parties in the Northern Iraq turned a discursive battlefield between Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) and the ruling Justice Development Party (AKP) after the 2005 General Elections in Iraq from which Kurdish groups emerged as a strong political actor in Iraqi politics. When the AKP government declared its policy of rapprochement with the Kurdish regional government at the beginning of 2007, the then Chief of General Staff Yaşar Büyükanıt publicly criticized and rejected this new policy. Büyükanıt declined to talk with Kurdish leaders on the grounds that they were supporting for the PKK. This exchange of statements was the part of a political snowball rolling to which other areas of the struggle were included. The rift between the AKP government and the TAF over how to deal with Iraqi Kurds started just as Turkey gears up for key presidential elections. This paper will attempt to analyze the battle over the Northern Iraq between the TAF and the AKP in order to answer the following questions: How the TAF and the AKP came face to face on the issue of the Northern Iraq? Under what conditions the Northern Iraq turned a discursive battlefield between the TAF and the AKP? What was the function of the Northern Iraq in the domestic power struggle between the TAF and the AKP?

Keywords: *AK Party, Civil-Military Relations, Northern Iraq, Foreign Policy*

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İktidar Mücadelesi Olarak Dış Politika: 2007-8 Yıllarında Ak Parti ve TSK Arasında Bir Mücadele Alanı Olarak Kuzey Irak

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Özet

Kuzey Irak'taki Kürt partiler ile yakınlaşma meselesi Kürt gurupların önemli aktör olarak ortaya çıktığı Irak'taki 2005 seçimlerinden sonra Türkiye'de Türk Silahlı Kuvvetleri ve Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi arasında söylemsel bir çatışma alanına dönüştü. AK Parti hükümeti 2007'nin başlarında Kürt bölgesel yönetimi ile yakınlaşma beyanını açıklayınca, dönemin Genel Kurmay Başkanı Yaşar Büyükanıt açık bir şekilde bu politikayı eleştirdi. Büyükanıt Irak'taki Kürt partilerin PKK'yı desteklediğini gerekçe göstererek böylesi bir yakınlaşmaya karşı olduğunu açıkladı. Bu karşılıklı açıklamalar 2007 yılı içinde yaşanan AK Parti ve TSK arasındaki daha geniş ölçekli çatışmanın bir uzantısıydı. Söz konusu dış politika tartışması Türkiye'nin Cumhurbaşkanlığı seçimine doğru gittiği bir ortamda patlak vermişti. Bu makale şu sorulara cevap vermek amacıyla AK Parti ve TSK arasında Kuzey Irak üzerinden yaşanan gerilimi analiz etmeyi amaçlamaktadır: TSK ve AKP Kuzey Irak konusunda nasıl karşı karşıya geldiler? Hangi koşullar tarafları arasında Kuzey Irak'ı bir söylemsel çatışma zeminine dönüştürdü? Kuzey Irak'ın AK Parti ve TSK arasında o dönemde yaşanan güç mücadelesindeki işlevi ne oldu?

Anahtar Kelimeler: AK Parti, Sivil-Asker İlişkileri, Kuzey Irak, Dış Politika

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Introduction

It is clear that the period from mid-2006 to the beginning of 2008 in Turkey witnessed a fierce battle between the Kemalist secular block and Islam-friendly ruling Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP). The killing of the Second Criminal Bureau Judge Mustafa Özbilgin in a terrorist attack on the Council of State in May 2006 triggered a secularist mobilization against the AKP government because the attack was related with “Islamic anger” about the ban on wearing headscarf in state institutions by the media and secular figures. For example, Ertuğrul Özkök, editor-in-chief of secular-daily *Hürriyet*, called the Council of State attack “the September 11 of the Turkish Republic” with a reference to the 11 September 2001 attacks against the World Trade Center by al Qaeda, known as an “Islamist terrorist” organization. The then President Ahmet Necdet Sezer, the heads of high courts in Turkey and the then Chief of General Staff Hilmi Özkök called a further mobilization against the threat of Islamic reaction (*irtica*). In his speech at the opening class of the Military Academy in October 2006, the new Chief of Staff Yaşar Büyükanıt defined the *irtica* as an enduring threat for Turkey and reminded the constitutional duty of the military in protecting the secularist character of the state. The military’s active involvement in this secularist mobilization against the Islam-friendly party in power was not coincidence because the TAF historically presented itself as the ultimate guardian of Kemalism, the state’s official ideology based on secularism and nation-state.

Under such a burning atmosphere, the conflict between the AKP and the secularist block reached a crisis point at the beginning of 2007 over the presidential elections. Bülent Arınç, one of the leading figures of the AKP, proposed to elect a pious president and this statement was followed by the nomination of the then Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül as the AKP’s candidate for presidency. For the army, the nomination of Gül was unacceptable because of the following reasons: the headscarf of Gül’s wife was an unequivocal symbol of *irtica* in the eyes of the military, Gül might approve AKP laws that were rejected by Ahmet Necdet Sezer, a fiercely secular president of Turkey, and Gül would also have a big say in appointments for important state institutions such as judiciary, university and military. In short, Gül’s nomination to presidency turned a symbol for secular groups in Turkey for their mobilization against the AKP government. In April

2007, as a response, anti-AKP civil-society groups organized mass rallies, known as republican meetings, in big cities such as İzmir, İstanbul, Ankara and Samsun. Unsurprisingly, this mobilized anger was both appropriated and promoted by the military. On April 12, 2007, General Büyükanıt told that would-be president must be “attached to basic values in republic” and indirectly supported mass republican meetings.¹ This was followed by the military’s e-memorandum of April 27, 2007 against the AKP through which the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) declared that it was a party to the debate around the presidency.

The AKP’s decision to go to snap elections as a reaction to the e-memorandum, its landslide victory in the general elections of July 22, 2007, and the election of Gül to the presidency in August of 2007 triggered a process of retreat for the military’s role in politics. This open battle between the secularist segments of the Turkish state and the AKP government in the year 2007 had some ramifications in Turkish foreign policy. Of them, the fiercest battle was fought on Turkey’s policy towards the Kurdish entity in the Northern Iraq. In other words, the military and the AKP fought a fierce battle over the northern Iraq in much the same way as they clashed each other in domestic politics. The TAF prevented the AKP government in developing its own distinct foreign policy towards Northern Iraq and imposed the traditional foreign policy based on non-recognition of a separate Kurdish entity there. While the military was able to resist the AKP’s policy in northern Iraq throughout 2007, it lost the ground to the AKP at the first quarter of 2008. Therefore, this paper’s argument is that Turkey’s northern Iraq policy in 2007 can be understood with a special reference to domestic power struggle between the AKP and the TAF. Unlike those who argued that “the military appeared willing to be subordinated to the government’s decisions” with respect to northern Iraq and called civil-military relations as “unprecedented harmony between the government and the military” in the case of northern Iraq², this paper claims that the transition of power in determining foreign policy was neither smooth nor easy. To do this, the

1 W. Hale, and E. Özbudun, *Islamism, democracy and liberalism in Turkey: The case of the AKP*, (London: Routledge, 2010), p. 91

2 E. Aydınli, “A paradigmatic shift for the Turkish Generals and an end to the coup era in Turkey”, *The Middle East Journal*, vol. 63, no. 4, (2009), pp. 591-2; A. Lundgren, *The Unwelcome Neighbour: Turkey’s Kurdish Policy*, (London: IB Tauris, 2007), p. 125

Turkish Armed Forces, the then institutional actor of the secularist power block in Turkey, must be brought in the analysis of power relations back.

This paper is split into three main sections. The first section seeks to explain why foreign policy is part of domestic power struggle theoretically. The second section inspects the rise and fall of the TAF's role in both domestic and foreign policies of Turkey. The final section focuses on the role of Turkey's policy towards the Kurdish entity in the northern Iraq with a special reference to domestic power struggle between the AKP and the TAF. This section composes of three parts as the followings: the first part shows how the recognition of Kurdish entity in Northern Iraq turned into an open battle between the military and the government, the second part deals with the role of the debate on the incursion into Northern Iraq in the military's attempt to weaken the image of the AKP on the eve of 2007 general elections, and the last part interrogates the ultimate transition of power in shaping Turkey's policy towards northern Iraq from the military to the AKP government.

Theoretical Arguments

Foreign policy is generally understood to be an activity for the promotion of a pre-given national interest and security of any state. Therefore, foreign policy is regarded as the external orientation of states because the state, according to traditional schools of International Relations, comes first and precedes foreign policy. For example, well-known and leading scholars of international relations claim that "the central focus" of foreign policy analysis "is on the policies and actions of national governments oriented toward the external world outside their own political jurisdictions".³ This traditional understanding was reintroduced with a nominal makeup by identity-based approaches according to which there is a casual relation between identity and foreign policy. Like traditional theories, the concept of identity as a reason why foreign policies are enacted limits analysis "to a concern with domestic influence on foreign policy".⁴ Fortunately, the redefinition of identity by post-structural theory in international relations

3 J. A. Caporaso, et al. "The Comparative Study of Foreign Policy: Perspectives on the Future", *International Studies Notes*, vol. 13, no. 2, (1986), p. 34

4 D. Campbell, "The Biopolitics of Security: Oil, Empire, and the Sports Utility Vehicle", *American Quarterly*, vol. 57, no. 3, (2005), p. 948

as both product of and justification for foreign policy was introduced to foreign policy analysis in order to account for foreign policy preferences. Thanks to this reformulation of identity, studies on foreign policy are able to focus on how foreign policy produces, maintains and reproduces the state and its identity by practicing and consolidating the artificial border between inside and outside. In other words, the inside/outside dichotomy is presented as an essential condition of the nation-state and therefore foreign policy is described as an ongoing inscription of this dichotomy.

The obsession with identity politics, however, distracts foreign policy analysis from domestic power relations. In other words, while identity-based analysis with special reference to identity construction rightly emphasize the process of nation-state building and the role of foreign policy in it, they overlook the existence of competing power blocks within any single state. If this is the case, any analysis putting power relations at the center of research attempts to tackle the process of discipline and domination through multiple forms of subjugation.⁵ In this process, the main function of foreign policy is to exercise “exclusionary practices in which resistant elements to secure identity on the inside are linked through a discourse of danger with threats identified and located on the outside”.⁶ Through these exclusionary practices, the hegemonic power is able to discipline domestic behavior and subjugates all other dissident power centers. In the hands of the ruling power block, foreign policy functions as “a double exclusion”, in silencing oppositional discourses and delimiting the boundaries of the existing hegemonic state identity. The ruling power block aiming to exclude and marginalize other voices in domestic politics uses foreign policy to hide the status of what is done in the domestic setting as exclusion and to normalize its own discourse on the society.⁷

Since foreign policy is a site of power struggle between different blocks and it is a strategy by which different power blocks consolidate, change, and challenge the existing power relations, its role as exclusionary

5 D. Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p. 10

6 Campbell, *The Biopolitics of Security: Oil, Empire, and the Sports Utility Vehicle*, p. 948

7 Campbell, *Writing Security*, p. 63

strategy in the hands of the ruling block has its equivalent as a double resistance⁸ among oppositional power blocks. When these blocks attempt to speak on foreign affairs, foreign policy works as a double approval of their resistance, identity and difference. By doing so, oppositional blocks (re)consolidate their differences and oppositional positions vis-à-vis the ruling power's dominant discourse. As a result, what Dirk Nabers calls as "hegemonic relations"⁹ should be one of the main research focus of foreign policy analysis because foreign policy is not necessarily based on national interest or identity but can be "a politicking strategy"¹⁰ for different power blocks in line with their power positions within the domestic setting. By assuming the fact that foreign policy is part of hegemonic relations among different power blocks, the paper attempts to inspect the role of policies towards the northern Iraq in the power struggle between the AKP government, representative of the rising conservative block, and the TAF, institutional guardian of the secularist block, during the year 2007.

The TAF's Changing Role in Turkish (Foreign) Policy

Turkey's admission to the NATO on 18 February 1952 had a dramatic effect on the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF). Thanks to this remarkable external leverage, the TAF set itself free from the tragedy of Turkish modernization notorious with failings to build strong state institutions. Unlike Fevzi Çakmak's long reign as Chief of Staff for more than two decades, the TAF was equipped by modern artilleries, tanks, trucks, aircrafts, and weapons to fulfill her commitments to the Western alliance against "the Soviet threat". The Western alliance also promoted a massive reform for the TAF because new equipment without better training and restructuring the military hierarchy was pointless. As part of this restructuring project of the army as a strong state institution, officers were sent abroad for training, command structure at the top of the armed forces was modernized, some of top generals who were too committed to old and authoritarian ways

8 A. Balcı, "The Kurdish Movement's EU Policy in Turkey: An Analysis of a Dissident Ethnic Block's Foreign Policy", *Ethnicities*, vol. 15, no. 1, (2015), pp. 72-91

9 D. Nabers, "Filling the Void of Meaning: Identity Construction in US Foreign Policy After September 11, 2001", *Foreign Policy Analysis*, vol. 5, no. 2, (2009), p. 192

10 A. Balcı, "Foreign Policy as Politicking in the Sarıkız Coup Plot: Cyprus between the Coup Plotters and the JDP", *Middle East Critique* vol. 21, no. 2, (2012), p. 157-170.

were purged from the army, and so on.¹¹ This abrupt departure from daily trajectory of Turkish modernization came to coincide with the discovery of a radically new reality of which the TAF could find no echo in Turkish modernization. The rapid modernization of the TAF through an external leverage (the NATO and military aids from the US) unlike other institutions in Turkey and the TAF's direct encounter with its modern counterparts in the West created an institution like a king without a throne.

After the 1960 military intervention, the TAF gained a strong voice in Turkish politics through the establishment of the National Security Council (NSC) and increased its exclusive control over security and foreign policy under the Cold War conditions. This institutional privilege, ability to go above and beyond the constitutional authority of democratically elected governments and other state institutions, was based on an ideological legitimacy which made the TAF as the ultimate guardian of the Kemalist identity in Turkey.¹² The 1960 military coup was followed by three short-dated military rules, two direct military interventions in 1971 and 1980, a post-modern coup of 1997, and an incessant military tutelage over civilian politics. With each intervention, the powers of the NSC were enhanced and various mechanisms to meddle in politics were created. However, the TAF preferred to return to the barracks and limited itself overseeing the trajectory of Turkish politics behind the curtains. This was the case until the 1990s when the TAF experienced its "golden age" in terms of its role in the formation and even execution of Turkish politics.¹³ Although the TAF was able to translate its high degree of political and institutional autonomy to the foreign policy area since the 1960 intervention, it gained an unchallenged influence in orchestrating foreign and security issues in the 1990s. Unlike the previous decades, the TAF became the ruler in sight. The fact of being constantly seen was realized by the TAF's active involvement in decision-making process. Accordingly, the military defined internal and external threats, determined foreign policy priorities, and even bypassed the civilian governments in signing agreements with foreign countries.

11 W. Hale, *Turkish foreign policy since 1774*, (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 96-97

12 Ü. Cizre-Sakallıoğlu, "The Anatomy of the Turkish Military's Political Autonomy", *Comparative Politics*, vol. 29, no. 2, (1997), pp. 151-166

13 İ. Uzgel, "Between Praetorianism and Democracy: The Role of the Military in Turkish Foreign Policy", *The Turkish Yearbook of International Relations*, vol. 34, (2003), pp. 187

However, it was the fact of being constantly seen that made the TAF open to criticism in the first decade of the 2000s.¹⁴ When intellectual and political campaign against the role of military in politics found an external leverage through Turkey's membership process to the EU after the 1999 Helsinki Summit, the TAF started to lose the ground. Curbing the institutional powers of the TAF with the ratification of EU harmonization packages in August of 2003 was followed by the ruling AKP's determined struggle to weaken the TAF's influence over Turkish politics. At this juncture, the AKP government introduced foreign policy as an instrument to counter the military's autonomy in politics. In other words, struggle over foreign policy issues in this decade were complementary part of a greater power struggle between the military, the ultimate guardian of the Kemalist secular regime, and Islam-friendly AKP government. There was an intimate relation between the struggle over foreign policy issues and the TAF's perception of the AKP as an Islamist party determined to bring an Islamic order to Turkey. Therefore, foreign policy functioned as an integral part of power relations/struggles between the Kemalist power block (the TAF, the Republican People's Party, bureaucratic elite, and some civil society organizations) and its main challenger, the Islam-friendly AKP. The outcome of this struggle in the first decade of the 2000s was the slow conquest of foreign policy arena by the civilian AKP government.¹⁵

The gradual reversal of the TAF's authority over foreign policy issues in the first decade of the 2000s had three important turning points accompanied by a permanent discursive shield. Turkey-EU relations provided a discursive shield to the AKP in its challenge against the traditional role of the military in Turkish politics. In other words, through a strategy of turning the EU accession process into an amplifier of its political agenda and reform programs, the JDP severed the military's autonomy in politics and the domestic power balance has been transformed into the government's remit.¹⁶ Although the military was highly concerned about the

14 See, A. Balcı, *Türkiye'de Militarist Devlet Söylemi, 1960-1983*, Ankara: Kadim Yayınları, 2011

15 G. Özcan, "The Changing Role of Turkey's Military in Foreign Policy Making", *UNISCI Discussion Papers* vol. 23 (2010), pp. 23-46

16 B. Duran, "JDP and Foreign Policy as an Agent of Transformation", Hakan Yavuz (ed), *The Emergence of a New Turkey: Democracy and the AK Party*, (The Salt Lake

consequences of reforms for its own autonomy in Turkish politics, it could not publicly block them due to “rhetorical entrapment”.¹⁷ As an institution committed to Westernization and joining to the EU, the military could not reject reforms all the way down. This created a discursive shield for the AKP’s policies aiming to limit military’s power in shaping both domestic and foreign policies. Added to military’s weakening position in domestic setting, the military lost its discursive supremacy in foreign policy issues because the AKP government utilized Europeanization in significant policy changes towards Cyprus, Iraq, Syria, and others.¹⁸ Under the discursive shield of Europeanization, the AKP was able to deprive the military of its necessary discourse and apparatus in shaping Turkish foreign policy.

Of all battles, the three came into prominence in terms of the transition of power in determining foreign policy from the military to the AKP government. The fight over Cyprus issue in 2004 was the first open clash between the AKP and the TAF and it resulted in reversing ‘the traditional conviction that Turkey’s civilian political class is too weak and self-absorbed to solve the key domestic and international problems effectively’.¹⁹ In 2004, coup plotters within the army as in the case of Sarikiz and Ayisigi attempted to use the Cyprus question to reverse the process by which the JDP gained an upper hand *vis-a-vis* the military because they believed that the Cyprus issue would provide the grounds for an ultimatum to be addressed to the government. However, the referendum of April 24, 2004 in Cyprus from which the AKP came out as a champion of Turkish national interest made

City: The University of Utah Press, 2006), pp. 281-305; K. İnat, and B. Duran, “AKP Dış Politikası: Teori ve Uygulama”, *Demokrasi Platformu*, vol. 1 (2006), pp. 1-39; T. Kardaş, “Turkey: Secularism, Islam, and the EU”, Stig Jarle Hansen, Atle Mosey & Tuncay Kardas (eds.) *The Borders of Islam: Exploring Samuel Huntington’s Faultlines, from Al-Andalus to the Virtual Ummah*, (London: Hurst and Company, 2009), pp. 191–210

- 17 Z. Sarigil, “Europeanization as institutional change: the case of the Turkish military”, *Mediterranean Politics*, vol. 12, no. 1, (2007), pp. 39-57
- 18 M. Müftüler Baç, and Y. Gürsoy, “Is There a Europeanization of Turkish Foreign Policy? An Addendum to the Literature on EU Candidates”, *Turkish Studies* vol. 11, no. 3, (2010), pp. 405-427
- 19 Ü. Cizre, “The Justice and Development Party and the Military: Recreating the Past after Reforming It”, Ümit Cizre (ed.) *Secular and Islamic Politics in Turkey: The Making of the Justice and Development Party*, (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 143

the coup plots fizzle out.²⁰ On the other hand, because the then coup plotters risked the alleged “national interests” of Turkey in Cyprus for their battle against the AKP government, the TAF lost its unchallenged authority as the ultimate guardian of Turkey’s national interests and civilian-political actors created more room to speak on national interests related to foreign policy issues. Although this challenge weakened the image of the TAF as the ultimate guardian of Turkish national interests, it did not result in a clear power shift from the TAF to civilian and democratically elected actors.

At the first quarter of 2007, the Turkish military came out strongly against the establishment of any direct relations with the Kurdistan Regional Government. This second phase in the fight between the AKP and the military over foreign policy issues had a transitory effect and produced a concrete result in terms of shaping foreign policy. After a long battle, governmental representatives entered into direct dialogue with Kurdish leaders of northern Iraq at the beginning of 2008, reflecting the general decline in the army’s independent political power in foreign policy-making.²¹ This transition of power in dominating Turkish foreign policy was tested and corrected in the case of Turkey’s relations with Israel. When the AKP challenged the TAF’s privileged position in Turkey’s relations with Israel at the dawn of the second decade of the 2000s, the military remained silent and contented itself with watching the AKP’s orchestrating relations with Israel. The military which orchestrated the process through which Israel became Turkey’s strongest strategic ally in the region after the second half of the 1990s not only behaved reticent against the cancellation of joint military exercises and military contracts with Israel but pointed also to the government as the only interlocutor in these affairs. Of all these three phases, northern Iraq as a transitory phase not only helps to illustrate changing of hegemonic relations between the secular block and its conservative counterpart in 2007-2008, but it also helps to understand how the military lost its upper hand in the formation and execution of Turkish foreign policy.

20 Hale and Özbudun, *Islamism, Democracy and Liberalism in Turkey*, p. 89

21 Hale, *Turkish foreign policy since 1774*, p. 137

The Northern Iraq between “Official” State Ideology and the AKP

After the emergence of a state-like Kurdish entity in the northern Iraq (Kurdistan Regional Administration) in the 1990s, the border between Turkey and Iraq has become contested because the Kurdish entity has reminded that the border does not reflect a “real” line between two different nations.²² In other words, the existence of a *de facto* independent Kurdish entity has been a reminder of the fact that Turkish nation state and its borders were constructed artificially. This new situation was consolidated by the dissemination of maps depicting the areas where the Kurds inhabit because these maps blurred the official border between Iraq and Turkey. In short, the emergence of the Kurdish entity in northern Iraq evinced the fact that the imagined nation-state and its territorial sovereignty do not correspond with the conditions on the ground.²³ Therefore, the Turkish state alarmed when the establishment of an independent Kurdish state became a clear possibility throughout the 1990s and the first half of the 2000s. The one of the main functions of Turkey’s foreign policy towards the Iraqi state was the solidification of the border differentiating the people assimilated to the Turkish nation from the people assimilated to the Iraqi nation. The relations between two different nation-states effaced the fact that the people living each sides of the border are Kurds and made the artificiality of the border inconspicuous.²⁴ The 1991 Gulf War resulting in a semi-independent Kurdish entity nullified the traditional function of the Turkey’s foreign relations with Iraq. In the eyes of Turkey’s policy makers, a state-like Kurdish entity become a permanent reminder of both the artificiality of border between Iraq and Turkey and imaginary character of the Turkish nation within the Turkish territory.

However, the idea of a state-like Kurdish entity in northern Iraq was not a nightmare or worst-case scenario for everyone in Turkey. Before the Iraqi elections in January of 2005 when Ankara’s policy of support for the Turcomans in order to counterbalance the Kurds of Iraq proved to be futile,²⁵ the then foreign minister Abdullah Gül criticized the policy based

22 Lundgren, *The Unwelcome Neighbour*

23 Lundgren, *The Unwelcome Neighbour*, p. 32

24 Lundgren, *The Unwelcome Neighbour*, pp. 34-35

25 G. Özcan, “Facing its Waterloo in Diplomacy: Turkey’s Military in the Foreign Policy-Making Process”, *New Perspectives on Turkey*, vol. 40, (2009), p. 99

on the use of Turkomans against the Kurds in northern Iraq. In his interview dated June 2004, he argued “until today, Turkey did not pursue a healthy policy about Iraqi Turkomans. The only society with whom Turkish citizens have historical and cultural ties is not Turkomans. It should be remembered that there are Kurdish origin citizens in Turkey”.²⁶ Like Gül, Davutoğlu, architect of the theoretical and intellectual background of Turkish foreign policy during the AKP era, problematized the artificiality of the border with the northern Iraq and argued in 2002 that “those who are from northern Iraq do not think of following the road from north to Basra at the south in order to reach the open sea, instead the road from Mosul to the Black Sea or Alexandretta both in Turkey”.²⁷ In his interview in 2004, Davutoğlu also emphasized the fact that the northern Iraq is not a region from which a military threat is directed to Turkey but a historical, cultural, and economic extension of Turkey.²⁸ This was a complete departure from the Kemalist understanding of the border with Iraq and therefore produced a clear shift of policy on the emerging Kurdish entity in this region. While the military advocated the unity of Iraq to prevent the emergence of an autonomous Kurdish entity in northern Iraq, the AKP promoted the unity of Iraq with the recognition of Kurdish entity together.

This shift of policy found a legitimate base for itself after the Iraqi elections of 2005 in which Iraqi Turkoman Front, an organization supported by Ankara, secured only 3 seats in parliament. Except the then Chief of Staff Hilmi Özkök, known as supporter for democratization of civil-military relations among staunchly Kemalist segment of the TAF, top-ranking generals were quite critical about this shifting of policy. For example, the then Land Force Commander Yaşar Büyükanıt accused the government of not having an Iraqi policy. Complaining that Turkey did not have a say in the ongoing restructuring process in Iraq, Büyükanıt asked “Do we have an Iraq policy?” and answered his own question by saying, “No, we don’t”.²⁹ The establishment of a state-like entity in northern Iraq was a challenge

26 A. Gül, “Türkiye Küresel barışın Teminatıdır”, *Anlayış*, No: 9, June 2004, p. 39

27 A. Davutoğlu, *Teoriden Pratiğe: Türk Dış Politikası Üzerine Konuşmalar*, 2nd Edition, (İstanbul: Küre Yayınları, 2013), p. 82

28 Davutoğlu, *Teoriden Pratiğe: Türk Dış Politikası Üzerine Konuşmalar*, p. 146

29 “Foreign Ministry responds to army criticism over Iraq”, *Turkish Daily News*, 18 March 2005

to the unitary nation-state idea of the Kemalist block and therefore the TAF and other Kemalist actors in Turkey declared their opposition to the recognition of such an entity. The secular establishment insisted on the unity of Iraq and non-recognition of the Kurds as a separate entity in order to pursue the unitary character of Turkish nation and defer the realization of the artificiality of Turkish nation. Therefore, the military and the secular establishment did not give the government much space in developing its own policies towards the northern Iraq. The then president Ahmet Necdet Sezer used every occasion to prevent an opening to Iraqi Kurds, vetoing for instance even invitations to Jalal Talabani who had assumed the presidency of Iraq simply because he was a Kurd.³⁰

Turkey's foreign relations with the newly-emerged Kurdish entity in northern Iraq have been a reflection of the internal power struggle among different blocks. The conflict over the northern Iraq was not only a result of different imaginations of border with Iraq but also it was a useful strategy in domestic power struggle. The way in which a state defines its national interest is integral part of domestic power struggle in which different groups use foreign policy issues to marginalize, deny, drive out, outlaw, and exclude the competing others. This is a competition over "the power to define the character of the nation and the principles on which it should be based".³¹ Unsurprisingly, the rift between the AKP government and the TAF over how to deal with Iraqi Kurds turned a fierce clash just as Turkey gears up for key presidential elections. Because it was domestic power struggle that turned relations between Turkey and northern Iraq to a battlefield, the clash over northern Iraq went hand in hand with domestic clashes between the AKP and secular Kemalist power block. Therefore, the fighting over northern Iraq was an integral part of a one-year process in which the military posted a so-called e-memorandum on its web site in 27 April, 2007, and a criminal court in İstanbul opened the Ergenekon investigation in the summer of 2007. The following part of the paper will attempt to evaluate the role of fighting over northern Iraq in domestic power struggle between the military (and Kemalist power block) and the AKP.

30 H. J. Barkey, "Turkey and Iraq: The Making of a Partnership", *Turkish Studies*, vol. 12, no. 4, (2011), p. 666

31 Lundgren, *The Unwelcome Neighbour*, p. 121

Three Phases of Fighting over Northern Iraq

The First Battle: The Policy of Rapprochement with the KRG

During his visit to Washington on 14 February 2007, Yaşar Büyükanıt declared that Turkey, since its formation, never faced as many risks and threats simultaneously as it faces now. He continued as the following: “On our borders there is the question of Iraq... The question of Iraq does not only have one aspect. The north of Iraq is a separate question... There is a terrorist organization in the north of Iraq. This is Turkey’s problem... Turkey has a problem over Cyprus. Moreover the Caucasus is an area of risks. We do not know how that may unfold in the future. Apart from these, Turkey has a common border with Iran. That is also a potential risk area. Turkey has never faced this number of questions altogether and simultaneously during its republican history”. In such an environment, for Büyükanıt, “as long as the dynamic forces (the military) protecting Turkey remain in place, no one can divide Turkey”.³² This reasoning was not an exception in Turkish politics. The Turkish Armed Forces traditionally had an absolute power in defining internal and external threats and assumed itself as a guarantee for the survival of the state against these imagined threats. Through its authority over the definitions of threats, the military was able to suspend all civilian mechanisms in decision-making process.

Büyükanıt’s depiction of Kurdish Regional Government as an existential threat towards the survival of state was reversal of the policy pursued by his predecessor Hilmi Özkök³³ and the AKP government in the last two years. After the election results in 2005 clearly indicated that Ankara’s policy of support for the Turcomans in order to counterbalance the Kurds of Iraq had failed, both Özkök and the AKP government began cultivating good relations with the KRG. However, the military changed its policy after

32 “Turkey faces more dangers than ever”, *Hurriyet Daily News*, 15 February 2007; Cengiz Çandar, “An exceptional reception for Büyükanıt in Washington”, *Hurriyet Daily News*, 15 February 2007; Ümit Enginson, “Büyükanıt warns separatists, Iraqi Kurds and ‘regime change seekers’”, *Hurriyet Daily News*, 15 February 2007

33 Among his fellow commander-in-chief, Hilmi Özkök was known as someone who was “acting as if he is in a secret agreement with the government” and responsible to keep the hard-liners waiting and softening their positions against the government. See. A. Balcı, “Foreign Policy as Politicking in the Sarıkız Coup Plot: Cyprus between the Coup Plotters and the JDP”, *Middle East Critique*, vol. 21 no. 2 (2012), pp. 157-170

Chief of General Staff Özkök retired in August 2006, and displayed a defiant stance under Yaşar Büyükanıt.³⁴ Therefore, Büyükanıt openly accused two leading Iraqi Kurdish groups, the KDP and PUK, of providing full support to the PKK and ruled out any talks between them and the TAF during his visit to Washington. As a reaction to this attempt reversing rapprochement policy, Erdoğan reiterated the government's determination to open official lines of communication with the civilian Kurdish leadership in northern Iraq. At the same day, Erdoğan declared that "steps could be taken in order to improve the relations with the Kurdish Regional Government in northern Iraq. Why not? Just so may this rapprochement bring welfare and peace and pave the way for positive developments".³⁵

The rift between the government and the TAF escalated when Büyükanıt said "both groups are fully supporting the PKK in northern Iraq" and "I have nothing to talk about with them". Added to this, military sources leaked information to the press that Büyükanıt would air the fact that Iraqi Kurdish leaders had kept supporting the PKK in the next National Security Council in order to undermine the government's policy of rapprochement with the KRG.³⁶ Against these salvos of Büyükanıt, Abdullah Gül, the then foreign minister, insisted that Ankara would keep talking to Iraqi groups, adding that "there are places where soldiers are supposed to talk and there are places where diplomats are supposed to do so".³⁷ Like his foreign minister, Prime Minister Erdoğan said that it would be the government who has the right to say the last word on the issue and characterized Büyükanıt's statement of not meeting with Iraqi Kurds "as a personal opinion and not reflective of an institution". This time, the TAF as an institution posted a brief statement in the web page of the General Staff in which it declared that "the views expressed by the chief of general staff naturally reflect the institutional stance of the General Staff, not his personal opinion".³⁸ Although the AKP government became increasingly outspoken against

34 G. Özcan, "The Changing Role of Turkey's Military in Foreign Policy Making", *UNISCI Discussion Papers* vol. 23, (2010), p. 38

35 Ferai Tınç, "Kürt hükümeti ile yakınlaşırız", *Hürriyet*, 15 February 2007

36 Fikret Bila, "Kanıtlar MGK'ya", *Milliyet*, 23 Şubat 2007

37 Özcan, "The Changing Role of Turkey's Military in Foreign Policy Making", p. 39

38 "Gov't, Military Rift Resurfaces Over Iraqi Kurds", *Today's Zaman*, 2 March 2007

the military instead of meeting criticism with silence,³⁹ it retreated in the first battle. As a result, KRG's Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani's plan to visit to Istanbul as part of the AKP government's policy of rapprochement was shelved. The policy of rapprochement was laid to rest for a while⁴⁰ and therefore the government's acquiescence on such an important foreign policy issue represented the military's ongoing decisive power over political thinking.

Nearly a one month-rift between the TAF and the AKP government over how to deal with the KRG was part of a greater rift centered on presidential election in April 2007. The army, a self-ordained guardian of Turkey's secular political order, was against the fact that Erdoğan or another top official of the AKP would become president on the ground that this would violate the secular character of the Turkish state. As part of a greater effort to discourage Erdoğan and other AKP members from becoming president, the military used the AKP's rapprochement policy with Kurdish Regional Government as an opportunity to prove the continuation of its power over Turkish politics.

Second Battle: Dispute over Incursion into Northern Iraq

The debate between the AKP and the TAF over how to deal with Kurdish Regional Government was succeeded by a much more critical conflict over the possibility of a cross-border operation into northern Iraq. İlker Başbuğ, the then Commander of Land Forces, suggested that "when military conditions required it, Turkey could at any time take whatever measures it saw suitable against the terrorist organizations in northern Iraq" in March 11, 2007. Başbuğ's statement was coincided with the deployment of Turkish military forces along the border with Iraq.⁴¹ The TAF increased its tone over the possibility of a cross-border operation when the dispute over the presidential election reached a boiling point. In a press conference, Büyükanıt both underlined the necessity of an operation into Iraq and

39 Özcan, "The Changing Role of Turkey's Military in Foreign Policy Making", p. 39

40 "Rafa kalkan 'Barzani'yle temas' MGK'da konuşulacak", *Hürriyet*, 20 February 2007; "Ben bir kabile reisiyle görüşmem", *Milliyet*, 8 June 2007

41 Hale and Özbudun, *Islamism, Democracy and Liberalism in Turkey*, p. 90

defined features of would-be president.⁴² Büyükanıt said that “an operation into Iraq is necessary. Would it be useful? Yes, it would. But there needs to be a political decision. If given a task, the TAF has exceedingly the luxury to launch an operation on the legal ground”. He also explained the idea of the TAF about candidate for presidency by saying that “we hope the next president will be somebody whose deeds not just words are bound by the basic values of the republic including secularism”. As in this press conference, clash over Iraq was not overshadowed by the dispute over presidency;⁴³ rather it went hand in hand with the latter. By saying that “we can do it, we want to do it and we think it’s worth the trouble” and asking for a written order authorizing an incursion into northern Iraq, Büyükanıt skillfully tossed the ball into the government’s court. Passing the decision on a would-be operation into northern Iraq to the government does not mean a “harmony between the government and the military”; on the contrary Büyükanıt was determined to “destabilize the government”.⁴⁴

Despite the harsh exchange of statements between Erdoğan and Barzani before Büyükanıt’s call for a cross-border operation, the AKP was distinctly averse to using military measures in northern Iraq. As part of the dispute over the referendum in Kirkuk province that might lead it to join the Kurdish region, Barzani stated that Iraqi Kurds could “interfere” in Kurdish-majority Turkish cities such as Diyarbakır if Ankara interfered in Kirkuk. Barzani’s remarks provoked a severe reaction from Erdoğan and he warned that “Northern Iraq is making a serious mistake: The price for them will be very high”.⁴⁵ Although he disputed with Barzani over the status of Kirkuk, Erdoğan did not give a positive response to Büyükanıt’s call for a cross-border incursion into northern Iraq. Soon later, Turkey was drawn into domestic political turmoil by the military memorandum that appeared on the General Staff site on 27 April and the government’s reaction to call

42 “Top Turkish Commander Büyükanıt: Military Operation Into Northern Iraq Necessary”, *Today’s Zaman*, 12 April 2007; “Top General Calls For a Cross-border Operation to Northern Iraq”, *Turkish Daily News*, 13 April 2007

43 Hale and Özbudun, *Islamism, Democracy and Liberalism in Turkey*, p. 90

44 Andrew Finkel, “General Büyükanıt - the Great Performer”, *Today’s Zaman*, 13 April 2007

45 Suzan Fraser, “Turkey Warns Iraqi Kurds on Interference”, *The Washington Post*, 9 April 2007

for a snap election. In June, rising PKK violence against Turkish soldiers such as killing of seven Turkish soldiers in the province of Tunceli on June 4th brought the idea of cross-border operation into the country's agenda. On the eve of an early general election on July 22nd, the generals were shifting blame for the violence to the AKP government by pointing to the government's unwillingness to approve for a cross-border operation against the PKK. For the military, the AKP would risk losing nationalist votes when the PKK continue to kill Turkish soldiers in the absence of the approval to strike in Iraq.⁴⁶

The use of a risky issue in foreign policy to delegitimize civilian governments was often applied by military generals who saw Islam-friendly parties as an existential threat to secular identity of the Kemalist state. For example, the TAF chose not to play an assertive role during the decision process whether Turkey would let to open a second front on its own territories for the US's Iraqi invasion in 2003 and left the responsibility to the government. This was unusual when the history of civil-military relations and the military's involvements in politics in Turkey are considered. For some AKP members who preferred to remain anonymous, "the military did not want to share the responsibility of such an unpopular and risky decision and planned to let the AKP 'fall upon its face' by letting them go ahead with the motion".⁴⁷ Similarly, the military attempted to utilize the PKK question and the northern Iraq in order to weaken the AKP on the eve of the early general elections of 2007. The nationalist fervor on the rise due to frequent funerals of martyrs lost to the PKK attacks provided a fertile ground for an anti-AKP mobilization. According to the TAF, painting the AKP as weak on the national security issue by referencing its unwillingness to authorize a large-scale military intervention against the PKK in northern Iraq would weaken its attractiveness among the PKK-weary Turkish people.⁴⁸ Therefore, potential military incursion into Northern Iraq became the main burning issue of political debate before the general elections and the

46 "Turkey and Northern Iraq: To Go or Not To Go", *The Economist*, 7 June 2007

47 Z. Taydaş, and Ö. Özdamar "A Divided Government, an Ideological Parliament, and an Insecure Leader: Turkey's Indecision about Joining the Iraq War", *Social Science Quarterly*, vol. 94, no. 1, (2013), p. 230

48 M. M. Gunter, and M. H. Yavuz, "Turkish Paradox: Progressive Islamists versus Reactionary Secularists", *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 16, no. 3, (2007), p. 295

election for presidency. Entire campaign of nationalist opposition parties was full with promises to take necessary measures against the PKK camps in the northern Iraq as suggested by the military.

General Yaşar Büyükanıt reiterated his determination to make a cross-border incursion in 1 June, 2007. Having said “as soldiers, we are ready”, Büyükanıt repeated that “the political authorities need to decide this”. He also tried to pressure the government to approve military action against the PKK by deploying additional tanks and troops to the border area with Iraq.⁴⁹ When the government felt under heavy pressure of the General Staff and of a nationalist wave to engage in a cross-border incursion into northern Iraq so as to crush the source of the PKK terrorism, Erdoğan reacted by saying that “there are numbers we receive. There are 500 terrorists in Iraq; there are 5,000 terrorists inside Turkey. Has the fight with terrorism inside Turkey ended so that we can think about the luxury of dealing with 500 people in northern Iraq?”⁵⁰ As a response, *Cumhuriyet*, one of leading secular dailies in Turkey, published a report showing there were 3,800 terrorists in northern Iraq and 1,600 terrorists in Turkey. The TAF also called the Turkish people to demonstrate their collective opposition against the terrorist attacks.⁵¹ As a result, the increasing pressure from the top generals created a useful “tool” to weaken the political popularity of the AKP before the general elections of 22nd July. Not surprisingly, main oppositional parties built their election campaign on the rhetoric of entering Iraq to deal with the PKK⁵² because more than 50 percent of all voters and almost 40 percent of AKP supporters agreed that Turkey should intervene in northern Iraq according to a public survey.⁵³ While the Republican People’s Party (CHP) leader Deniz Baykal said that “this government, Prime Minister Erdoğan is the most important obstacle in front of Turkey’s fight against terrorism”, the Nationalist Action Party leader Devlet Bahçeli called Erdoğan as “the architect of dark and

49 “Turkey Deploys Extra Troops to Iraq Border as Tension With Kurds Grows”, *The Guardian*, 1 June 2007

50 “Gov’t’s Final Word on Incursion: NO”, *Hurriyet Daily News*, 13 June 2011; “Erdoğan Resists Calls for Northern Iraq Incursion”, *Today’s Zaman*, 13 June 2007

51 “Week in Review”, *Hürriyet Daily News*, 16 June 2007

52 R. Karakaya-Polat, “The 2007 Parliamentary Elections in Turkey: Between Securitisation and Desecuritisation”, *Parliamentary Affairs*, vol. 62, no. 1, (2009), pp. 129-148

53 Tarhan Erdem, “Irak’a Müdahale”, *Radikal*, 05 July 2007

bloody situation” in Turkey.⁵⁴

Against this nationalist pressure, the AKP pursued a two-tier policy. While the government argued for a powerful military response to the PKK in northern Iraq during the elections campaign with the aim of not missing the nationalist votes, on the one hand, it kept to stress the negative timing and the possible results of this military confrontation, on the other. Although the military and other nationalist oppositions used all their cards against the AKP on possible incursion to the northern Iraq, the public remained opposed to such an incursion and eventually interpreted the increase in terrorist activities three months before the elections as a plot against the government by asking whether the military were deliberately pursuing a confrontational policy to undermine the AKP.⁵⁵ Added to this, the campaign pushed Kurdish-origin citizens of Turkey to the AKP because the military’s pressure over the government was perceived by Kurds as an attempt to re-militarize the Kurdish issue. The election results with the AKP’s clear victory made the campaign to drive the AKP into corner on the issue of northern Iraq fizzled out. While a possible military incursion into Northern Iraq continued to dominate the political agenda after the election, the AKP gained a discursive and political advantage against the military in the ongoing power struggle.

The AKP Relieved: Operation into Northern Iraq

The AKP’s landslide victory in general elections and Abdullah Gül’s election to Presidency not only consolidated civilian government’s power but they also eroded the power and credibility of the military. In this new environment, the TAF’s request for a cross-border operation was acceptable in the eyes of the AKP leaders. After months of resistance to the TAF’s request, the PKK’s increasing attacks over Turkish targets accelerated the process. The PKK’s killing 15 Turkish soldiers on Mountain Gabar, located on the Iraq-Turkey border, on 7 October 2007 resulted in the rise of public rage against the government’s repugnance for cross-border operations and pressure on the government to allow the TAF to stage across-border operations increased dramatically. As a result, the AKP government

54 “Week in Review”, *Hürriyet Daily News*, 16 June 2007

55 M. H. Yavuz, *Secularism and Muslim Democracy in Turkey*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 257-258

brought a motion to parliament allowing military operations in Iraq, which was passed with the support of opposition on 17 October. However, the PKK increased its attacks on Turkish targets and 12 Turkish soldiers were killed, 16 wounded, and 8 abducted in Dağlıca, a small village in Hakkari province, on 21 October. When funerals of soldiers sparked an outpouring of public anger in towns and cities across the country, and centrally organised nationalist mobs attacked DTP party offices, the AKP government intensified its preparations for a cross-border operation against the PKK in northern Iraq. For that reason, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan paid a visit to Washington on November 5 and discussed a possible military operation to northern Iraq with the Bush administration. Additionally, the Bush administration proposed a tripartite coordination mechanism between Turkey, the US, and Iraq against the PKK and promised to supply a real-time intelligence on the PKK activities in Iraq.

The AKP government skillfully tossed the ball back into the military's court because such an operation would both bring the military solution of the PKK problem in northern Iraq into public criticism and force the TAF to quit its insistence on its own way of dealing with the autonomous Kurdish entity. From 16 to 23 December and on 16 January, Turkey launched a series of targeted bombing raids on PKK camps in northern Iraq. Air attacks were followed by a major land and air incursion on 21 February 2008. However, the land operation came to an abrupt end in 29 February, a day after Robert Gates, US defence secretary, visited Ankara to urge Turkey to leave quickly. Added to the US pressure, Büyükanıt explained the unexpected timing of the pull-out by saying that "we could not carry out the operation for another week, otherwise we would have suffered losses" due to the cold weather. Büyükanıt also came to conclusion that the struggle against the PKK could not be won "through military measures alone".⁵⁶ This last statement was quite symbolic in transferring the decision how to deal with the northern Iraq to the civilian actors. As a result of this acceptance, the military never attempted to make a cross-border operation again although the Turkish parliament gave the military permission for such kind operations for a one-year period.

56 Selcan Hacaoglu, "Turkey May Launch New Incursion in Iraq", *The Washington Post*, 3 March 2008

After this operation, the AKP government simply came to have control over Turkey's northern Iraq policy. Accordingly, Iraqi President Jalal Talabani paid a visit to Ankara on March 7 one week after the Turkish military ended its operation against the PKK in northern Iraq. Hasan Cemal presented Talabani's visit as a first sign of the new process in which "a new wheel is starting to turn". For him, the AKP government was starting "a new civil operation" regarding the Kurdish issues domestic and regional.⁵⁷ For Cengiz Çandar, this visit proved "how deeply the 'state tradition' was wounded in Ankara" because "Talabani is the president of a country which is boycotted by the Turkish military".⁵⁸ More importantly, Turkey's National Security Council (MGK) meeting on 24 April 2008 declared that the TAF agreed that it would be in Turkey's interests to continue consultations with all Iraqi groups and actors. This was a direct message to the Kurdish Regional Government in northern Iraq for a possible dialogue process. As part of abandoning his policy of refusing to deal directly with the KRG, Erdoğan's then advisor Ahmet Davutoğlu went to Arbil in 30 April, 2008, and met with Nechirvan Barzani, the then prime minister of the Kurdish Regional Government.

Conclusion

Neither the military's look to the government for approving cross-border operation⁵⁹ nor the AKP's approval of the military's request for such an operation⁶⁰ can be called as a policy of cooperation between the government and the military. While putting the ball into the government's court on the eve of 2007 general elections by the TAF aimed to make the government look undecided and weak on such a vital issue as the fight against the PKK, letting the military go into northern Iraq after two electoral victories weakened the authority of the TAF on the PKK question. This clearly shows that Turkey's foreign relation with northern Iraq in 2007 was a part of domestic power struggle between the AKP and the military. The military attempted to utilize the northern Iraq through the representation of danger

57 Hasan Cemal, "PKK'ya Yönelik Yeni Bir Çark", *Milliyet*, 9 March 2008

58 Cengiz Çandar, "The 'Two States' in Ankara", *Hürriyet Daily News*, 12 March 2008

59 Aydın, "A Paradigmatic Shift for The Turkish Generals and an End to The Coup Era in Turkey", p. 591

60 Lundgren, *The Unwelcome Neighbour*, p. 125

that legitimizes the political role of the military as guardian on the one hand, the AKP government used cross-border operation to make the military more vulnerable to criticisms by bringing it into real politics, on the other. These strategies, however, were not intentional acts of pre-given subjects; instead hegemonic relations between the AKP and the military made the northern Iraq functional for power strategies. Given the definition of national security is crucial in reproducing the military's role as the guardian of the regime and in undermining any civilian input in security policy⁶¹, fighting over the northern Iraq was strongly related to hegemonic relations between different power blocks in Turkey.

The period between 2006 and 2008 can be called as a turning point for the civil-military relations in Turkey because for the first time these relations transformed in favor of the civilian actors. Therefore, explanations for the failure of the TAF in pursuing its ability to go above and beyond the constitutional authority of democratically elected governments are of great importance. Of studies attempting to explain the transformation of civil-military relations during the AKP period, those with no reference to foreign relations of Turkey at that time will remain inadequate.

61 Ü. Cizre, "Ideology, Context and Interest: The Turkish Military", Reşat Kasaba (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Turkey: Turkey in the Modern World*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 304

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