



## WHAT IS THE TURKISH MILITARY'S STRATEGIC IDENTITY AFTER JULY 15?

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## Introduction

Turkish civil-military relations (CMR)<sup>1</sup> have been undergoing a revolutionary civilianization process since the attempted July 15 coup.<sup>2</sup> Purges in the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) began on July 27 under a state of emergency decree law in the Official Gazette and continue to uproot each branch of the military. Most affected by these summary dismissals were the commanding elites of generals and admirals.

Of the 325 generals in the army, navy, and air force, 149 (45.8%) were discharged. Among them were two four-star generals, nine lieutenant generals, 30 major generals and vice admirals, and 126 brigadier generals and rear admirals.<sup>3</sup> Among those 149 generals, nearly 44% of land force generals, 42% of air force generals, and 58% of navy admirals were formally discharged.<sup>4</sup> An additional 586 colonels were retired by the Supreme Military Council (YAŞ) on August 23 to make the officer corps younger.<sup>5</sup> Among the discharged TSK generals and colonels were some important names leading the TSK's transformation process. There are strong suspicions that one of the leaders of the coup attempt was Maj. Gen. Mehmet Dişli, the chief of the strategic transformation office at the Turkish General Staff (TCGB) who was responsible for the monitoring of all active transformation projects and for designing the new project. He was running the transformation process of the Turkish military's personnel policies. Also among the expelled were Lt. Gen. Salih Ulusoy, the chief of TCGB's Command of Plans and Principles (J5), an important command in charge of relations with NATO, strategic foresighting and future planning, budgetary planning, and the TSK's relations with other militaries of the world; Maj. Gen. Nevzat Tasdeler, the commander of the Staff College; Maj. Gen. Salih Sevil, serving as Turkey's representative at NATO; and Maj. Gen. Serhat Habiboğlu, responsible for force development at TSK headquarters. The list of expelled generals further shows most were officers who gave priority to Atlantic ties and held strong pro-NATO stances, which no doubt will have major effects on the TSK's strategic identity and organizational culture.

Although the military has been undergoing a gradual civilianization process for the past decade and

a half, this new revolutionary civilianization can also be taken as "predatory civilianization." With the involvement of the deep-seated "parallel state" structure of the Gülenist Terror Organization (FETÖ), the militant followers of the U.S.-based imam Fethullah Gülen, the TSK, once a coup-wielding organization capable of severe political pressure turned more professional and less political, or one could say less Huntingtonian and more Janowitzian,<sup>6</sup> has once again become one of the largest political concerns in Turkish government and society. The presidential civilian government is now exerting a force on the military reciprocal to that of the force the military once exerted on civilian governments. Although an extensive purge of coup plotters in the TSK is the optimum end, the process has struck a blow to the morale of the TSK and its institutional identity.

As the ideologies and worldviews of the military are not often cited by government or academics, the ideological underbelly of the military is a "black box" waiting to be opened. This paper will invite a brief look into this black box as it appears after July 15.

## Typologies and Outlooks: The TSK's Identity in the Post-July 15 Setting

Right now there is a need to understand a more detailed profile of the Turkish officer corps in order to foresee the possible directions in which the TSK might pivot after July 15. As the civilians have taken control of the Armed Forces, the TSK might reinforce or disengage from preexisting military reform plans and move forward on a path toward new ones. Continuing transformation may be supported by civilians; however, if the rapid rate of civilianization in the TSK continues, these shifting balances of power within the military may exclude the military voice itself.

When Chief of the General Staff Hulusi Akar assumed office in August 2015, he had in mind hundreds of plans to institutionally transform the TSK — a plan reminiscent of the Cold War machine regarding culture, organizational structure, mentality, and job positions. Before the failed coup attempt on July 15, the mentality and need for transformation behind the chain of command was clear-cut;

however, the question of how this transformation would unfold was ongoing. The deficit of intellectual capacity left by FETÖ members who nested themselves into the Turkish army has yet to be fully felt and understood. By infiltrating the transformation efforts of the TSK, FETÖ also embarked on designing the institution in light of its own secret agenda. Now the question is simple: How much of this capacity for institutional transformation remains in the minds of those in the TSK's chain of command, and furthermore, how resolute are they in achieving this aim?

The institutional transformation of the TSK became politicized following the events of July 15. Adopting an ideological lens makes it difficult to examine the current picture from a technical or apolitical standpoint. For instance, one cannot question the fact that the TSK became a "warehouse for colonels" before July 15. As of April 2016, there were about 5,500 (12%) colonels for every 40,000 officers.<sup>7</sup> This proportion skyrocketed in the land forces command as there were 4,000 colonels for every 21,000 officers. This means that there was one colonel for every five officers, so questioning the fact that this number had increased in past years is not a matter for political debate. Comparing these numbers to modern armies throughout the world, there is one colonel for every 100 officers in the U.S. Army and an average of three colonels for every 100 officers in the British and Israeli armies. It is obvious that there are hundreds of "photocopier" colonels in the TSK, i.e. colonels whose only task is to make photocopies at headquarters. In this sense, the colonel cadre has become replaceable.

Why has this issue become political? Prior to the coup, putschist Mehmet Partigöç carried out a plan to retire 1,500 colonels who had been in their positions from 1985 to 1988. Due to the ideological views of Partigöç, this move became branded as a FETÖ project. In the public eye, this project carried out by the putschists to "purge Kemalist colonels" needs to be shelved. The measures taken at the August 23 YAŞ meeting have been a precursory solution; however, additional measures are needed to continue to cut this cadre.

The question now is simple: How can the TSK attempt to undergo institutional transformation

while remaining vulnerable in light of this extreme politicization? Will the TSK go back to the status quo, or will the transformation process and the current situation turn it into "something" else? In order to answer these questions particularly from the institutional transformation perspective, it is possible to delineate three different types of senior officers.

**Symbionts** (senior officers who have a parasitic relationship with the TSK): This type of senior officer thinks that they have already paid their dues for their past service and that they are entitled to kick back while it is the system's turn to look after them. In this way, there is a one-sided relationship with the institution. The indolent officer, who staunchly defends the status quo, is uncomfortable with the prospect of transformation, something that would inevitably lead to more risk and more work. The symbiont tries to do away with these transformation initiatives by wasting time and attending meetings. The symbiont, who would defend the status quo until death, is the embodiment of the saying "you can't teach an old dog new tricks" and is adverse to innovation. Symbionts do not enjoy taking risks, and they very strictly follow in the footsteps taken before them.

**Pragmatists** (senior officers who only think of their careers and have opportunist relationships with the TSK): This type of senior officer consistently follows the status quo or trends that are happening inside the institution and falls on the side of what would be the best for their career. Out of all the types of senior officers, the pragmatists are most vulnerable to being politicized and emphasize the short term instead of the values of the institutional system or long-term strategic vision. A pragmatist who has been at work for two or three years and tends to follow popular trends can appear to be either a follower of the status quo or a transformationalist. As the pragmatists tend to follow popular trends in the TSK as well as decisions of policy makers and the opinions of their commanders, they either take a risk and become a transformationalist or are risk adverse and choose the status quo. However, a majority of the pragmatists will go the latter route, as this also always seems to work in their favor, i.e. staff colonels. Staying below the radar is seen as a type of job security for pragmatists. None of the staff colonels' names or their po-

litical preferences were placed on any lists or published on the internet or in the media following the Balyoz (Sledgehammer) and Ergenekon cases or July 15 as they attempted to preserve their position for generalship.

**Transformationalists** (senior officers who are not pleased with the current situation and who want to see the TSK turn into “something” else): The transformationalists are an enemy to the status quo as they are constantly criticizing the TSK’s culture, organizational structure, and the nature of job positions. They also believe that the TSK falls behind (in either technology or tactics/techniques) when compared with global armies. The following groups are two classes of transformationalist senior officers:

**Originalist transformationalists:** According to these more traditionally minded transformationalists, the current values held by the TSK have diverged from the ideals espoused during the early years of the Turkish Republic (proactive and exclusive secularism, etatism, nationalism, elitism and enlightenment, among others). In order to reach their goals without diverging from the intended path, the current system needs to be completely done away with and then returned to the original principles (almost like a factory reset). According to this type, the thing that needs to be prioritized and addressed above all else is the mental and ideological system of values within the TSK.

**Progressive transformationalists:** This type, who are not as stuck in the past as the originalist transformationalists, thinks that the TSK must move forward with the present situation as it stands now. Generally speaking, the progressives, who do not have as much of a values-oriented approach as the last type, are of the opinion that changes need to be made to society, Turkish CMR, and the global security environment.

An example may better illustrate these typologies. For instance, think about the discussion of whether or not the graduates of *imam hatip* religious high schools should become officers and non-commissioned officers in the Turkish army. The originalists would not accept this under any circumstances as it would be deviating from the “ideal type.” The

	Nationalist	Globalist
Rightist	Conservatives	Atlanticists
Leftist	Neo-nationalist	Eurasianists

Table 1. Prominent ideologies within the Turkish military

symbionts would remain uninterested in this debate, while the pragmatists could either be for or against it depending on the tide of politics and the stance taken by their higher-ups, such as the chief commanders. As for the case of the progressives, they would conduct a cost-benefit analysis. If the analysis revealed that the need for societal change prevailed over the need to stick with the current system, then they would be in support of allowing graduates from *imam hatip* religious high schools becoming officers and non-commissioned officers.

In addition to the typologies among senior officers, it is possible to classify the viewpoints and political tendencies of generals as follows (see Table 1).

**Conservatives** (*mukaddesatçı*, in Turkish): Typically, these generals do not have knowledge of a foreign language, do not have experience training in foreign countries, and do not hold offices in foreign countries. They tend not to be concerned with developments in the international system and the global security environment. These types of generals are pro-status quo, reactive, and normally pragmatists, but sometimes their symbiont sensibilities can come to the forefront.

Conservatives are nostalgic for the time period before 1923, making the difference between religiosity and nationalism visible (for example, a conservative would allow religious practices such as Friday prayers and fasting inside the barracks and would act in a particular manner such as using prayer beads, talking colloquially, and using local expressions). This type of general thinks that areas outside of Turkey’s borders are dangerous and views anyone outside of Turkey with suspicion (this can even sometimes include civilians in Turkey).

**Neo-nationalists** (*ulusalçı*, in Turkish): In contrast to the conservative, this type of general views the period before 1923 as an era of darkness but similarly does not have high competence of a foreign language or much international experience. This type will view anything that happens outside Tur-

key with suspicion and most of the time will lean towards a reactive/nationalist attitude. In addition to showing pragmatic tendencies, the neo-nationalists are critical of preserving the TSK's traditional institutional identity and the continuation of the status quo, similar to the originalists.

**Atlanticists:** These types of generals typically have a decent level of knowledge of a foreign language, are well educated, and have undergone at least one foreign assignment. Furthermore, these generals aim at reaching a level of NATO professionalism. Atlanticists think that NATO and its value system, as well as the structure and the conditions of jobs within the U.S. Army, are ideal. This school of thought is similar to the way in which the originalists think of Republican ideals. Furthermore, the Atlanticists perceive that the TSK is an important part of the Western security environment, with the United States in the lead. This type of general thinks the TSK must rank among the best armies around the world in order to increase its presence on the world stage.

**Eurasianists:** Like the Atlanticists, the Eurasianists have a good grasp of foreign languages, a good academic education, and at least one post abroad. However, unlike the Atlanticist, the Eurasianist is more independent and anti-American. They hold the opinion that the TSK should be more independent and are as against NATO as a neo-nationalist is. They believe that the center of global power should be shifted east. Since the Eurasianist is more well read, he is not as color blind as the neo-nationalist.

The vast majority of the officers who were forced to separate from the TSK between 2010-2014 during the Balyoz, Ergenekon, and the Izmir Spy Cases were idealists, some were neo-nationalists, and some were originalists. There were also more senior officers being promoted who were Eurasianists, and it is known that the Eurasianists had tendencies towards being transformationalists. The TSK had slid to the right during these intellectual purges, which provided FETÖ with an opportunity to take hold of the process, a painful lesson that we have all learned from.

As for the process following July 15, in contrast we see that those who were on the list to be expunged

from the TSK were either conservatives or Atlanticists. It is possible to say from these lists that the FETÖ members nesting in the units showed the characteristics of Atlanticists and were governing the TSK's institutional transformations. These facts emerged during a number of coup plotters' testimonies following July 15. In addition, a list of those who used the mobile messaging app WhatsApp to plot the coup included a number of military staff who had served in NATO missions. As a consequence of these dismissals, the TSK is now going left after July 15. However, the intellectual Left is now much more reactive and nationalist after undergoing such unjust treatment in the previous era, with stronger wills after having been proven right about FETÖ. What is even more important is that the originalist tendency is even stronger than before. The effects of FETÖ on the Atlanticists and the subsequent dismissals were, to a great extent, the reason why so much momentum has been lost.

## Conclusion

One of the worst ways the putschists harmed Turkey the night of July 15 was to take away the will and capacity of the TSK to continue with its institutional transformation. Prior to the coup, the military had been on a path toward change; however, the way forward has now been covered up. Instead, the civilian government now leads the way down an alternative path to an end we cannot know. The military is now suffering the same shock and fear that the putschists brought upon the civilians during the coup.

Previous efforts to turn the TSK into “something” else are clearly now over. If the TSK was falling prey to FETÖ, then it is a good thing these efforts are over. However, the TSK is now left vulnerable. Will the TSK continue its transformation process, or will it return to the pre-July 15 status quo? If by any chance the policy makers and the chain of command cannot reach a clear decision, then no military reforms will come to fruition.

July 15 not only brought rapid civilianization into fashion, but it also marked a trend within the Turkish military: conservatives and Atlanticists out. It seems for now that the Eurasianists will hold on to their influence and ranks, but for how long remains a question to be answered. Who will come to replace FETÖ members masquerading as transformationalist Atlanticists? Recent dismissals and appointments of key military personnel close to the president will ultimately alter the pre-coup ideological balance within the Turkish military and signal the changing outlook of the TSK. However, whether the military faces East or West, remains open or closes, hangs on to the status quo or moves forward is still one of the greatest matters of speculation in Turkey.

## ENDNOTES

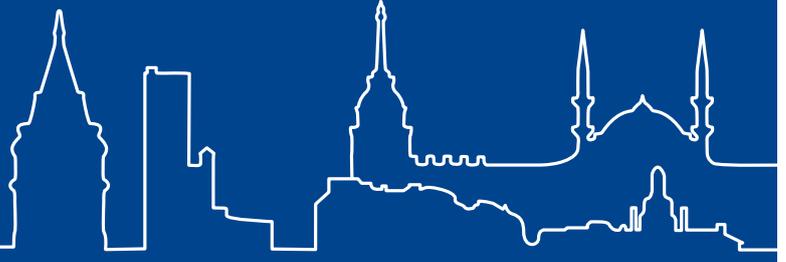
- 1 | The literature on CMR revolves around the nature of the relationship between what is civilian (governments, civil society, academia, media, think tanks) and what is military. It is mainly because of the problem of explaining the complex relationship between what is civilian and what is military that historians, political scientists, sociologists, anthropologists, and military strategists have all made important contributions to expand the scholarly grasp of the field. Work done by both Samuel Huntington and Morris Janowitz dating back 60 years is still relevant for contemporary debates regarding CMR. Huntington's *The Soldier and the State* and Janowitz's *The Professional Soldier* not only methodically combined empirical research on CMR with systematic theorizing for the first time but also led to the emergence of different paths within research on CMR. That is, political science studies of CMR, on the one hand, have mostly followed Huntington's tradition and are mostly concerned with the question of how civilian political leaders can maintain civilian control or the subordination of the military under the legitimate elected civilian leadership. Janowitz, on the other hand, concentrates more on the cultural norms, values, and societal factors affecting militaries and the relationship between the soldiers and civilians.
- 2 | Metin Gurcan and Megan Gisclon, "From Autonomy to Full-fledged Civilian Control: The Changing Nature of Turkish Civil-Military Relations after July 15," *IPC-Mercator Policy Brief* (Istanbul: Istanbul Policy Center, August 2016), accessed August 25, 2016, [http://ipc.sabanciuniv.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/July-15\\_Gisclon\\_Gurcan.pdf](http://ipc.sabanciuniv.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/July-15_Gisclon_Gurcan.pdf).
- 3 | Metin Gurcan, "Will the Turkish Military turn East or West?" *Al-Monitor*, August 23, 2016, accessed August 25, 2016, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/08/turkey-what-is-next-for-military-east-west-both.html>.
- 4 | Metin Gurcan, "What Went Wrong with Turkey's WhatsApp Coup," *Al-Monitor*, July 19, 2016, accessed August 25, 2016, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/07/turkey-coup-attempt-basic-cause-was-premature-birth.html>.
- 5 | "Military council retired nearly 600 colonels," *Hurriyet Daily News*, August 24, 2016, 04.
- 6 | Gurcan and Gisclon, "From Autonomy to Full-fledged Civilian Control."
- 7 | As noted above, this number has recently changed after the August 23 YAŞ meeting in which 586 colonels were retired: 470 from the land forces, 71 from the naval forces, and 45 from the air force.







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