Globalization, the Paradox of Security Discourse and Change in Turkey

1. Introduction

The security discourse in Turkey has been one of the prominent issues in the debates about the prospects for democratization and political change in the country. Its prevalence is due to the strength of the military’s monopoly over the definition of threats and appropriate responses to these threats in addition to its involvement in Turkish political life. As the key actor in determining the security discourse in Turkey, the military faced a new challenge in the 1990s. On one hand, as a consequence of globalization, new threats emerged, requiring the broadening of the scope of security measures, and thus increasing the power of the military as an institution. On the other hand, new norms of democratic governance promoted by international actors, especially the European Union, required a reassessment of security and the role of the military in Turkish politics. This paper analyzes the paradox of security discourse in Turkey as a result of these two challenges and discusses the possibilities for changing the Turkish security discourse along more democratic lines and the success of attempts to achieve this. However, in order to do this, the paper first discusses the traditional security discourse of Turkey and how its scope was broadened in the 1990s.
2. The National Security Discourse in Turkey

“Turkey’s definition of security has been more in military than non-military terms”\(^1\) and the main concern has been the preservation of the territorial integrity of the state and prevention of threats that could easily arise from Turkey’s unique regional position and strategic importance. The focus on the military aspect of security reinforced the importance and power of the military over civilian institutions and facilitated the establishment of the military’s monopoly over the definition of Turkey’s security discourse.

Historical factors also contributed to the establishment of the military’s monopoly. The importance of military conquests for the continuation of state power during the Ottoman era,\(^2\) the lack of a tradition of separating civilian authority from military authority and the army’s priority in the modernization process increased the influence of the military in political life.\(^3\) The role played by officers during the Turkish War of Independence as the leaders of the struggle and the founders of the republic also legitimized the existence of the military in political life afterwards.\(^4\) As the founding institution of the republic, the military took over the role of the “guardian of norms and core institutions of the Ataturkian legacy”\(^5\) and this self-appointed guardian role enabled the army to define the ideology of the state and the threats to state and its ideology, and justified its interventions into civilian politics at different times. The resulting structure was a democracy under the tutelage of the military, which could interfere in politics when the civilians failed to cope with threats to the integrity of the country\(^6\) and this structure became stronger in the absence of a civil society tradition in Turkey.\(^7\)
“The founders of the state and the bureaucratic-military elite that succeeded them envisaged a controlled linear course for Turkish development”. However, especially in the 1990s, this idea of social engineering proved to be difficult because of the globalization process that initiated new internal conflicts. Kurdish separatism, the intensifying PKK violence and the rise of political Islam were the major domestic problems of the period and these problems initiated a redefinition of the national security discourse in Turkey. As guardians of the regime, the military perceived these problems as internal threats to the character of the state and redefined security discourse accordingly, broadening its scope to internal as well as external threats.

The broadening of this security understanding as “equal to the protection of the existence of the state and the nation against internal and external threats” provided a wide range of areas in which the military can interfere legally and legitimately. According to the perceptions of the military, the civilian establishment has not been adequate to deal with the new internal threats successfully and the army has a legitimate role to intervene and protect the integrity of the state because it is above political conflict and has always defended the common interest of the people.

While the domestic political environment of the 1990s reinforced the supremacy of the military over civilian institutions, Turkey’s EU accession process, which gained pace during the same period, and the pressure coming from the EU-level for structural reform and democratization, challenged this supremacy and provided an opportunity for redefining the security discourse in Turkey.
3. The EU Impact and the Redefinition of Security Discourse

The most important impact of the EU accession process in terms of redefinition of the Turkish security discourse has been creating the opportunity for the discussion of its nature and determination. Because of the pressures coming from the EU-level for the improvement of democratic governance structures and structural reforms, the question of who determines Turkey’s security priorities and policies has come onto the agenda and the role of the military in the process, which was previously taken for granted, began to be discussed. According to the Accession Partnership Documents of 2001 and 2003 Turkey was expected, as a part of the political criteria of membership, to make the necessary legal changes in the composition and functioning of the National Security Council (NSC) in order to increase civilian control over the policy-making processes.¹³

In order to respond to these demands for structural reform, in 2001 and 2003, important legal changes were made within the context of EU harmonization packages, which could have substantial impacts on the security discourse in Turkey in the long-run. With these changes, the number of the civilian members in the NSC was increased, it became possible for a civilian to be appointed as the Secretary General of the Council, the number of the Council meetings was decreased and the Council began to meet bimonthly instead of monthly. In addition, Council decisions were no longer binding over the Council of Ministers and it became an advisory body.¹⁴

These changes, carried out by the civilian politicians, were not contested by the military despite the risk of losing its prominent position in identifying Turkey’s security discourse. The main reason for this attitude has been the military’s traditional
pro-Western and pro-modernization position, which also entailed supporting Turkey’s EU membership. Once it became apparent that certain reforms were necessary for the continuation of the process, the military opted for not openly resisting and advocated a selective and gradual change,\textsuperscript{15} in order to protect its key position. Although the changes in the composition and powers of the NSC are an important step for the re-conceptualization of Turkey’s security discourse, the lack of parliamentary control over military spending, the immunity of the decisions of the High Military Council (which is responsible for the appointment, retirement and discipline decisions about the officers) from judicial review, and the position of the Chief of General Staff as directly responsible to the Prime Minister instead of the Ministry of Defence, show that the changes are far from guaranteeing civilian control in determining the security discourse of the country.

The EU accession process created an impact in Turkey, which may be called a “first generation security sector reform”,\textsuperscript{16} with the initiation of discussions about the discourse and the role of civilian and military actors in conducting the country’s security policy. In other words, the EU factor has created a contradictory impact to the new threat understanding of the 1990s and certain challenges stemming from historical and political dynamics affected the prospects of discourse change during the EU accession process.

4. The Challenges of Security Discourse Change in Turkey

The most important challenge of changing the security discourse in Turkey stems from the nature of the process of conceptualizing security itself. The definition of security priorities, threats and responses are inherently political processes, whose
outcomes depend on the preferences and powers of the related actors, i.e. the military and civilian political authorities. In Turkey, the National Security Policy Document, which reflects the security discourse of the country, has been revised three times in 1992, 1997 and 2005. In 1992, the separatist activities were added as a threat to country’s security and in 1997 religious fundamentalism officially became a threat for the country. In 2005, the scope of the internal threats remained unchanged and each revision of the document reflected the security understanding of the military because of its traditional monopoly in this area.

The military’s traditional monopoly has been strengthened by the lack of interest amongst civilian actors in terms of dealing with security matters. The lack of civilian capacity in terms of knowledge, expertise and policy-making experience in these matters and the anxiety of political insecurity on behalf of the civilian politicians, which was institutionalized through the military interventions, reinforced the military’s role as the actor that determines Turkey’s security discourse.

Despite the EU harmonization reforms and related legal changes, this role of the military remains unchanged because the informal mechanisms through which the army exerts its influence over politics and society remain intact. These mechanisms, such as compulsory military service, which also entails an ideological education process, the compulsory national security course taught in high schools by a military officer and the participation of the army in economic life through its firms, are still utilized by the military in order to retain its legitimate and above-politics guardianship role in the society in spite of the loss of certain of its powers with the new laws. The latest developments regarding the ongoing investigation about illegal relations and
coup attempts of certain retired generals and military officers may, however, have a
decreasing impact over the legitimacy and credibility of the army in the eyes of the
public in the long-run and thus limit the informal channels of impact for the military.

Despite the changing image of the military for the public and the decreasing 'political'
powers of the military, the traditional understanding of security itself remains as a
challenge for changing the security discourse in Turkey. The traditional approach to
security has been to prioritize the territorial security of the state over security of the
government. The security understanding that neglects the societal
dimensions of security, which would guarantee an environment conducive to
individual rights and freedoms, gave leverage to the military over the civilians in
terms of determining the basic premises of the security discourse and prevented the
development of civilian capacity. This understanding remains unchanged in Turkey as
the unchallenged concept of internal threats and the methods, which are used to deal
with them, reveal. The change of security discourse entails a change in the security
priorities and strategies of the state and, up to this point, the policy makers seem to be
resistant to the idea of initiating this change.

The final challenge for changing the security discourse in Turkey is the reluctance of
the civilian actors and the EU, who are expected to be the pioneers of
democratization, to take the initiative. As the draft of the civilian constitution—
which did not bring any changes in the composition and duties of NSC—
reveals, the
civilian actors refrain from openly challenging the security discourse of the military
and opt for minor changes. The main reasons for this choice are their concerns about
political stability and their own political security. Although the progress reports

The civilian actors refrain from openly challenging the security discourse of the military
and opt for minor changes. The main reasons for this choice are their concerns about
political stability and their own political security. Although the progress reports

criticize Turkey for the role of the military in domestic politics and point out the need for an increase in civilian democratic control over the army, the EU also does not openly challenge the traditionally strong role of the army in Turkish politics and society mainly because of its sensitivity about the internal dynamics of Turkish politics and its reluctance to change the balance of power between the military and civilian political actors.\textsuperscript{19} The passive attitude of the civilian initiative and the EU leads to a status quo in terms of the security discourse in Turkey and although the EU accession process has created an opportunity for change, these challenges prevent its initiation and the legal changes cannot create an effect in terms of changing the security discourse.

5. Conclusion

The traditional security understanding in Turkey has prioritized the security of the state and its borders over the security of the individual and thus the discourse was shaped along military lines and by the military itself. The internal threat understanding of the 1990s strengthened the role of the military, while the EU accession process required a re-assessment of this situation. Although this constitutes an opportunity for defining the Turkish security understanding in terms of the human security aspect and along more democratic and civilian lines, the power relations between the military and civilian actors, the lack of civilian capacity for dealing with security matters, the resistant nature of the traditional security understanding and the reluctance of both the civilian actors and the EU to openly challenge the issue because of their concerns about political stability, have so far prevented the initiation of a process of discourse change in Turkish security policy.\textsuperscript{20}
Dr Ayşe Aslıhan Çelenk
Erciyes University, Department of International Relations
38039 Kayseri, Turkey
acelenk@erciyes.edu.tr


10 Şaban İba, Milli Güvenlik Devleti (The National Security State) (İstanbul: Çivi Yazi, 1998), 102-103.


12 Demirel, Soldiers and Civilians, 130.


Cizre, *Prime Movers*.

Seydi Çelik, *Osmanlı’dan Günümüze Devlet ve Asker: Askeri Börokrasinin Sistem İçindeki Yeri* (*State and the Military from the Ottoman Era to Present*) (İstanbul: Salyangoz Yayınları, 2007).

Misrahi, *The EU and the Civil Democratic Control*, 35.

This paper has been proofread by professor David Lovell.