

## Secularism, Islam and Turkey's authoritarian temptations

Summary of presentation by Gerald Knaus  
(and the debate afterwards)

Over the past decade, three turns in power for Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP) have brought about a dramatic transformation in the relationship between the civilian government and senior generals. This also has had a direct impact on the position of some of Turkey's non-Muslim minorities, as nationalist narratives rooted in the war of independence become less prominent, practices of authoritarian secularism are modified and the legal concept of "local foreigners" (to refer to non-Muslim Turkish citizens) is removed from different laws and administrative procedures. And yet, despite such developments, authoritarian temptations persist, and even after the military's loss of power big challenges to a pluralist democracy remain when it comes to acceptance of other minorities and when it comes to rethinking national security policies and Turkey's draconian anti-terror legislation.

Military thinking has shaped the development of the Turkish Republic from the very beginning. Among the first seven heads of state between 1923 and 1989, only one, Celal Bayar, was not a former general and he was ousted in the country's first military coup in 1960. A famous speech (*Nutuk*) delivered by Ataturk in October 1927, which summarised the Turkish War of Liberation, remains the sacred book of Kemalism. It describes a social-Darwinian struggle for national survival. As Ataturk told his audience: "The inner structure of the state, including many cultures and national characters, different aspirations, and disharmonious peoples with their contradictory wishes, is undoubtedly without a solid ground and therefore rotten."

Since Turkey's first free and democratic elections in 1950, the armed forces have intervened about once every 10 years: in 1960, 1971, 1980 and 1997. With the National Security Council Law of 1983 the definition of "national security" became so wide that it covered almost everything, including: "the defense and protection of the state against every kind of external and internal threat to the constitutional order, national existence, unity, and to all its interests and contractual rights in the international arena including in the political, social, cultural and economic spheres." It also included non-Muslim minorities and their demands for full equality under the rubric of threats to national security. The opening of the Orthodox Seminary on the island of Halki, which had been closed in the 1970s, was thus defined as a matter of national security.

In a speech in Brussels in April 2003, National Security Council general secretary, general Tuncer Kilinc, openly expressed the view that minority questions were weapons used by the enemies of Turkey: "Since the conquest of Istanbul, the Europeans have viewed us as their foes...After World War One they turned the Armenians against us and created the foundation for dozens of horrific events that followed. The PKK is an organization that the EU has established. The EU is the reason 33,000 of our people were killed. The EU secretly and openly supported terrorist organisations in Turkey."

Emruhan Yalcin, another graduate of the Turkish Land Forces Academy and a retired captain in the Armed Forces, published an entire book on the Halki Orthodox Theological School in May 2009. Its title is “The Last Crusader Fortress” (*Son Hacli Kalesi*). The final chapter “Why the Theological School on Heybeliada should not be opened” leaves no doubt about its author’s convictions.<sup>1</sup> For Yalcin, the reopening of the Theological School “has to be evaluated as a political demand symbolizing Hellenic and Orthodox aspirations.” The religious education of “men who are enemies of the Turks”, he claims, will “transform Istanbul under the guise of a cultural and tourism centre into a Vatican-style religious city with the status of a state, dividing Turkey and building on the divided parts, following the framework of the ‘Megali Idea’, a Great Byzantine Empire.” In fact, the Christian population in what is now Turkey has declined dramatically in the past century. In 1906, the Christian population of this area within the Ottoman Empire was about 25 percent, while Muslims counted for 74 percent and Jews for about 1 percent. Today the total number of Christians officially resident in Turkey is estimated at about 115,000, some 0.16 percent of a population of 71 million.

In recent years a bitter power struggle has pitted Turkey’s generals against the A.SP government. In his inaugural speech in autumn 2006 as chief of the general staff general Yasar Buyukanit warned that “the Turkish Republic has since its foundation never been face to face with so many threats at the same time.” From the outset he focused on two threats: separatism and anti-secularism. There was “armed separatist terrorism.” There was also “unarmed terrorism of domestic and foreign formations and initiatives” challenging the unitary structure of the Turkish Republic. Outgoing president Sezer warned in a speech at the military academy in early April 2007: “Since the foundation of the Republic Turkey’s political regime has never faced such dangers as it does today. The core values of the secular republic are being openly debated for the very first time.” This was directed at the threat of the AKP taking control also of the presidency in 2007 – but at the same time the generals also opposed all other concessions to minorities, and president Sezer vetoed an EU-inspired law to improve the legal status of non-Muslim foundations.

The law finally did enter into force after the election of Abdullah Gül to the presidency. There were also other important legal changes which improved the status of Christians in Turkey pushed by the AKP government, even if some of the most important reforms – such as reopening the Halki seminary – have still not taken place. The rhetorical commitment of Turkey’s current government to pluralism has also often been expressed by reference to Ottoman traditions. As foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu put it in Sarajevo in 2009: “Multicultural existence is very important because the rise of a civilisation can only be understood through analysing the urban structures and the cultural life in cities. If a city is uniform it means that civilisation is not so diversified. It is an inward looking, closed society ... Istanbul and all other Balkan cities used to be multicultural. We lived together, and because of this strong cultural richness there was an increase in interaction.”

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<sup>1</sup> Emruhan Yalcin, *Son Hacli Kalesi*, p. 125-148.

At the same time, however, new concerns have been raised about continued authoritarian temptations for those governing Turkey, even under the conditions of weakened military influence. This affects in particular the wide use made of anti-terror legislation, with a very significant number of arrests, indictments and sentences under these laws, as well as a recent clamp-down on Kurdish political leaders. Turkey also still has the old constitution; even when it comes to civil-military relations there has been little real change in laws and institutions except in the matter of military impunity and the ability to put generals before civilian courts. Definitions of national security remain as broad in the legislation as before. As the military has lost its ability to veto reforms, criticisms for remaining restrictions of the rights for Turkish citizens will therefore from now on rightly be directed at the elected civilian institutions. This issue was also raised during the debate following the presentation.