Turks went to the polls on 12 September 2010 to vote in a historical referendum on government-sponsored constitutional amendments that were designed to reshape the structure of higher administrative courts and reduce the role of the military in Turkish politics. The victory of the “yes” vote was hailed as signaling popular readiness to continue Turkey’s ongoing modernization and reform in line with accession to the European Union. Given that the opposition—the secular establishment led by the military and consisting of the high courts, university administrators, the opposition Republican People’s Party (RPP), some media, and a still-powerful community of “secular faithfuls”—had attempted to make this a vote of confidence for the government, the referendum’s result was also considered as impressive support for the consolidation of power by the ruling, Islam-friendly AKP (the Turkish acronym of the Justice and Development Party), a pragmatic offspring of the banned Islamist party.

1. The result was 58.42 percent “yes,” with a 78 percent turnout. Many Kurds, more than half in southeastern Turkey, boycotted the vote.
2. The earliest predecessor of the AKP was the Welfare Party, founded in 1983 and shut down by the Constitutional Court in January 1998 on the grounds that it had become a focal point of antisecular activities. The Welfare Party was succeeded by the Virtue Party in 1997, which also was shut down, in June 2001. The movement eventually split into the traditionalist Felicity Party, founded in July 2001, and the reformist Justice and Development Party, founded in August 2001.

Umit Cizre is professor of politics at Istanbul State University, specializing in civil-military relations and national security policy. She was Ertegun Professor at Princeton University (2008–09) and a public scholar at the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars in Washington, DC (2009). She is a member of the advisory board of the Geneva Center for Democratic Control of Armed Forces.
The support given to the government through the electorate’s approval of partial constitutional changes, however, does not solve Turkey’s deeper problem, although it is a significant step toward addressing it: the Turkish military as a “political army” that maintains an “active institutional role and doctrinal position in national politics” in order to control the fundamentals of the political agendas through its ability to sustain its special constitutional mandate to watch over the regime it created in 1923.3 Especially since the 1990s, Turkey’s armed forces have been able to militarize key state institutions and political issues by waging an internal war against Kurdish separatism and by formally declaring political Islam a threat to the secular character of the Turkish state it had sworn to safeguard.4 As the possibility of the military bureaucracy’s intervention in the political system lessens because of the EU reform process and the emergence of an atmosphere of openness in society, Turkey’s judiciary has begun to take the role of “system guardianship” and has started to make overtly political decisions by interpreting the law through time-tested statist and secular lenses.5 In turn, proposed amendments to the constitution add more judges to the constitutional court, limit their terms in office, and allow parliament to elect some of them.6

6. Political reforms to align Turkey’s laws and norms with EU values have been introduced through two major constitutional reforms, in 2001 and 2003, and eight legislative packages between February 2002 and July 2004. The democratic packages of July 2003, formally put into effect on 7 August 2004, contained an amendment to some articles of the Act on the National Security Council and the General Secretariat of the NSC that tipped the civil-military membership balance in favor of civilians. The package also repealed the NSC’s executive powers that overlapped with other agencies or sometimes exceeded the executive branch’s prerogatives. August 2003 legislation turned the NSC into an advisory body and gave civilians majority status. The Eighth Harmonization Package, passed by parliament on 21 May 2004, further strengthened civilian oversight of the defense budget and removed military representatives from the Council on Higher Education (Yuksek Oğretim Kurumu, YOK) and the Supreme Board of Radio and Television (Radyo Televisyon Ust Kurumu, RTUK). It also abolished the State Security Courts, which tried crimes against the state, a legacy of the aftermath to the 1980 military coup.
The most serious result of the military’s continued supervision and guidance of Turkish politics and policy making has been its power to sustain a world conceived in bipolar terms—an undifferentiated category of “Islamic reactionaries” versus “secularists”—a marked characteristic of Turkish politics and society today. That the “yes” votes in the September referendum are viewed by Turkey’s secular camp as a maneuver by an “Islamic” government to introduce religion into the system by using EU requirements for an independent judiciary, create a more controllable military, and grant more freedoms is a consequence of this bifurcated worldview. The Turkish Armed Forces’ (TAF’s) “power concerns” in this polarizing battle against what it calls the “Islamic” threat—the current government—are glossed over in this picture: the military is also engaged in preserving its unique impunity, institutional integrity, and special prerogatives, all of which it retains through the permanent supervision and guidance of politics and policy making. While focusing on safeguarding the entrenched principles of the regime, the TAF also safeguards its own interests, institutions, and privileged positions in society.

For their part, AKP officials accuse “secularists” of hindering Turkey’s democratization and EU accession aspirations, changes that would diminish much of their power and privilege. It is true, of course, that the September constitutional referendum package essentially aimed at resetting the civil-military balance in favor of constitutionally elected organs. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan based his referendum rhetoric on ending judicial immunity for those who instigated the 1980 military coup. This is symbolic of the sense of grievance his party holds against the secular establishment led by the TAF. The referendum was seen by Erdogan as a path for ending the government’s inability to define the fundamental parameters of politics resulting from its being blocked by the establishment’s old guard.

Despite the softening impact of global changes and the structural reforms to the Turkish system because of its EU aspirations, the weight of the past and the present corrosive polarization between the statist/secularist establishment and the AKP government help sustain a strongly militarized state and political arm, not to mention a relationship dominated by suspicion, conflict, and open or disguised confrontation between the two sides. There is a need for a better understanding of the possibilities and challenges for establishing new
rules of the game and a more democratic definition of the civil-military equation in Turkey, where a politically autonomous and secular military is pitted against a popularly elected Islamic government in the context of an electoral democracy. In this essay I address the new turn this relationship has taken since the historical referendum of 12 September 2010 and the revelations of the “Ergenekon incident”—its arrests and ongoing trials of nineteen retired TAF officers (four of them four-star generals) along with a few active duty officers, among others, planning coups against the government—as a catalyst for greater recognition of the “military factor” in Turkish politics. I then focus on the after-effects of these landmark events and how these can be figured into the equation of change and reform in Turkey’s civil-military relations, including the all-important issue of the prospects for democratic oversight of the TAF. Finally, I seek to show some fundamental pitfalls in regime characteristics that not only block qualitative progress in civil-military relations but also work against improving Turkey’s status as a leading democratic nation in the region.7

The Weight of the Past

The power and privileges of the TAF stem from three basic sources. First, it bears the torch of Turkey’s faith-based ideology, called Kemalism or Atatürkism after the founder of the republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. The most

7. The incident involving the secret organization called Ergenekon began with serious investigation only in June 2007 and led to the arrests and trials of not only retired and active-duty officers but prominent former politicians, journalists, academics, and conservative nationalist activists on charges of planning to provoke the Turkish military to intervene and bring down the Islam-sensitive government. As the story unfolded and arrests were made, commentators have argued that a number of political assassinations could be linked to the Ergenekon network. Media revealed a covert action plan discovered by the police, “Action Plan to Combat Islamic Reactionaries,” prepared by senior active-duty staff officer Colonel Dursun Cicek. The plan aimed to use various means to undermine public support for the AKP by discrediting and framing the government and the highly influential Gülen movement, a global educational network for Turkish-nationalist-Muslim renewal that was said to have been infiltrated by the TAF. According to the plan, drafted between December 2002 and early 2003 and signed by Cetin Dogan, then commander of Turkey’s First Army, the electoral victory of the AKP was “a major step backwards” in the fight against the Islamist brand of politics. Details of the planned coup, codenamed “Sledgehammer,” were revealed in the local newspaper Taraf after the paper was tipped off by sources in the Turkish army. The newspaper handed over documents of five thousand pages plus several CDs detailing the operation to the prosecutor’s office.
unfailing tenet of this ideology is a secularism that forms the basis for the priorities and values of Turkish public life. The TAF’s strong and persistent role in Turkey’s politics throughout most of the twentieth century, albeit in different modalities and with different emphases, is an imperative of this ideology.

A second source of the TAF’s unchallenged control, built up over the past decade, is its role in defining what constitutes security or other threats to the nation, which serves to promote its own legitimacy and perpetuate its veto power in politics. Through its weighty influence in the political system, Turkey’s military establishment has the capacity to militarize political issues that it categorizes as “regime issues.” It has branded political Islam and the Kurdish separatist movement as internal threats to the secular character and integrity of the Turkish state. As a result, there exists in Turkey a special category of problems called “regime issues” (rejim meseleleri) pertaining to the fundamental character of Turkish political society. They revolve around questions such as secularism, citizenship, and rights of identity, where negotiation or redefinition fall only within the remit of statist civil and military bureaucracies. As long as they keep their distance from fundamental issues such as ethnic and religious fault lines of the society at large, political parties find support from the bureaucracy as a kind of “rule of the game,” and as long as they keep their focus on economic and social issues, they also enlist enough support from the population as a whole.

The third and final source of the TAF’s political power in Turkey comes from the fact that the military bureaucracy’s policy viewpoint is steeped in esoteric, predemocratic notions, including a visible distaste for popular politics as a societal activity and, therefore, an ambivalent attitude toward the electoral power of the populace. These views became evident in April 2007, when the military high command attempted to block the presidency of the ruling party’s candidate, Abdullah Gul, through morally and, in the eyes of a great many constitutional lawyers, constitutionally questionable means. Gul was, in fact, one of the founders and major figures in his party, but he also had a wife who wore a headscarf. There is no popular sovereignty as long as the armed forces have the right to guard Turkey’s “design-flaw,” the idea

that the armed forces must guard secularism first and democracy (and commitment to Europe) second.\textsuperscript{9} The AKP leadership challenges the military’s supervisory role on the grounds that it undermines democracy.

The freedom with which the TAF could shift from being a trailblazer in 1960—“liberating” the country from what it termed economic, political, administrative, and cultural underdevelopment—to consolidating in 1980 a capitalist democracy and a tenaciously conservative presence in public life exemplifies the flexibility it allows itself in its role as guardian. Responding to abuses of power by a parliamentary majority, the first military intervention of the twentieth century in 1960 had been orchestrated by the lower and middle ranks of the officer corps who thought Turkey could do better at governing itself and thus introduced a multiparty system, a strong executive, checks and balances, an independent judiciary, civil rights and liberties, a free press, and other standard features of advanced democracies.

The 1980 military intervention did the opposite. With its immediate objective being to save the country in its critical hour from a descent into chaos via destructive clashes between Left and Right, it set a formidable conservative precedent in Turkish politics. Crisis or no crisis, the Turkish military firmly stood as a “guardian” or “ballast” keeping the ship of state on an even course and pushing it to draconian actions when it confronted what were defined as threats to secular security—whether communism, Islamism, Kurdish nationalism, or an overbearing parliament arousing the suspicion of the army.

From the Cold War years through the last decade of the twentieth century, the army transformed itself from a reformist institution into one that viewed the world around it with disapproval, frustration, concern, and despair. In turn, it regarded the political system as being in constant “reaction” against the good and solid foundational principles of a modern, secular, and developed Turkey. The Turkish establishment upholds a discourse on secularism

\textsuperscript{9} However, the significance of bureaucratic elites guarding the design flaw is that large sectors of society view civilian politics and politicians through the same lens. Yael Navarro-Yashin’s illuminating ethnographic study of the 1990s in Turkey sheds tremendous light on how realms of experience outside the state—such as civil society, social movements, personal preferences, identifications and interests, and the press—have come to reproduce statist discourse through a “fantasy of the state” and “cynicism” and have turned such realms into “spontaneous” sources of active support for the secular state. See Yael Navarro-Yashin, \textit{Faces of the State: Secularism and Public Life in Turkey} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).
that depends for its existence on what it denies rather than what it is and does not go beyond the nebulous “separation of religion from politics.” Perry Anderson captures this link between the “rigidity” and “intellectual thinness” of Turkish secularism when he characterizes such secularism as an “ersatz religion in its own right,” which “has never been truly secular” even when apparently at a fever pitch.10 These characteristics suggest that the Turkish establishment advocates an even more complete extraction of religion from everyday life.

Failure to address the real issues of democratic politics in the process of defining secularism deprives the secularist elites of a chance for meaningful advocacy. Still, they remain sensitive to tinkering with the secular principle. They suspect that the AKP, despite its moderate facade, has a hidden Islamist agenda that would contaminate official Turkish identity. In the past it has expressed doubts and warnings even about center-right governments whose actions were in no sense Islamist or antimodern. This indicates that military-led institutions hold an incoherent notion of secularism, one with a strong moral imperative but lacking the clarity and certainty that any such moralizing outlook would be expected to have.

State institutions regard the EU’s emphasis on democratic accountability of the military and security sectors, sensitivity to expressions of identity, and concern for human rights as part of a grand plan to weaken Turkey. The TAF’s general attitude toward Westernization, therefore, has moved from early advocacy to current accusations against the EU’s “fantasy” of democracy and accountability in the Turkish system.

On the government side, the AKP also leaves its identity usefully and deliberately ambiguous. Although it has explicitly abandoned Islamist politics in characterizing itself as “conservative,” it has also left its ideological transformation indefinite: “the departure of the AKP from its National Outlook Movement heritage does not necessarily mean that it cut its ties with the Islamic movement in Turkey.”11 By proclaiming itself “conservative democrat” yet keeping some affinity with an Islamist ontology, the party

conveniently weds pragmatism with nostalgia and a new vision with populist reformism shaped by conservative sensibilities. Rather than consistently and clearly reproducing a past tradition, the party leadership relies on contradictions and inconsistencies as sources for creativity and energy.

The AKP has accepted a trade-off between democratization strategies that would damage the existing political role of the military and potential risks of armed intervention in any modality. This strategy was evident in the aftermath of the legislative package of July 2003, which, as part of Turkey’s commitment to align its civil-military relations with the EU’s “good practices,” aimed to tip the civil-military balance in favor of civilians by repealing the executive powers of the National Security Council (NSC) that overlapped or sometimes exceeded executive branch authority and by reducing its status to that of an advisory body. If effectively implemented and pursued with perseverance, this legislative package would, by prioritizing democracy over security, significantly lower, if not totally diminish, the influence of military institutions. The party leadership, however, found it more worthwhile to guard itself against the military’s interventionist potential by building a power base for itself rather than following up with more legislation, implementation, and, most importantly, an intellectual understanding and welcoming of the concept and reality of democratic control of the armed forces. By excessively focusing on its own community, the AKP has opted for enlarging domains of control and influence, especially after the fading of the flagship security project of the EU.12

Opportunities for Recalibrating the Civil-Military Balance

Several recent developments and trends suggest that even as the weight of the past within the military and its supporting coalition endures, other dynamics are emerging and interacting with traditional ones, transforming the latter to some extent. Compared with the situation five years ago, there is a shift for the better in civil-military relations. Yet herein lie both opportunities and perils: If the government’s ongoing attempts to recalibrate the civil-military

balance in favor of constitutionally elected political authority and civil society are not sustained and fed by an intellectual conviction in the universal principles of democratic control of the military and security, and, at the same time, policies are not followed consistently, the military’s disengagement from politics can be only illusory, haphazard, and tactical. Moreover, the TAF’s withdrawal without a formal retreat may serve to reinforce some existing negative trends toward paranoia, polarization, and authoritarianism. These perils are discussed in the next section, but first some important opportunities for change should be noted.

Perhaps the most momentous opportunity in persuading the government to do something about the existing power balance between civil and military authority was offered by the Ergenekon affair and the victory of the “yes” votes in the 12 September 2010 referendum. The former incident signifies the strength of the official dogma and the dangerously uncivil politico-social division in Turkey between secularists and reactionaries (dinci and gerici). Yet this confrontation also raises prospects for long-awaited changes. Why is it important?

A year after the military-led secular bloc became engaged in a court case aimed at closing the ruling party in March 2008, which demonstrated yet again that the fate of an Islamic-oriented governing party with strong electoral backing still lay in the hands of eleven judges, and two years after the TAF attempted to block the presidential election, the Ergenekon affair underscored the depth of animosity against the AKP government in the secular establishment and its determination to use extralegal means against it if necessary. The public has been largely untroubled by the uneven character of civil-military relations despite continued calls for reform by the EU since

13. On 30 July 2008 the court fell just one vote short of closing the ruling party on charges of antisecularism. Such closures have become a prominent sign of the “exceptionality” of Turkish democracy — the establishment’s ability to take extraordinary measures to restore an exceptional secular regime bearing no relation to popular elections.

14. In starting the closure case, what provoked the chief prosecutor to press charges on this occasion was the repeal by parliament of a law banning women from wearing Islamic headscarves in places that offer public services, including universities. But the broader factors underlying Ergenekon were the capture by the AKP of the presidency, government, and parliament (the power troika) and the resulting establishment fear that the ruling party could control the rules of the game and the bastions of the secular establishment.
1999. But this same public’s sense of justice has been hurt by what it sees as embarrassingly crude and archaic plans to overthrow a popularly elected government. The revelation in Ergenekon of the involvement of state bureaucrats, including military personnel, and right-wing intellectuals and professionals in illicit and unconstitutional activities has created an unprecedented opportunity for the government to repair and reset, more intentionally and intensely than in the past, the lopsided balance between civil and military authorities in favor of constitutionally elected organs.

It is clear that the strong response to the Ergenekon incident in all walks of life is not just a result of the political autonomy and impunity of the Turkish military, nor is it merely an interagency issue between two institutions. Ergenekon is about who genuinely makes fundamental rules in Turkish politics — with what force, coalitions, legitimacy, and agendas. Hence the episode, more directly and intensely than has ever been done, raises the need to institute genuine forces and processes of democratic politics in Turkey in order to displace preoccupation with the futile issue of the dichotomy between secularism and Islam, which has wasted the country’s energy and time for the past two decades.

The revelations of Ergenekon have acted as catalysts enabling the AKP government, in a spectacular act of defiance, to pass a law in June 2009 clearing the way for the first time in the republic’s history for providing for civilian courts to try military personnel in peacetime for crimes subject to the Code of Criminal Procedure. These crimes include coups d’état, crimes affecting national security, and organized crime. This change virtually ends the military’s judicial autonomy. Furthermore, the new legislation eliminates the remaining powers of military courts to try civilians in peacetime, thus aligning Turkey with EU practices. Ergenekon has also helped open the doors for an even broader and bolder debate in public about civilian control of the undemocratic “guardians of the regime.” For the first time in Turkish

15. Ever since the 1999 Helsinki Summit extended candidate status to Turkey, the “political criteria” inscribed in both the Accession Partnership Document and the annual reports have suggested the need for structural changes in the organization of civil-military relations in Turkey to establish greater stability and transparency to enhance civilian control in line with the EU’s standards.

16. The main opposition party (Republican Peoples Party, CHP) appealed to the Constitutional Court for annulment of this new legislation. As of the end of 2010 the case was still pending.
history, three force commanders testified voluntarily as witnesses in December 2009, cooperating with the government in its investigation while insisting that Ergenekon was part of a smear campaign.17

In March 2009 the government amended the Regulation on the Organization and Duties of the Gendarmerie. The new regulation clarified the powers of the police and gendarmerie in urban and rural areas. It is now being implemented under the responsibility of government-appointed provincial governors. During the Supreme Military Council (YAS) meeting in August 2010, arrest warrants were issued for eleven senior officers up for promotion who were allegedly involved in the ongoing investigation into the so-called Sledgehammer coup plot.18 As for senior promotions, the government ended the practice of the TAF high command, imposing its own list of promotions and retirements by vetoing the appointment of the land forces commander because of his alleged involvement in Sledgehammer.19 In fact, the civilian behavior was quite in line with the text, if not the context, of official military policy, which blocks the promotion of officers on trial, but in a situation where the armed forces maintain absolute autonomy over their personnel issues and where parliament and a civilian minister of defense have no control over these forces, the unwritten rules have dictated quite the opposite. The process of normalizing civil-military relations took another unprecedented turn.

17. Commission of the European Communities (CEC), Turkey 2009 Progress Report (Brussels: CEC, October 2010), 7. The witnesses were former navy commander Admiral Ozden Ornek, who served as commander between 2003 and 2005; former land forces commander General Aytac Yalman, who served from 2002 to 2004; and former air force commander General Ibrahim Firtina, who served from 2003 to 2005.
18. YAS meets twice a year to decide on the promotion and retirement of military personnel as well as on disciplinary proceedings. Turkish governments have traditionally lacked significant influence over this military-dominated, fifteen-member council, where decisions are made by majority vote. In this case, the generals who were not promoted by decisions made by YAS in connection with Sledgehammer appealed to the Military High Administrative Court, which decided in their favor, openly contradicting the expressed will of civilian authorities.
19. The general in line for this post had been the commander of the important First Army, General Hasan Igsiz, who was to succeed General Isik Kosaner as head of the Turkish land forces. But while the Supreme Military Council was in session, a state prosecutor summoned Igsiz and eighteen other offices to give statements on the issue of “Internet Memorandum,” Web sites created as part of the antigovernment plan. Igsiz was also asked to give testimony as a “suspect” in the Ergenekon case. When the government vetoed him, the commander of the gendarmerie, General Atila Isik, was offered the same position of land forces commander, but he called for his retirement in support of Igsiz. The knot was finally untied when General Erdal Ceylanoglu, then the commander of the First Army, was appointed as the new land forces commander. See Milliyet, 6 September 2010.
on 23 November 2010 with the government’s suspension of three generals from their duties for suspected ties to an early coup plot.20

All things considered, the AKP emerged from the 12 September 2010 referendum and the Ergenekon episode newly positioned to renegotiate a robust role for itself in reviewing the role played by the military in Turkish politics. The government’s initiatives included renewing the commitment to EU reforms and beginning a negotiation with Turkey’s thus-far shunned Kurdish leaders after decades of bloodshed in what is called in popular parlance “the Kurdish opening.” In the still-developing referendum process, various issues sensitive for the military are now questioned and debated in the media, including the following:

- past killings and irregularities by the “deep state”;
- reform in the army to reduce its overall size and raise its professional standards;
- more transparency;
- better channels of accountability for military expenditures still somewhat hidden behind a curtain of secrecy;
- threat perception;
- procurement;
- force deployment;
- strategic planning;
- senior appointments and promotions; and
- mandatory conscription.

A new public awareness of these vital issues points to the need for change not just in Turkey’s current civil-military balance but in its culture of security as part of remaking the pact between state and society and building the capacity of the civilian regime to oversee the military machine.21

What helps the government in this process is the new post–Cold War international policy wisdom about democracy, security, and defense, which has

20. Major Generals Halil Helvacioglu and Gurbuz Kaya and Rear Admiral Abdullah Gavremoglu have all been served suspension orders and are among nearly two hundred army personnel facing charges of plotting to oust the current government.

indirectly or directly affected Turkey’s own culture of security. A fresh focus
on the quality of democracy as a crucial instrumental concept for regional
and global stability and security has brought to the forefront the inconsis-
tency between the guardianship role of the armed forces and the “democrat-
icness” of the regime.22

A lack of popular consensus today in favor of change of government through
military means is also the product of an age when a country with interven-
tions by its armed forces is now likely to be seen as a pariah state. Those ele-
ments in society sympathetic with the military are also embarrassed by the
ease with which conspiratorial plots against the government are leaked to the
general public by an army staff itself. This shows that the struggle for power
within military institutions has been instrumental in ensuring the exposure
of an army that has lost its sense of unity, dignity, esprit de corps, discipline,
and focus.

The Perils of Inconsistent Reform of Civil-Military Relations

Is the AKP government a free rider owing its “democratizing” facet to being
victimized because it is considered “the other?” Its attack against the guard-
ian role of the military is motivated more by the preconditions for further
alignment with the EU than a democratic discourse that originated from the
party itself. The haziness of the AKP political profile together with its vic-
tim’s role have limited its capacity to challenging or threatening established
interests only as far as they can help its own causes.

From the perspective of its military policy, free riding provides an excel-
lent cushion for the AKP in dealing with a strong secular bloc that has the
motives and means to create problems for it. It can accept compromises, make
U-turns, and renegotiate its position with regard to its establishment inter-

22. I have borrowed the term “democraticness” from Marc Plattner in his “A Skeptical Perspec-
tive,” in Assessing the Quality of Democracy, ed. Larry Diamond and Leonardo Morline (Baltimore:
Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 79. He uses the term in the general debate on the ambiguities
in measuring the quality of democracy. He poses the question of what to do if democraticness,
understood as individual rights and popular control, is disconnected from the quality of govern-
ance, as it may conflict with individual rights and minorities. The argument that underpins this
essay is that a politically active military over which there is very little democratic oversight can
lead to distortions in both democraticness and effective civilian performance.
ests. By the middle of its first term in office, for instance, the ruling party abandoned its proactive policy toward the military question partly because at that point it chose to go with the flow of “street nationalism” and to converge with the military’s hard-line approaches to the Kurdish question, northern Iraq, and the EU.23 This move on the part of the ruling party provided the armed forces with an opportunity to continue to “maintain its influence whilst altering its political profile.”24 The TAF would also continue to enjoy a high degree of autonomy. With the appointment of General Yasar Buyukanit, a political hardliner and head of the land forces, to replace General Hilmi Ozkok as the new chief of General Staff on 31 July 2006, the ruling party’s alignment with the high command was complete.

The AKP’s failure to pursue its initial reformist strategy by the middle of its first term reveals several important points. First, at that stage the AKP leadership lacked both the clout and, more important, the political will to overcome the traditional civilian posture of compromise with the military that has been, to this point, a permanent feature of Turkish politics. The AKP’s embrace of the EU project and the less statist approach it took to the Cyprus problem had encouraged the public to begin a genuine debate on questions of what constitutes Turkey’s national security, who should make decisions involving it, and what should be the relationship between security and democracy. Moreover, the AKP government has demonstrated that its power strategy is compatible with and, as its military policy toward the Kurdish issue after 2005 has shown, is sometimes symbiotic with a military institution that prioritizes security over democracy.25 This suggests that its military policy is contingent not on its intellectual commitment to full democracy but on its self-interest. The party feels forced to shore up its own political credentials free from the restraining and demeaning strategies and behavior of the military toward the party.26 This self-interested strategy extends to the

26. One example of this demeaning behavior takes place each year when President Gul gives receptions to mark official days. General Staff and force commanders attend the president’s Republic Day on 29 October only if the invitations are issued for male guests only, simply because they refuse to attend with their wives if the president’s Islamic head-scarved wife attends. In 2010 the president issued invitations for couples and his wife attended; the commanders declined to attend.
conviction of party leadership that its peaceful and democratic efforts for an accountable military will “benefit” the AKP’s electoral chances, since conventional wisdom holds that a policy of open conflict with state institutions may not play well on the street. It would be correct to say that establishment agencies have turned to some extreme measures unprecedented enough to lead significant segments of Turkish society to begin questioning the compatibility of such actions with the hallmarks of twenty-first century democracy they keep hearing, watching, and reading about, thanks to globalization. These excessive steps have also encouraged the government to restrain its traditional impulse to simply follow along with the powerful military.

The prime minister’s euphemistic and evasive discourse about issues regarding the armed forces and the high command is emblematic of the continuing uncertainty and insecurity that surrounds the civil-military equation. Responding to criticisms that occurred during the Supreme Military Council meeting in August 2010 over the promotion crisis of those officers involved in the Ergenekon affair, Erdogan said, “Nobody should drag us to a trap. Nobody should be in an effort to create tension between the armed forces and the government. We have fulfilled what has been determined in the constitution regarding the institutions.”27 Similarly, the government’s lack of resilience and determination in establishing democratic civilian control is also apparent in the passage of the Court of Auditors Law on 3 December 2010. This is a much-awaited and historically important statute that has been expected to lay a firm basis for accountability in military spending, including extra-budgetary sources, to the Court of Auditors for the first time in the republic’s history.28 However, under an amendment made by the AKP government, the Court of Auditors will not be able to audit military expenses on efficiency grounds, nor will the results of the auditing be fully transparent for the public to view.29 Taken together with criticisms in the recent EU Progress Report on the government’s failure to change the Turkish Armed Forces Internal Service Law or the Law on the National Security Council,30 it

28. Similar efforts in the past were obstructed by the military’s lobbying activities.
30. The former provides a legal ground for military interventions while the latter grants the military wide room to maneuver by providing a broad definition of national security.
seems that the government will not risk an effective democratic control over the armed forces until it can guarantee further entrenchment of its own power in the next election.

Despite the progress made in curbing the political powers of the TAF through reforms, the military institution is still an influential force. The EU-centered democratization process has pushed the military out of the foreground, although, ironically enough, not the tradition of military intervention itself. The forces in favor of normalizing civil-military relations and turning the TAF into a “peacetime” establishment have not yet achieved full success. Moreover, such changes are neither easy nor inevitable. For one thing, Turkish politics and society are increasingly polarized and segregated. The secular sector entertains apocalyptic fears and hostilities against another part of the population. Although it has won the September referendum, the AKP still refrains from tampering with the secular order of things until it can achieve a greater consensus in the parliament and society in the next elections to overcome the ferocious polarization that shapes behavior and policies in Turkey today.

As a profession, institution, and abstraction, the Turkish military is also at a crossroads. The fact that it cannot be expected to play a political role as a political party by offering “better” policies than the AKP government reduces its ambitions to simply “wishing” for a different electoral outcome. By associating Turkey’s armed forces with the coup plotters, the Ergenekon affair has already delivered an embarrassing blow to the image that the TAF has favored for itself: that of standing “above” narrow partisan interests. Unsurprisingly, the immediate response of the high command was to deny any connection with the conspiracy and to distance itself from the conspirators. All in all, this scandal represents a critical setback for the military institution in terms of its political role and social prestige, and carries the potential to radically alter the contours of its existence. Since the September referendum, the high command’s short-term response to this threat seems to be disengagement from a too-visible public presence, yet this does not mean a planned retreat. On a number of occasions, the General Staff has reacted publicly to politicians and media reports, including in its strongly worded warning issued on 17 December 2010 against the demands in two languages
by the Peace and Democracy Party (the Kurdish party) to make the Kurdish language a second official language alongside Turkish.31

**Conclusion**

It is a common Western perception—shared by Turkish policy makers and scholars and derived from the US Cold War strategy of relying on Turkey’s armed prowess against the communist threat—that, located in an invaluable geostrategic location with great military strength, a secular political system with a Muslim population, and a commitment to fighting terrorism, Turkey can promote stability in one of the most unstable regions of the world. Yet none of these properties, together or alone, has been able to create stability within Turkey during the past two decades. On the contrary, despite undeniable bright spots of progress, the politics and mindsets that have driven contemporary Turkish politics have failed to produce nonviolent resolution of conflicts, just development, access to a broad spectrum of human rights, or uncorrupt and accountable public administration.

When one takes stock of Turkey’s capacities and limitations in the region, not in terms of geopolitics, Islamism, or secularism, but from a sociological and political perspective focused on internal challenges and prospects, perhaps the most critical concern turns out to be the civil-military balance. The AKP government’s engagement with this problem, especially after the Ergenekon incident and the 12 September referendum, is an improvement over the wholesale denial of the critical impact of this imbalance on Turkey’s authoritarian impulse and bureaucratic rigidity. But these changes suffer from a basic flaw: the AKP worldview is not attuned to taking issue with the historical status and positions of an official organ, the TAF, located in the heart of a sacrosanct “state.” If it could, the government would prefer to abdicate the duty of reshaping the role and missions of the military to the officers themselves and lead a cozy coexistence with the armed forces. So the government is compelled to do something about the military institution not because it views effective governance through the expansion of democracy—which

includes freedom from a powerful military invoking “insecurity” of the republic to entrench its tutelage—as the real touchstone of popular will. Nor does it show any intellectual preparation and awareness that the TAF’s hegemonic role can be addressed through a democratic control that transcends bureaucratic mechanisms of oversight and adopts a more inclusive approach that promotes the participation of wider sectors of civil society in the debate on defense and security. In this regard, what is needed is a move from the classic but deficient concept of civil-military relations (which implies perfect and equal distribution of knowledge and power between the two sides) to a “democratic governance of civil-military affairs” that indicates a move from a structural and institutional build-up to “consolidation of democratic norms and procedures.”

Surrounded by a coalition of potentially hostile forces that treats the civilian administration with contempt and disdain and inhibits its administrative decisions in off-limit areas, the government has captured unique opportunities for restructuring the civil-military balance, designing a new foreign policy, and addressing the Kurdish question. These unprecedented possibilities could hardly have emerged, however, without the “yes” votes in the September referendum and the explosion of the Ergenekon incident. The former has offered a persuasive critique of the closed, dark, intolerant, and secretive communities friendly with the military bureaucracy and state officials and slavishly devoted to destroying the government. The TAF high command, on the other hand, risks its long-term survival if it ignores the AKP’s electoral popularity or obstructs its agenda so long as new reforms leave a zone of comfort for the military to keep its institutional autonomy intact (by, for instance, maintaining a public voice and its core corporate interests).

33. One example of the constrictive role of the army on the government is the recent decision by the chief prosecutor’s office, which immediately followed the postreferendum decision of the Higher Board of Education to enable girls to take exams of the Student Selection and Replacement Center with a headscarf if they wished. The chief prosecutor’s office stated that allowing headscarves at universities contradicts the principle of secularism.
34. One indication of this continued military autonomy has been the government’s inability to have Dursun Cicek, one of the active duty officers indicted as an Ergenekon conspirator, dismissed from the army during the annual meeting of the Supreme Military Board in August 2009.
Staff’s strategic calculus in coping with the changing balance of forces is naturally based on protecting its underlying interests, goals, and strengths after the Ergenekon storm exposed the basic fault lines of Turkey’s civil-military relations and internal splits within the army.

To face its internal challenges in order to maintain stability and a strategic position in the world, Turkey must acknowledge one of the truths the Ergenekon incident seems to have brought home: secularism and Islam are contentious issues, not at all settled. Moreover, they should be resolved not from the top-down but rather from bottom-up processes. The suspicions, discomforts, and fears that public visibility of Islamic identity evokes in the military and secular communities are not solely the responsibility of the Islamic community; they are also functions of secular intellectual confinement to a narrow vision of politics and society. By training, the military bureaucracy is intolerant of any version of Turkish politics that strays beyond what it considers correct at a given juncture. In order for intelligent lessons to be drawn from Ergenekon, training and positions on issues in the armed forces must also be brought in line with twenty-first-century realities, and, in turn, an esoteric, ideological approach to politics, society, and the world must be abandoned.