

# Praetorian Army in Action: A Critical Assessment of Civil–Military Relations in Turkey

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## Abstract

With four successful and three failed coups in less than 60 years, the Turkish military is one of the most interventionist armed forces in the global south. Despite this record, few scholars have analyzed systematically how the military's political role changed over time. To address this gap, this article examines the evolution of civil–military relations (CMR) in Turkey throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Based on a historical analysis, this article offers a revisionist account for the extant Turkish scholarship and also contributes to the broader literature on CMR. It argues that the military's guardian status was not clearly defined and that the officer corps differed strongly on major political issues throughout the Cold War. This article also demonstrates that the officer corps was divided into opposite ideological factions and political agendas and enjoyed varying levels of political influence due to frequent purges and conjunctural changes.

## Keywords

Turkish military, 1960 coup, 1971 memorandum, National Unity Council, İsmet İnönü, Cemal Gürsel, Turkish politics

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Since Turkey's transition to multiparty rule, the armed forces toppled civilian governments on four occasions (1960, 1971, 1980, and 1997) and staged three unsuccessful interventions in 1962, 1963, and 2016. While scholars welcomed the emergence of "liberal" civil–military relations (CMR) under the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) rule (Aydinli, 2009; Gürsoy, 2012; Heper, 2011), the 2016 coup attempt demonstrated that the interventionist tradition is still alive within the officer corps (Aslan, 2018; Esen & Gumuscu, 2017). Meanwhile, the plotters' alleged ties to the religious Gülen movement challenges the Turkish military's widespread portrayal as a homogenous organization committed to Turkey's founding leader, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, and his principles (for an exception, see Gürcan, 2018). Many of these allegedly Gulenist officers had joined the Turkish military in the 1980s and subsequently rose through the ranks of the armed forces even before the Islamist AKP first took office. Under the AKP rule, they finally reached the military's upper echelons and, in turn, were used by the government to neutralize its opponents.

The existing literature on CMR in Turkey centers on two primary questions (Aslan, 2018, p. 1): the categorization and modeling of Turkish CMR (Aydinli, 2009; Cizre-Sakallıoğlu, 1997; Heper & Güney, 1996) and case studies of successful coup d'états during the Republican era (Aslan, 2016; Demirel, 2003; Harris, 2011). Earlier works have claimed that the military's primary motivation in staging coups was to restore public order and preserve the secular regime (Heper & Güney, 1996). The literature took a critical turn after the military's 1997 intervention against Turkey's first pro-Islamist government. These scholars have asserted that the Turkish military increased its institutional privileges after each coup d'état to gradually establish tutelage over the political system and society (Cizre-Sakallıoğlu, 1997; Cook, 2007; Kuru, 2012). However, this critical scholarship rarely accounts for coup outcomes in failed attempts (for exceptions, see Aslan, 2018; Esen & Gumuscu, 2017) and does not engage the broader literature to explore why and how CMR varied over time. Similarly, there is limited interest on how the Turkish military's political role and ideological stance changed during the course of the Republican era. To fill this gap, this article reassesses the Turkish military's political activities through a detailed case study of CMR between the 1960 and 1971 coups, which constitutes the most praetorian period in republican history.<sup>1</sup>

Based on a historical analysis, this article makes several arguments that depart from the extant Turkish scholarship and also contributes to the broader literature on CMR. While acknowledging that the Turkish armed forces exhibited strong praetorian characteristics (Sarigil, 2014), this article asserts that the military's guardian status was not clearly defined and that the officer corps clashed with each other on major political issues throughout the Cold War years and beyond. Accordingly, the ideological disposition of the officer corps was subject to major changes due to frequent purges and conjectural shifts. After the 1960 coup d'état, for instance, strong fissures erupted within the junta between radical officers who wanted long-term military rule and moderates who favored speedy return to parliamentary rule.

The latter group did not necessarily consist of genuine democrats but rather confined themselves to advocating the armed forces to monitor political developments from the sidelines after initially setting the regime's parameters. Meanwhile, throughout the 1960s, the radical officers gradually acquired leftist ideas from socialist circles to advocate a highly statist regime (Fidel, 1970, p. 37).

This tug-of-war between the two factions, both of which were in contact with civilian politicians, shaped Turkish politics and fueled praetorian sentiments throughout the 1960s and 1970s. In turn, political elites sought to exploit these intramilitary rifts to prevent the armed forces from staging another coup. After the 1960 coup, for instance, the Republican People's Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi [CHP]) leader İnönü cooperated with the junta's moderate members to purge the radical faction and secure transition to parliamentary rule and, when in power, to put down two coups led by Talat Aydemir in 1962 and 1963. These political maneuvers refute the argument that the Turkish military left power voluntarily to institute democratic rule as suggested by the scholars of CMR (Cizre-Sakallıoğlu, 1997; Heper & Güney, 1996) but also problematize the notion that the Turkish military was united in its ranks as a Kemalist guardian actor. The interventionist tradition was strong in the armed forces and under different circumstances could have paved the way for long military rule.

The Turkish case can also contribute to major debates in the broader theoretical literature. The 1960 coup placed Turkey on a "coup trap" (Belkin & Schofer, 2003), as evidenced by later military interventions in 1962, 1963, 1971, 1980, 1997, and 2016. This article explores the policies used by civilian leaders and military elites to curb this interventionist tradition and "keep officers in the barracks" (Albrecht & Eibl, 2018). It asserts that the junior officer-led coup in 1960 "provided a template for other coup makers to follow" (Singh, 2014, p. 49) as seen in coups from the middle in 1962, 1963, and an aborted attempt on March 9, 1971. In response, both Prime Minister (hereafter PM) İnönü and Demirel cooperated closely with the military leadership to end this tradition with some success. One of their tactics was to keep a high-ranking general—Cemal Gürsel and Cevdet Sunay—in the presidency in exchange for his loyalty to parliamentary rule. Both PMs purged interventionist officers like Talat Aydemir in 1962 and Cemal Tural in 1969. Meanwhile, National Security Council (Milli Güvenlik Kurulu [MGK]) was established to assure junior officers that the military would have some input for state affairs. Lastly, the military created a mutual assistance pension fund to increase the material well-being of the officer corps. Although these measures reduced the likelihood of success for coups from the middle, they did little to remove the military leadership's strong hold over Turkish politics and its ability to stage coups from above. Through detailed case studies, this article suggests that coup proofing strategies should differ for coup scenarios that occur within and outside military hierarchy.

Second, this article can also inform debates on the promissory coup literature (Bermeo, 2016). A recent wave of studies claimed that coups targeting authoritarian leaders could promote democratization (Thyne & Powell, 2016; Varol, 2012; for a

contrary view, see Tansey, 2016). Indeed, many officers initially joined the 1960 coup out of concern with the Democrat Party (*Demokrat Parti* [DP]) government's authoritarian measures. While many plotters planned to call for elections immediately after the DP's fall, this scenario was aborted after the military seized power. The Turkish case demonstrates the enormous challenge of executing a promissory coup successfully. The junta's eventual decision to call for parliamentary elections in 1961 was not part of a deliberate plan but occurred due to major schisms and purges within the officer corps. Many officers wanted to reverse this decision even after the 1961 elections were held.

This article also lends strong support to those who characterize coups as coordination games (Aslan, 2018; Singh, 2014). Coups in the Turkish context did not succeed because one side had clear dominance over the other or that challengers had more support within the populace than the pro-government forces (Singh, 2014, Chapter 2). Small factions staged coups in 1960, 1962, and 1963 with very limited support from the military leadership. And yet, the 1960 coup toppled the decade-long DP government that had strong popular support, whereas a weaker İnönü government put down the 1962 and 1963 attempts. By contrast, the 1971 memorandum that was signed by the top military leadership removed Demirel government, which had single-party majority in parliament and widespread electoral support. None of these governments had mobilized the masses, as happened during the 2016 failed coup (Esen & Gumuscu, 2017). Public opinion was not taken into consideration in any of these cases.

## Historical Background

The Turkish military played a formative role during the early decades of the Turkish Republic, as the vanguard of Kemalist reforms throughout the country (Hale, 2011; Lerner & Robinson, 1960; Rustow, 1959). The republican regime was established by a core group of bureaucratic and military elites, who switched their loyalty to the nascent Turkish nation-state following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Many important posts were filled by retired officers who participated in the War of Liberation (1919–1922). Moreover, the military played an essential role in suppressing anti-regime revolts and pacifying the society during the early republican years. As the first two presidents Mustafa Kemal and İsmet İnönü and many ministers came from military ranks, the officer corps felt strong attachment to the Kemalist regime. Under the leadership of Fevzi Çakmak, the Chief of the General Staff (1921–1944), the armed forces were fiercely loyal to the government. The military's duty to protect the republican regime was even codified in Article 35 of the Armed Forces Internal Service Law of 1935. Although the ruling elite was firmly in control of the political system, the top military brass jealously preserved their veto player status on important issues and remained free from political interference.<sup>2</sup> The government was content with this tacit agreement forged with Çakmak, who kept the military

loyal in exchange for securing reserved domains for the armed forces and keeping his post (Harris, 1965).

Although the military leadership was satisfied with its access to power, the armed forces lost this autonomy over time. Kemalist governments shifted more resources to education and infrastructure during the interwar years, even though the defense budget did not experience a significant rise. Under Fevzi Çakmak's conservative leadership, the military lagged behind in terms of tactics, equipment, and weaponry (Özcan, 2010). This lack of change within the General Staff caused resentment among junior officers whose upward mobility was restricted. After Çakmak's forced retirement in 1944, civilian control over the armed forces increased further, thanks to an organizational restructuring (Kurç, 2017, p. 262). In a symbolic move, the Chief of the General Staff became responsible to the Prime Ministry and 5 years later to the Defense Ministry (Harris, 1965, p. 63). Although the military remained loyal to the regime throughout the single-party era (1923–1950), the armed forces were under-equipped and ill-trained and that the lower stratum of the officer corps had major grievances about their material conditions (Çelikoğlu, 2010, pp. 54–55; Esin, 2005, pp. 17–18; Seyhan, 1966, pp. 25–36).

CMR underwent dramatic changes after the ruling CHP was defeated by the DP in the 1950 general elections. In order to terminate the organic ties between the political and military leadership, the DP government retired 16 generals and 150 colonels following rumors that senior commanders pledged their allegiance to İnönü on election night (Hale, 2011, p. 199). These changes came against the backdrop of Turkey's entry into North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which made the military's structural problems—such as outdated equipment, inadequate resources, and conservative leadership—more apparent (Kurç, 2017). NATO membership created new career opportunities for junior and field officers who spoke English and were trained in modern warfare. But the DP government eventually hesitated to radically restructure the armed forces so as not to create discontent among the military leadership and instead chose to appease senior commanders in exchange for their loyalty. Accordingly, the DP government sought to maintain the status quo and directed the military via civilian defense ministers in a manner that favored partisanship over competence (Hale, 1994, Chapter 5; Pelt, 2014). This course generated disappointment among junior and field officers, many of whom had initially welcomed the DP's victory in anticipation of improvements in the armed forces.

These problems were exacerbated by economic bottlenecks caused by the DP government's populist economic policies after its second term in office. After high growth in the early 1950s, Turkish economy began to experience inflationary pressures due to poor trade performance and excessive public spending (Yagci, 2018, p. 84). Amid this economic downturn, the main opposition CHP increased its vote share in the 1957 parliamentary elections but fell short of defeating the DP (Kili, 1976, pp. 111–134). The government tried to maintain its popular support by tilting the playing field against the opposition and adopting a highly partisan discourse. The

opposition newspapers were heavily censored, while the pro-government press was subsidized with selective distribution of public advertisement funds. As the CHP continued to gain strength, the ruling party turned to more repressive tactics that paved the way to a competitive authoritarian regime.<sup>3</sup> In April 1960, for instance, the DP caucus formed a parliamentary committee to investigate opposition activities. The CHP leadership in response accused the DP government of seeking an excuse to ban the main opposition party and mobilized university students in Ankara and İstanbul against the motion (Uyar, 2017, pp. 336–347).

## The Coup From the Middle in 1960

The DP government tried to co-opt the military leadership with promises of material and political benefits. Pro-DP officers were rapidly promoted to higher ranks and retired top generals like the Chief of the General Staff Nuri Yamut were nominated as MPs from the ruling party. While preventing coups from the top (Albrecht & Eibl, 2018; Singh, 2014, Chapter 4), these measures did little to appease junior and field officers who blamed the government for the country's growing political challenges and economic problems (Çelikoğlu, 2010, pp. 68–70; İpekçi & Coşar, 2010; Ulay, 1968, pp. 20–23). Officers were concerned about their salaries as well as social status and deeply worried about democratic backsliding under the DP rule. As professional soldiers, they were enraged particularly by the government's partisan appointments that turned senior commanders into sycophants and restricted career opportunities for bipartisan officers. It was against this backdrop that the military emerged as a political actor to counteract the DP's increasingly authoritarian measures.

Plotting in the armed forces began as early as 1955, when several junior officers in Ankara and İstanbul had formed a clandestine organization that would later become the nucleus of the junta (Aydemir, 1968, pp. 23–59; İpekçi & Coşar, 2010, pp. 19–42; Koçaş, 1977, pp. 347–356; Özdağ, 2004). The conspirators initially concentrated their efforts on appointing their members to key military posts. Coup plotters had members in the military's Personnel Department through which they could appoint collaborators to key positions, such as the Martial Law Command Centers in Ankara and İstanbul, the First Army headquarters, Military Academy (Kara Harp Okulu), and the Presidential Guard Regiment (Cumhurbaşkanlığı Muhafız Alayı; Aslan, 2018, p. 6; Çelikoğlu, 2010, p. 110). In 1959, they finally reached out to the commander of the Army Cemal Gürsel, who gave tacit support for such activities but did not join the conspiracy personally (Koçaş, 1977, pp. 418–425, 433–461; Seyhan, 1966, pp. 42–61). The plotters expanded their support in the ensuing months by cultivating ties with senior leaders like General Cemal Madanoğlu and General Sıtkı Ulay (1968, pp. 66–75), who joined the group several weeks before the 1960 coup. In coups from the middle, plotters indeed focus on getting their allies stationed in strategic sites (Singh, 2014, p. 109). Thanks to such access, they could then mobilize hard power at a time when their inability to recruit support

from the military leadership might have limited their wider appeal. Scholars have noted that large-scale public protests serve as a signal for the declining power of the government and growing popular support for the coup (Casper & Tyson, 2014; Johnson & Thyne, 2018). In the Turkish context, the plotters were understandably emboldened by anti-government protests in April/May 1960 and were enraged by the military leadership's consent to have the armed forces used to put down these demonstrations (Çelikoğlu, 2010, pp. 115–123; Özkaya, 2005, pp. 60–62, 138–140; Ulay, 1968, p. 85).

Despite being executed outside the chain of command, the 1960 coup met with little resistance from the military and the public at large (Akyaz, 2002, pp. 119–130; Hale, 1994, pp. 104–110; İpekçi & Coşar, 2010, pp. 117–180; Özdağ, 2004). Due to weak support within the military leadership, junior and field officers mobilized their own regiments to take control of strategic sites in Ankara and İstanbul and made a broadcast from the public radio to create a *fait accompli*. Except for PM Menderes, all prominent government figures and pro-DP generals, including the Chief of General Staff (Rüştü Erdelhun), were taken under custody within a few hours (Aslan, 2018, p. 6). The commander of the Third Army Ragıp Gümüşpala, who was stationed in Erzurum, refused to join the putsch until he was told that the Commander of the Land Forces Cemal Gürsel was the coup leader (Özdağ, 2004, pp. 238–239). Although Gürsel was not directly involved in the coup, plotters handpicked him as their titular leader to prevent resistance from other high-ranking officers in the armed forces.<sup>4</sup>

Many officers joined the coup once they realized that it met with success against the government. In reality, though, a small group of junior officers, who would later form the National Unity Committee (*Milli Birlik Komitesi* [MBK]), was in charge of the coup (Erkanlı, 1972, pp. 18–26; Özkaya, 2005, pp. 221–231; Seyhan, 1966, pp. 82–84). Given their young age and inexperience, most MBK members lacked the skills to run a modern state. Not surprisingly, the junta soon split into factions as a result of ideological disputes and personal rivalries (Erkanlı, 1972, pp. 135–158; Esin, 2005, pp. 118–119; Hale, 1994, pp. 119–136; Seyhan, 1966, pp. 89–91). The main source of tension revolved around the question of how long the plotters should stay in power. One faction that included Colonel Alparslan Türkeş wanted to stay in power long enough to enact structural reforms. These officers feared that quick departure from office would leave power to the CHP, a party that they considered to be dominated by corrupt politicians. Opposing Türkeş and his associates were several high-ranking MBK members, who joined the putsch at a later stage because of their opposition to the DP rule and wanted to hand power over to the CHP after a short transition. Although close to the moderates, Gürsel did not command strong control over the MBK and could not resolve this division.

Meanwhile, the CHP leadership was ambivalent toward the military regime, oscillating between support for the coup and opposition to the junta's efforts to prolong its rule. Although the CHP was not implicated in the coup, its leaders met the DP's fall with relief due to their fear that the DP government was not willing to

allow free and fair elections (İpekçi & Coşar, 2010, pp. 46–57). At the same time, İnönü was worried about prolonged military rule and wanted the armed forces to return to the barracks as soon as possible (Kili, 1976, pp. 161–177; Toker, 1992b). With the DP leaders in prison, the CHP elites wanted elections to be scheduled before the former ruling party could reorganize itself. Accordingly, İnönü called for early elections in 1960 autumn but was also careful to not challenge the junta directly. The CHP leadership lobbied moderate MBK members as well as Gürsel to turn them against the junta's radical faction.

The rift between the radical and moderate factions led to intense plotting among the MBK members throughout the autumn of 1960 (Akyaz, 2002, pp. 140–148; Özkaya, 2005, pp. 285–297; Tunçkanat, 1996, p. 328; Ulay, 1968, pp. 156–157. According to Harris (2011), MBK members “were afraid to sleep in the same place for two consecutive nights worrying that they would be captured by rival plotters” (p. 204). It was against this backdrop that Gürsel decided to purge the committee's radical members and hand power over to the civilians to avoid further rifts in the military. He subsequently met with İnönü, who assured the MBK leader that he would not be a candidate for president after the next election, thereby increasing Gürsel's chances for remaining as president. Confident that he would be able to keep his post after transition to parliamentary rule, Gürsel called for a Constituent Assembly to draft a new Constitution and thus began the process of democratic transition. On November 13, the moderates led by Cemal Gürsel purged Türkeş and 13 other members (known thereafter as *Ondörtler*) from the MBK and assigned them as Counselors to Turkish embassies, while a new junta was subsequently formed with the remaining members (Erkanlı, 1972, pp. 135–159; Esin, 2005, pp. 169–183; Hale, 1994, pp. 131–136; Seyhan, 1966, pp. 117–119). Soon afterward, a new government was formed on January 5, 1961, and the Constituent Assembly convened in Ankara the following day.

The expulsion of the 14 hardliners did not stabilize the military regime, however. Certain MBK policies such as the forced early retirement of 5,000 officers generated widespread discontent within the armed forces (Erkanlı, 1972, pp. 36–43). High-ranking officers resented taking orders from the MBK members who were not in active military duty. This resentment prompted the formation of a clandestine group within the military—the Armed Forces Unity (*Silahlı Kuvvetler Birliği* [SKB])—that sought to preserve the corporate interests and the hierarchical structure of the armed forces.<sup>5</sup> The group included ambitious officers like İrfan Tansel, Faruk Güventürk, and Talat Aydemir who were initially left outside the MBK.<sup>6</sup> The SKB quickly spread within the military, as junior officers recruited both their colleagues and superiors in the armed forces. The MBK leader Gürsel and his associates attempted to disband the group in June 1961 by removing Air Force Commander İrfan Tansel from his post. The SKB members responded with an ultimatum that demanded the reinstatement of İrfan Tansel and the resignation of the Minister of Defense as well as the Army and Navy Commanders (Aydemir, 1968, p. 93; Batur, 1985, pp. 94–96; Örtülü, 1966, pp. 112–123; Özkaya, 2005, pp. 334–340;



Tunçkanat, 1996, pp. 427–437). Gürsel's capitulation against this show of force demoted the MBK and quickly shifted control over to the SKB.

Amid this power struggle, the constituent assembly completed its draft constitution that envisioned anti-majoritarian institutions such as the Senate and Constitutional Court to prevent governments from abusing power like the DP once did.<sup>7</sup> Due to the CHP's comfortable majority in the Constituent Assembly, the final text bore much resemblance to the party's *İlk Hedefler Beyannamesi* endorsed at the 1959 convention (Demirel, 2011, p. 197; Kili, 1976, pp. 161–163). In addition, the MBK members sought to retain their political influence. For example, the MBK members became Natural Senators for life in the newly envisioned Senate, while the armed forces gained an elevated status in the new constitution. The General Staff became responsible to the Prime Ministry, rather than the Ministry of Defense as was the case since the late 1940s. The National Security Council (MGK) was created as a platform for government officials and military leaders to gather within an institutional setting to discuss state matters. Although the extant literature portrays the MGK as a tutelary organization (Kars Kaynar, 2018), one of its important functions was to tame the prevailing interventionist sentiment among junior officers after the 1960 coup. Its designers hoped that with the General High Staff represented in the council, there would be less worry among the officer corps that the military was not consulted on political issues. This, in turn, strengthened the position of the military elites over their subordinates. Finally, the junta oversaw the formation of new parties that would replace the vacuum left by the now closed DP. Among them, the most important was the Justice Party (*Adalet Partisi* [AP]) led by General Ragıp Gümüşpala, former Chief of the General Staff, who was retired by the MBK after the 1960 coup (Demirel, 2004, pp. 28–34), and the New Turkey Party (*Yeni Türkiye Partisi* [YTP]) founded by Ekrem Alican, the junta's former Minister of Finance.

In the 1961 general elections, the CHP won only a plurality of parliamentary seats with 36.74% of votes against the AP's 34.79%. In contrast, the right-wing parties that claimed to be DP's successors attained majority in both the parliament and the Senate. This electoral outcome panicked the military, which saw the CHP's victory vital to safeguarding the new regime. Moderates were taken by surprise with the CHP not gaining parliamentary majority, while the interventionists represented by the SKB got enraged against the rising electoral tide. The SKB's İstanbul branch met immediately after the election to sign a memorandum to seize power, disband the MBK, and suspend all political activity before the new parliament convened (Aytekin, 1967, p. 77; İsen, 2010, pp. 29–32; Örtülü, 1966, pp. 145–147; Seyhan, 1966, pp. 155–157; Tunçkanat, 1996, pp. 456–464). This initiative was also supported by the SKB's Ankara branch led by the commander of Military Academy Colonel Talat Aydemir. Resistance to this plan came from the Air Force officers who were closely affiliated with the CHP and the Chief of the General Staff Sunay. To prevent another coup, Sunay assured the interventionist officers that the newly elected MPs would support the new constitution and instruct their members to vote Gürsel for President

and İnönü for PM (Hale, 1994, pp. 153–156; Koçaş, 1977, pp. 1039–1040; Seyhan, 1966, pp. 157–160).

Sunay's maneuvers preserved the parliamentary regime, albeit only temporarily. Since the generals refused to stage a coup, the initiative passed on to dissident colonels like Talat Aydemir who did not welcome İnönü's return to the Prime Ministry (Aydemir, 1968, pp. 110–116; İsen, 2010, pp. 41–43). According to Aydemir, İnönü was an old politician who lacked the mental and physical capacity to lead the country. On February 9, 37 generals and colonels—of 59 officers present—signed another memorandum to call for a coup against İnönü government (Aydemir, 1968, pp. 116–133; Aytekin, 1967, pp. 182–188; Hale, 1994, pp. 155–156; İsen, 2010, pp. 43–45; Seyhan, 1966, pp. 173–177). But the protocol was not carried out due to strong opposition from Sunay and the Air Force Commander Tansel. On February 18, at a meeting attended by high-ranking officers, Sunay declared his opposition to the coup and suggested to Aydemir in private that military intervention could only take place in the event of İnönü's death or resignation (Hale, 1994, p. 156). In response, Aydemir reportedly challenged Sunay and claimed that pro-government generals were not in control of their units. Aydemir's response thus made the division between generals and field officers "common knowledge" (Singh, 2014, p. 82) to all attendees. For Sunay, who realized that he was not in full control of the armed forces, military intervention had few potential benefits.

Although most generals did not join the conspiracy, the "colonels' junta" still favored military intervention and took action on February 22, when Aydemir and his conspirators were forcefully retired by the government (Aydemir, 1968, pp. 137–143; İsen, 2010, pp. 57–84; Seyhan, 1966, pp. 183–198; Toker, 1992a, pp. 72–89). The Military Academy cadets constituted Aydemir's hard power at the outset, but the plotters soon received support from other interventionist junior officers in regiments across Ankara, including the highly strategic Presidential Guards Regiment. Since this was a coup from the middle, field officers needed to make a show of physical force to turn their move into a *fait accompli* and end any potential resistance from the military (Albrecht & Eibl, 2018, p. 319). Capturing prominent symbolic targets is crucial for shaping expectations during such a coup (Singh, 2014, p. 32). Accordingly, the plotters encircled the parliament and the presidential place but did not capture either building. Due to the widespread discontent among junior officers against the government, the General Staff was initially hesitant to use force against the plotters. But PM İnönü refused to negotiate and compelled the military leadership to take a strong stance against Aydemir. Meanwhile, the interventionist officers in İstanbul got cold feet, once they realized the strong political resolve in Ankara. Sunay's anti-coup message broadcasted on public radio further signaled to the armed forces that the plotters did not enjoy strong support in the military (Aslan, 2018, p. 9). In the absence of a clear plan of action, Aydemir soon lost his momentum and surrendered after midnight. His other alternative would have been to attack pro-government forces at a time when nearly the entire military leadership lined up behind İnönü, thereby triggering civil war—the least desirable outcome for both

sides. The key role played by İnönü in countering Aydemir's putsch challenges Singh's argument that civilian actors play at best a secondary role in influencing the course of events during a coup (Singh, 2014, p. 38).

Although İnönü put down Aydemir's putsh, his party's coalition with AP was weak internally. Following the AP's demands for amnesty for the DP politicians arrested after the 1960 coup, İnönü resigned and formed a new coalition government with the YTP and the Republican Peasant's Nation Party (*Cumhuriyetçi Köylü Millet Partisi* [CKMP]). The ensuing political instability created fertile ground for praetorianism. Even after Aydemir's failed 1962 coup, the interventionist mindset was indeed still prevalent in Ankara. Few officers favored the status quo and even fewer had confidence in the parliament. This widespread discontent increased support for interventionist sentiments in the military. Even in retirement, Aydemir was supported by a diverse group of opportunist politicians, journalists, academics, and businessmen who had grievances against İnönü (İsen, 2010, pp. 125–129; Koçuş, 1977, pp. 1200–1204). Aydemir also stayed in touch with other groups that had interventionist agendas, including *Ondörtler* who planned to return to Turkey soon (Aydemir, 1968, pp. 192–230; İsen, 2010, pp. 111–116).

It was against this backdrop that Aydemir staged his second putsch on May 20, 1963, with the help of officers still loyal to him (Aydemir, 1968, pp. 231–264; Hale, 1994, pp. 164–168). As a retired colonel, however, Aydemir had few troops on the ground and only shaky support from junior and field officers (Akyaz, 2002, pp. 214–232). The key part of his coup plan was to take over Ankara radio station to make a public broadcast, which was crucial for making the intervention a *fait accompli* for the rest of the armed forces (Singh, 2014, pp. 28–29). Realizing that the coup text was signed by Aydemir, the officers knew the putsch did not enjoy broad support and many refused to join the putsch. The radio station was soon recaptured by pro-government forces and Aydemir was arrested subsequently.

## Returning the Armed Forces to the Barracks

Aydemir's second putsch demonstrated that the conspiratorial mindset was still alive within the military. To restore military discipline, İnönü purged the interventionist officers and expelled all cadets from the Military Academy. Coup organizers were prosecuted in public trials that resulted in jail sentences for plotters and capital punishment for Aydemir, who was executed in 1964 (İsen, 2010, pp. 233–265, 271–333). Aydemir's death lowered the risk of Turkey becoming a "praetorian state" prevalent in Middle East and Latin America at the time. After these two failed coup attempts, field officers realized that they had little chance for success without support from the military leadership and a political doctrine. In the following years, interventionist officers therefore turned their attention to the recruitment of high-ranking generals to their cause.

Meanwhile, some retired officers decided to join civilian politics and run for parliamentary seats in the 1965 general elections. For those like former MBK

members Orhan Erkanlı, Orhan Kabibay, and İrfan Solmazer, as well as purged Air Force officer Hüsni Özkan, the logical destination was the CHP (Kayalı, 1994, pp. 110–116). On the other hand, right-wing officers chose the AP, whereas Türkeş and his associates joined the CKMP after their return from exile. Party elites saw these figures as valuable political assets to monitor developments in the military due to their contacts. The civil–military literature has neglected this intricate link between retired officers and political parties. These ties allowed retired military figures to wield political influence even under democratic rule. One such case was the National Unity Caucus (*Milli Birlik Grubu*) in the Senate, composed of former MBK members who became Natural Senators for life once the 1961 Constitution was ratified. These senators vehemently defended the 1960 coup, criticized governments that tried to reverse the junta’s policies, and served as an unofficial channel between governments and the armed forces.

Although İnönü government kept the military in barracks, it failed to address the country’s pressing socioeconomic problems. The ensuing political vacuum set the stage for the AP’s subsequent electoral rise, particularly after Süleyman Demirel, former Director of the General Directorate of the Hydraulic Works (*Devlet Su İşleri* [DSİ]) during the DP rule, was elected as the AP chairman following Gümüşpala’s sudden death in 1964. Under Demirel’s energetic leadership, the AP distinguished itself from other right-wing parties to form the government after its impressive 52.87% victory (240 deputies of 450 in total) in the 1965 general elections. Hailing from the party’s moderate faction, Demirel sought common ground with senior military commanders such as Sunay and Cemal Tural, then commander of the land forces, on the basis of their mutual hatred of communism (Cizre-Sakallıoğlu, 1993; Demirel, 2004; Hale, 1994, pp. 168–180). Both generals supported Demirel’s pragmatic approach centered on state-led industrialization against the CHP’s “left of center” agenda (Emre, 2013; Kili, 1976, pp. 211–265). As a further sign of reconciliation, Demirel also supported Sunay’s election as president in 1966 to retain the military leadership’s support.

## The March 12 Memorandum

Although the 1969 elections returned the AP to power with a comfortable majority, the government encountered strong opposition from nonparliamentary actors in its second term. Rapid industrialization enabled workers to organize under militant unions affiliated with the recently established Confederation of Revolutionary Labor Unions (*Devrimci İşçi Sendikaları Konfederasyonu* [DİSK]) that increased the number of labor strikes and anti-government demonstrations, as evidenced by the massive DİSK-orchestrated protests in İstanbul and Kocaeli on June 15–16, 1970 (Algül, 2015). Similarly, ultraleftist groups recruited university students to engage in subversive activities that destabilized Turkish politics (Olson, 1973; Ulus, 2010). In response, the ultra-right-wing group “Grey Wolves” employed violent tactics to counter the leftist wave with the AP government’s tacit approval. The AP’s

problems were exacerbated by the rise of an intransigent wing that was culturally conservative, acted in a confrontational manner against the military, and advocated the restoration of the DP elites' political rights. In February 1970, they voted against Demirel government's draft budget in parliament and were expelled from the party (Demirel, 2004, pp. 57–59). The weakened AP also faced competition from other right-wing parties such as Türkeş's National Action Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*) and the Islamist National Order Party (*Milli Nizam Partisi*) founded by several independent MPs elected in the 1969 general elections (Aytürk, 2014).<sup>8</sup> Against this backdrop, the country was plunged into a balance of payments crisis that forced Demirel government to announce currency devaluation in August 1970 (Yagci, 2018, p. 85).

Meanwhile, senior commanders had become disillusioned by Demirel's failure to maintain order within his party and the country. They feared that the ensuing power vacuum intensified Turkey's socioeconomic problems and emboldened student and labor radicalism. They also interpreted the bank robberies and other petty crimes carried out by student groups as a sign of collapsing state authority. This is in line with studies that found strikes, riots, and protests to be strong indicators of coup attempts (Powell, 2012). In the Turkish context, however, the military could not take immediate action against Demirel government due to strong internal disagreements within the senior leadership. The Chief of General Staff Memduh Tağmaç, who was unhappy with the status quo, did not want to topple Demirel government at that moment. He believed that the military should intervene only in the event of Demirel's complete failure to maintain public order and worried more about the radical sentiments prevalent among junior officers. By contrast, other generals like the commander of the Air Force Muhsin Batur saw economic reforms as necessary for political stability and preferred military intervention to Demirel's rule. As Singh (2014, p. 83) puts it, Batur assumed the role of a "challenger" tilting the opinion in favor of coup within the General Staff. Among the lower ranks, he was strongly supported by radical officers in the Land and Air Forces, who espoused leftist views and organized secret meetings to plan a military takeover.

Unlike their counterparts in the early 1960s, these officers were more politically engaged and acquired a leftist doctrine to direct their actions after the coup. They had contacts with prominent socialist intellectuals and were influenced by leftist journals such as Doğan Avcıoğlu's *Yön* and *Devrim* (Bilbilik, 2013, pp. 107–133; Gürkan, 1986; Ulus, 2010). Parliamentary rule, they argued, could not generate rapid economic development and social justice and that strong military rule was necessary to attain both goals simultaneously (Nye, 1977, p. 212). By early 1971, these radical officers reportedly put together plans for a putsch with the tacit approval of Muhsin Batur and commander of the Land Forces Faruk Gürler, both of whom were allegedly SKB members in the early 1960s (Turhan, 2001, pp. 105–127). According to these plans, the plotters planned to close down all political parties, including İnönü's CHP, and establish a Revolutionary Council to govern Turkey with their radical-reformist agenda.<sup>9</sup>

Following these developments with concern, senior commanders calculated that continued inaction on their part would further polarize the military and encourage junior officers to stage a coup from below, as in 1960, 1962, and 1963. But they also had serious doubts about joining the coup planned by the radical faction for fear of fueling tensions between leftist and rightist factions within the military. When the interventionist group met for the last time on March 9, Gürler therefore expressed reservations about staging a coup and proposed to wait for the “Enlarged Council of Commanders” that was scheduled to meet the next day (Batur, 1985; Bilbilik, 2013; Gürkan, 1986). In light of Gürler’s opposition, Batur also got cold feet and refused to give the green light for the coup. The General Staff was clearly divided but also did not want to lose total control of the course of events. Meanwhile, the military’s conservative faction followed these developments closely through the National Intelligence Agency (*Milli İstihbarat Teşkilatı*), which regularly informed President Sunay and Chief of the General Staff Tağmaç about the activities of the interventionist group. This information was indispensable for Tağmaç to monitor the situation and preempt any action by the junior officers. Unlike the 1960 coup, the top military brass was not caught by surprise in 1971.

With the radical faction demoralized on March 9, Tağmaç took action to preempt the coup from below. First, he met with generals at the Enlarged Council of Commanders to rule out the option of direct military rule and block a leftist coup attempt by junior officers. Given his position, he could schedule this meeting without being detected by civilian elites (Singh, 2014, p. 79). On March 11, Tağmaç met with Army, Navy, and Air Force Commanders one last time to discuss their options to force out Demirel. They all knew that inaction was no longer an option but also did not also want to join the bandwagon against the government. They instead settled on a compromise solution in the form of a public statement that called for Demirel’s resignation and the formation of a reformist government. Signed by Tağmaç and the three force commanders, the memorandum had significant soft power, carried the weight of the armed forces, and was broadcasted from the public radio. Given their easy access to public information, the generals did not need to stage their action in the middle of the night or use direct force unlike the previous three coups. With no support from the president or the opposition leaders, Demirel resigned the same day and the parliament remained open as a result.

Due to this compromise, the March 12 memorandum did not amount to a full military takeover. Instead, the military leadership purged members of the “radical” faction that planned the March 9 coup (Bilbilik, 2013, pp. 152–154) and selected Nihat Erim, an MP from the CHP’s centrist faction, to head the next government. As Singh (2014, p. 80) noted, senior officers have easy time building coalitions with civilian politicians with whom they are in contact due to their official positions. Nihat Erim had close ties to the bureaucratic and military elites and was known to be critical of CHP’s “left of center” agenda. Erim quickly formed a technocratic government to enact the reforms demanded by the military, while also restoring public order (Aydın & Taşkın, 2014, pp. 220–238). However, the government’s reform

agenda was soon overshadowed by its draconian measures against the leftist groups. In April 1971, for instance, the government declared martial law in 11 provinces, closed down the Workers' Party of Turkey (Türkiye İşçi Partisi), suppressed leftist associations and trade unions, and temporarily suspended the left-Kemalist daily *Cumhuriyet*. The ensuing wave of arrests included many prominent leftist intellectuals, union leaders, and academics, including Muammer Aksoy and Tarik Zafer Tunaya, two constitutional law professors who helped design the 1961 Constitution. This crackdown resulted in the resignation of 11 leftist ministers and the formation of a new cabinet by Erim.

The military leadership used successive governments in this period—four governments served between 1971 and 1973—to curb political rights and civil liberties introduced by the 1961 Constitution. The adoption of martial law shifted more power to local commanders, who deliberately targeted unions to attain industrial peace and repressed leftist groups. These governments increasingly adopted a conservative economic agenda, as Turkey came under what can be described as a “bureaucratic-authoritarian regime” (O'Donnell, 1973). According to O'Donnell, bureaucratic-authoritarian regimes are installed by militaries to limit the distributive conflicts arising from the exhaustion of the “easy” stage of industrialization. The military in response curtails the political space to limit union activities and adopt orthodox economic policies favored by economic elites.

This fusion between the economic and military elites transformed the military leadership along a pro-business line as high-ranking officers saw their corporate interests tied to the country's capitalist development. This cooperation had begun even before the 1971 intervention, which can be seen from growing economic activities of the Armed Forces Mutual Assistance Fund (*Ordu Yardımlaşma Kurumu*).<sup>10</sup> One clear impact of this shift was the strong discipline instituted within the armed forces after the early 1970s. Although some officers sympathized with political parties, the military leadership remained autonomous, avoided forming strong attachments to parties, and defended its corporate interests against governments throughout the 1970s.

## Conclusion

This article challenges two prevailing views in the Turkish CMR literature. First, it challenges those studies that portray the Turkish military as an ideologically homogenous actor. Although the armed forces in Turkey historically had a strong corporate identity structured around the regime's official ideology (Kemalism), officers differed in their personal interpretation after the 1960s. Whereas some officers increasingly subscribed to anticommunism and supported a pro-NATO foreign policy, others were critical of heavy U.S. involvement in the country, emphasized social issues, and wanted to enact economic reforms. The former group was increasingly prevalent in the upper echelons of the military, sided with right-wing politicians, and seized power only through coups within chain of command. Meanwhile, the latter

group had a radical ideology, was prone to support coups from below, and challenged any party that stood in its way. Due to the international context during the Cold War, the expansion of anti-communist platforms across countries that were the United States allies strengthened the former faction and led to growing ties between right-wing politicians and military elites. As this group prevailed after the early 1970s, a very rigid and conservative interpretation of Kemalism took hold of the armed forces in the lead up to the 1980 coup (Esen, 2014). In recent years, the notion of a “deep state” (Soyler, 2015) taking extra-legal measures has been central to contemporary debates about the Turkish military’s political involvement.<sup>10</sup> Scholars should turn their attention to this alliance forged between right-wing generals and political elites during the Cold War to trace its origins.

Second, this article argues that the military’s decision to not establish long-term rule cannot be attributed to its democratic commitment. The quick restoration of parliamentary rule after coups was not inevitable but rather occurred as a result of major schisms between different military factions and political elites. It demonstrates that radical groups in the armed forces advocated long-lasting military rule and prepared detailed programs for establishing a new political regime. Similarly, this article highlights that factions in the military, though loyal to the republican regime, had different motives for staging coups and promoted various agendas in power. None of the coup attempts covered in this article occurred fully within chain of command, except for the March 12 memorandum. These rifts led to fissures in the armed forces that constrained the military’s agenda and challenge the view that the coups took place primarily to defend Kemalism.

These arguments carry implications for contemporary CMR in Turkey. Lack of unity within the officer corps has continued until the contemporary times on issues ranging from secularism to foreign policy. The anti-American line, which was subdued after the purge of March 9 faction, reappeared following the rise of an Eurasianist group that advocated the Turkish military to seek autonomy within NATO and sought closer ties with Iran and Russia in the 1990s (Akcali & Perincek, 2009). Just as some officers criticized the United States in the 1960s due to its insufficient support for Turkey during the Cyprus crisis, the U.S. assistance to Kurdish groups in Iraq and Syria has similarly pushed some military circles to subscribe to anti-American views. Moving away from the “Turkish-Islamic synthesis” of the 1980 junta, the military leadership grew increasingly worried about the rise of political Islam until the 2010s. Not unlike the 1960s, some junior officers contemplated taking action on their own and pressured their superiors to protect the secular regime in the 1990s and 2000s. This discontent across officer ranks may have compelled high-ranking generals to pressure governments. Meanwhile, secularism no longer command full loyalty within the officer corps in the post-1980 period (Gürcan, 2018). Religious officers have infiltrated the armed forces with some success and subsequently consolidated their positions under the AKP rule. It was ironically this growing faction that pushed the military to stage a coup d’état in 2016 (Esen & Gumuscu, 2017). In the aftermath of the 2016 failed coup, President Erdoğan has



sought to create a partisan army for coup proofing, not unlike the DP's approach in the 1950s.

These conclusions point to several avenues for research in Turkish CMRs. First, scholars should investigate the evolution of ideological factions within different branches of the armed forces over time. For instance, there is little information on the organization, membership structure, and postcoup plans of the leftist junta that conspired to topple Demirel government on March 9, 1971. It is not clear whether they merely wanted to "complete" the reforms envisioned by the 1960 junta or establish a durable leftist dictatorship as was seen in Syria and Iraq in the 1970s. Similarly, there is no monograph on the Armed Forces Union (SKB) that played such an important political role in the early 1960s. Did the group have a clear political agenda or instead serve as cover for officers with ambitious political goals? We do not even know if the group disbanded itself after Talat Aydemir's failed coups. Another possible avenue for research is the transformation of the armed forces after Turkey joined NATO in 1952. Located next to the Soviet Union, Turkey had one of the largest militaries in NATO and its military was restructured in accordance with U.S. strategy and military tactics after the 1950s. This shift promoted U.S.-trained officers, shaped promotion channels, and may have consequently reduced the chance for success for coups from below due to their radical nature.

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### **Notes**

1. In line with Huntington's analysis, this article defines praetorianism as a regime wherein the military frequently intervenes in politics as a direct actor (Huntington, 1968; Perlmutter, 1969). As seen in the Turkish case, praetorian militaries arise in the early and middle stages of modernization, when institutions are not strong enough to allow for increased political participation and economic development in an orderly fashion. Rapid

economic growth after the 1950s generated intense conflict between social classes and fueled popular mobilization, which the political institutions could not handle as seen from rising political instability and polarization after the 1960s.

2. For more on the concept of veto player, see Tsebelis (2002).
3. For more on competitive authoritarian regimes, see Levitsky and Way (2002).
4. Until Cemal Gürsel was brought to Ankara from İzmir, where he was staying at the time, the putschists declared General Cevdet Sunay as their leader in Ankara and tried to secure the support of key units based on his prestige (Aytekin, 1967, pp. 45–47). On Gürsel's position under the Democrat Party government, see Çelikoğlu (2010, pp. 99–103).
5. Due to the dearth of primary documents, it is difficult to discern the *Silahlı Kuvvetler Birliği's* (SKB) ideology and membership structure. For more on SKB, see Özkaya (2005, pp. 317–330), Turhan (2001, pp. 105–127), Esin (2005, pp. 221–222), Seyhan (1966, pp. 130–138, 144–150), and Akyaz (2002, pp. 148–164).
6. The junta tried to co-opt these officers by offering them high-level posts. For instance, Talat Aydemir was appointed as commander of the War College, while Sadi Kocaş, then military attache in London, was appointed as Senator in 1962 by Cemal Gürsel (Ulay, 1968, pp. 141–142).
7. *Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi* was a transformed version of *Cumhuriyetçi Köylü Millet Partisi* that changed its agenda, ideology, and official name after Türkeş and his collaborators took control of the party. Meanwhile, *Milli Nizam Partisi* was a new party that was established with an Islamic agenda by an independent deputy from Konya, Necmettin Erbakan.
8. Gürlü was considered for the presidency in the new regime, while Batur would be appointed as prime minister. For members of the Revolutionary Council and the draft constitution, see Bilbilik (2013, pp. 144–146, 157–175).
9. Although it was initially established in 1961 to offer officers supplementary retirement benefits and loans, *Ordu Yardımlaşma Kurumu* soon grew into a major conglomerate with investments in a wide array of sectors (Parla, 1998).
10. I thank one of the referees for raising this point.

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