



# The Generals Take Command in Turkey: Problems and Prospects

An Intelligence Memorandum

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**The Generals Take Command  
in Turkey: Problems  
and Prospects**

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**Summary**

Because of exasperation with the growing anarchy, economic malaise, and political immobilism that threatened the very foundations of the Turkish state, the military took control of the government on 12 September. The military commanders probably will stay in power as long as it takes to restore order, to stabilize the economy, and to make some fundamental political and constitutional changes. [Redacted]

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The new regime faces major obstacles, but in the short term, it is likely to bring a measure of order and economic equilibrium while keeping Turkey on a solidly pro-Western course. It is also likely to succeed in imposing a more orderly democracy that emphasizes a strong presidential form of government, fewer political parties, and a more restrictive constitution. [Redacted]

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The goal of securing long-term social, political, and economic health within the context of a democratic state will be more difficult to achieve. The commanders are not likely to eliminate the causes of political violence, which will almost certainly reemerge when they withdraw from politics. The economy's structural deficiencies will leave it susceptible to severe gyrations. And those groups adversely affected by the military's institutional reforms are bound to resist. [Redacted]

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The result may be that Turkey's military chiefs will not be able to restore full civilian rule in the one- to two-year time frame they envisage. Rather, they risk getting bogged down in managing Turkey—either directly or indirectly—for such an extended period that institutional democracy, relations with Turkey's allies, and their own professionalism will be severely damaged. [Redacted]

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*This memorandum was requested by the National Intelligence Officer for Western Europe. It was prepared by [Redacted] Office of Political Analysis. It was coordinated with the Office of Economic Research, the Office of Strategic Research, the Directorate of Operations, and the National Intelligence Officer for Western Europe. Information available as of 22 September 1980 was used in its preparation. Comments and questions are welcome and may be addressed to the Chief, [Redacted]*

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*Chief of Staff Gen. Kenan Evren,  
leader of new regime*



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[Redacted]

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**The Generals Take Command  
in Turkey: Problems  
and Prospects** [Redacted]

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**Background**

The overthrow of the civilian government and the assumption of power by the National Security Council comes exactly two decades after the direct takeover in 1960 and nine years after the so-called "coup by memorandum" in 1971.<sup>1</sup> As with the previous interventions, it was preceded by a period of political and economic disorder and growing military disillusionment with civilian leaders. [Redacted]

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For three years, Turkey has been gripped by skyrocketing inflation that peaked last winter at an annual rate of over 100 percent. One-fifth of the work force is idle, and an acute foreign exchange shortage has drastically curtailed imports and production. Moreover, civil war appeared to be on the horizon as the toll of political violence rose to 15 lives a day this summer. The bureaucracy, including policemen and teachers, was polarized into leftist and rightist camps, and the country was pockmarked by so-called liberated areas that were off limits to state authorities. The general atmosphere that characterized both elite and mass populations was heavy with despair and foreboding. [Redacted]

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The politicians, meanwhile, continued to pursue narrow, partisan interests, eschewing cooperation for the national good. Particularly galling to military leaders was the growing audacity of the Islamic-oriented National Salvation Party—strategically positioned between the forces of the left and right—which sponsored a religious rally last month where both Ataturk and the Turkish national anthem were insulted. [Redacted]

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This was anathema to Turkey's proud military, which has traditionally viewed itself as guardian of the nation and guarantor of the ideals of modern Turkey's founder, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk. Ataturk called for a strong, independent, secular, and Westernized state characterized by social cohesion and class harmony. [Redacted]

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<sup>1</sup> The National Security Council consists of Chief of Staff Gen. Kenan Evren (Chairman), Ground Forces Commander Gen. Nurettin Ersin, Air Force Commander Gen. Taksin Sahinkaya, Navy Commander Adm. Nejat Tumer, and Gendarmerie Commander Gen. Sedat Celasun. Gen. Haydar Saltik is secretary general of the Council. The commanders on 21 September appointed a civilian cabinet of technocrats, retired officers, and centrist politicians headed by retired Adm. Bulend Ulusu that will handle the day-to-day affairs of government. [Redacted]

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The commanders moved only after several warnings to civilian leaders to unite in behalf of the national interest. Their demarches last January and February emboldened the minority rightist government of Prime Minister Demirel to enact sweeping economic reforms and to propose new internal security legislation recommended by the military. The warnings also temporarily intimidated the opposition Republicans and Demirel's erstwhile partner, the National Salvation Party, to mute their criticism and be more cooperative. This truce was soon broken, however, and the parties were unable to elect a new president after six months and more than 110 ballots. Nor were the parties able to agree on additional military-requested internal security legislation. [redacted]

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[redacted] Indeed, the economy was showing signs of recovery. Substantial foreign assistance pledges totaling more than \$3 billion this year combined with Demirel's bold economic measures had all but eliminated shortages of essential goods; the annual inflation rate had been cut in half; and the balance-of-payments deficit was narrowed. [redacted]

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The level of violence, however, continued to rise. There were more than 600 killings in July and August, including prominent political and trade union leaders as well as military officers and policemen. The last straw for the military appears to have been the new political offensive unleashed by the Republicans and Salvationists to bring down the Demirel government that began with the no-confidence vote against its Foreign Minister. The commanders apparently concluded that the politics-as-usual approach by civilian leaders would continue indefinitely as the country, crippled by the absence of a permanent president, headed toward civil war. [redacted]

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**Forging a New Order**

The commanders' intervention—their suspension of Parliament, the Constitution, and political parties, and the arrest of over 100 politicians—underscores their intention to make fundamental changes before they restore civilian rule. Initially, they are likely to try to suppress terrorist groups by imposing a harsh martial law regime that could include trying extremist politicians for crimes against the Constitution. They will also try to accelerate the economic recovery. [redacted]

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The military also is likely to revise the country's Constitution in the name of placing the needs of the community over the individual and order over liberty. They will probably also forsake proportional representation in favor of the majority system in an effort to eliminate the political fragmentation that has produced a succession of weak governments in recent years. Overall, they seem determined to create a political system that remains democratic but is better equipped to handle the stresses and strains of Turkey's transition from a rural to an urban society. [redacted]

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In foreign policy, the new military government will pursue a pro-NATO and pro-US course. Almost all of the top leaders have had some training in the United States, and they are known to value Turkey's membership in the Alliance. At the same time, they will be looking for a measure of understanding and support for their effort to place the country on an even keel. Coolness by the Allies at this critical time could sour relations very quickly. The commanders, who still resent the arms embargo imposed on Turkey after its invasion of Cyprus in 1974, will be especially sensitive to the US attitude on military aid. [redacted]

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#### **Difficulties and Advantages**

The military regime will encounter a number of obstacles in trying to forge a new order. Some of these are unique to Turkey, others are inherent in the act of military men becoming governors. The difficulties all seem to be greater than when the military tried to govern the country directly in the early 1960s and indirectly in the early 1970s. [redacted]

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To restore order, they must control the many armed terrorist groups on the left and right that are well-organized, highly disciplined, and strongly committed to disrupting Turkish society. The economy also is at a critical juncture. It can either revert to the triple-digit inflation, growing unemployment, and the acute shortages of last winter, or it can continue the recovery prompted by the civilian government's free market-oriented economic reforms and huge inflows of foreign assistance. Much will depend on whether the commanders will follow through on those reforms—which run counter to the state capitalism espoused by Ataturk—and be responsive to the advice of foreign aid donors. [redacted]

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Although the military is united in a common purpose and morale is high, the choices and decisions that lie ahead—how to deal with terrorism, what shape to give the new Constitution and electoral law, how to respond to external pressures, and when to withdraw from politics—may place severe strains on military unity. Finally, the generals must operate within an international environment far more sensitive to human rights violations

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and far more suspicious of military rule than was the case in 1960 or even 1971. The result could be a reluctance by some countries to contribute to large aid packages in the future. [redacted]

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Juxtaposed against these risks and obstacles are some important assets the military can bring to bear. In a society wracked by the breakdown of authority, the commanders have a monopoly of power as well as the will to control terrorism and impose the sacrifices necessary for economic recovery. In place of the opportunism and irresponsibility of political leaders, they bring a steadiness that could help substantially to restore order and develop a sound economy. The military leaders' strong domestic position, moreover, will make it easier for them to make tough decisions on troublesome foreign policy issues such as the disputes with the Greeks on Greek reentry into the military wing of NATO, Aegean rights, and Cyprus. [redacted]

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**Short-Term Prospects  
Encouraging**

On balance, Turkey's military leaders are likely to be largely successful in achieving their immediate aims of restoring order, reactivating the economy, and creating new political institutions without unduly disrupting Turkey's relations with its allies. [redacted]

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Although they cannot completely eradicate political violence, the commanders should be able to bring it under control. If, as seems likely, the terrorists seek to provoke harsh reprisals to discredit the regime abroad, the military initially may try to avoid excesses. The commanders' first priority, however, will be to establish order, and in the end they will use whatever force they believe necessary. Many terrorist groups will be broken up, while their leaders will go deeper underground and scale down their activities. [redacted]

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The commanders, despite the military's state capitalist bias, show signs of adhering to the austerity program and free enterprise orientation introduced by Demirel. Moreover, the commanders are in a better position than the Demirel government to see the economic reforms through. The new regime, for example, can and probably will prohibit strikes and inflationary wage increases. [redacted]

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Reorganizing Turkey's political institutions also is likely to prove manageable. Political immobilism in recent years has led to a consensus among most military leaders and some members of the civilian elite on the need for a more orderly democracy. The new civilian cabinet of technocrats headed by Prime Minister Uluşu appears well qualified to lead this effort. [redacted]

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International reactions so far to the commanders' takeover suggest that Turkey's foreign ties will not be significantly disrupted. Most governments have shown sympathy for the military's goals—even while publicly lamenting the necessity of the takeover and calling for a speedy return to democratic rule. Some governments and many left-of-center political parties within NATO and the European Community may press for cooler relations with the new regime, but in the short run their impact is likely to be slight. [redacted]

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Barring widespread abuse of power and assuming clear if gradual moves toward restoring democracy, most NATO and EC countries will support Turkey's military rulers. Even Greek officials seem optimistic that they will be able to establish a productive dialogue with the commanders over longstanding bilateral differences. Preliminary statements by the commanders and their need to show good will toward the Western Alliance suggest the Greeks may be right. [redacted]

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**Long-Term Outlook  
Less Promising**

Even if the military can reduce violence substantially, further reactivate the economy, and devise a more effective and centralized political system, these would by no means ensure that Turkey will enjoy stable, democratic government and economic prosperity. [redacted]

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The causes of violence in Turkey are derived from deep social divisions, the dislocations and inequities accompanying modernization, [redacted]

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[redacted] The military leaders—like previous military-dominated governments—are not likely to make much headway against these problems, and bloody confrontations between extremists are likely to resume as soon as martial controls are lifted and full democracy is restored. [redacted]

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It also will take time to fill the void left in the nation's leadership by the discrediting of most major political figures. At this point it is far from clear where the new generation of leaders will come from or how the political forces will align themselves in a new environment that strongly discourages the proliferation of parties. Nor would economic recovery preclude future crises requiring more international rescue efforts. Unless future Turkish leaders can forgo grossly overvalued exchange rates, huge budget deficits, and price and interest rate controls, Turkey could again get into the same economic bind it is in today. [redacted]

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The new political institutions the commanders will form, moreover, will obviously hurt some groups while they help others. Those whose interests are adversely affected—such as the extreme right and left, the Islamic fundamentalists, the universities, and the trade unions—are likely to seek revenge. Their reactions could make it difficult for the military to extricate itself from politics. And even after the military withdraw, renewed polarization could impel them again to intervene.

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