

DEFENSE & SECURITY

How the Politicization of the Turkish Armed Forces Undermined its Core Tasks

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With its primary mission of protecting Turkey's sovereignty and promoting peace in the region, the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) plays a crucial role in national defense and humanitarian aid. Nevertheless, recent incidents have raised questions about its effectiveness in carrying out these tasks. After the attempted coup on July 15, 2016, the Erdoğan government carried out political interventions and purges within the TSK, using the unrest as a pretext to align the military with its own political agenda. This politicized the TSK and consequently weakened its ability to effectively perform its essential missions of deterrence, strategic intelligence gathering, threat assessment, humanitarian assistance, and response to natural disasters.

The TSK has recently been under fire for participating too late in search and rescue operations with all their units and capabilities following the two major earthquakes that struck Turkey on Feb. 6, 2023. This was in sharp contrast to the army's performance some decades earlier. On Aug. 17, 1999, for instance, the TSK acted rapidly after an earthquake in Gölcük. Within 48 hours, some 65,000 soldiers had been deployed to conduct search and rescue, evacuation, and shelter operations. Soldiers also set up field hospitals, tent cities, and mobile kitchens to help those affected by the disaster, playing a crucial role in the country's recovery. [Deploying](#)

in 2023, the Turkish people expected a similar response from the TSK but were disappointed when they saw low-capacity efforts in the earthquake zone. During the current disaster, the TSK deployed only 7,500 soldiers, slightly more than one-tenth of the personnel deployed in the 1999 Gölcük earthquake, in the first 48 hours after the quakes, a critical time for search and rescue operations.

In response to criticism that the TSK was late to respond to the earthquake, Defense Minister Hulusi Akar issued a statement on Feb. 20. He defended the army's actions, stating that they were mobilized from the very beginning and rushed to render aid. He explained that the first earthquake occurred at 4:17 a.m. on Feb. 6 and that the Defense Ministry, as well as all the operations centers of the land, naval, and air forces, ordered their units to report at 4:30 a.m. The Turkish Armed Forces' Humanitarian Aid Command was given instructions, and all military units were mobilized accordingly. Akar said he reported to President Erdoğan at 5:10 a.m. on the state of the army, adding that despite difficulties due to poor weather, the Turkish army made great efforts to transport rescue teams to the affected areas. Indeed, snow and freezing rain hampered rescue efforts, but the weather is only a small part of the reasons for the armed forces' hobbled response.

While Akar does not explicitly state why the TSK did not deploy enough troops to the region immediately after the earthquakes, he implies that the army was ready to intervene and wants people to conclude that President Erdoğan did not allow them to do so. This statement exonerates Akar and places the responsibility for the TSK's late response on Erdoğan. The reason for the president's decision is speculated to stem from his desire to prevent the TSK from regaining its previous level of credibility and public support, for he views it as a threat to his rule.

The root of the TSK's seeming incompetence lies several years back. After a coup attempt in 2016, the Erdoğan administration implemented institutional changes in the TSK, weakening the command-and-control functions of the force commands and the chiefs of general staff over their units and staff. In previous crises, such as the 1999 earthquake, the Naval Forces Command had the autonomy to establish a maritime transportation bridge with warships and transport the wounded to hospitals without orders from anyone. However, in recent

earthquakes, a similar maritime transportation bridge was not established within the first 24 hours, despite the availability of landing and amphibious ships and frigates. The TSK's usual institutional reflexes in crises have been compromised by the structure set up by the Erdoğan administration.

Additionally, the government's ongoing purge of the military following the coup attempt in 2016 resulted in the dismissal of thousands of experienced and competent officers, roughly 40 percent of the army's generals and admirals, who had not participated in the coup attempt, leaving the TSK with a significant loss of capability and capacity. The Turkish Air Force (TAF) has been struggling with a shortage of fighter pilots in recent years following the mass dismissal of nearly 1,000 pilots in the wake of the failed coup. Before the coup attempt, the ratio of fighter pilots to fighter jets in the air force was 3:1; following the dismissals, that ratio dropped to just 0.3:1

Other developments further attest to the maiming of the army after 2016. For instance, Turkey dispatched two A400M military transport aircraft to Ukraine on Feb. 24, 2022, to evacuate Turkish nationals. [The two aircraft](#) have remained at Boryspil Airport near Kyiv since that date due to the closure of the Ukrainian airspace. From the TAF point of view, the deployment of the aircraft to Ukraine hours before Russia invaded Ukraine and their getting stranded there can only be explained by the strategic blindness of military intelligence. Another example: Turkish Navy reconnaissance and surveillance could not detect Russian warships positioned in the Black Sea to launch Kalibr cruise missiles. While the Turkish public tries to keep track of information about the Russian army's progress in Ukraine on social media and telegram channels, how can the British Ministry of Defence provide [regular details](#) from the theatre of operations in Ukraine every day while the Turkish cannot? The main reason the TSK was unable to detect the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine is that it lacks signals intelligence capabilities and technologies, which are critical components of modern military intelligence.

The primary cause of the TSK's ineffectiveness stems from the political interference by the Erdoğan administration. The efforts of the government of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to consolidate power and establish an autocratic regime in Turkey have profoundly impacted the institutional structure and effectiveness of the TSK.

In 2016, the Erdoğan administration introduced a new promotion system that gave the president significant control over the appointments of generals and admirals. Apart from the chief of general staff and force commanders, the other four-star generals and admirals were excluded from Supreme Military Council (YAS) membership. The vice president and the ministers of finance and treasury, foreign affairs, justice, the interior, and education were appointed as new members. With this arrangement, the power in the promotion and appointment of admirals and generals passed from the military bureaucracy to Erdoğan's government. The changes led to the politicization of the military and undermined its independence. The new system favors officers loyal to the Erdoğan government rather than ones promoted for merit.

In the current situation, the TSK has faced significant challenges in recent years, with changes to the promotion system and the mass dismissal of staff officers following the abortive putsch in 2016, leading to substantial weaknesses in leadership, planning, and command functions. In his memoir, *Never Give an Inch: Fighting for America I Love*, former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo shares his assessment of the TSK during the post-coup period as follows: "Whether we take the fight against ISIS with the Turkish Armed Forces or with the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), the level of support we need to provide will not change. Because the TSK's capabilities and capacity are quite limited."

The world is evolving from a unipolar order dominated by a single power to a multipolar political system in which more than one power fights for dominance. With Russia's annexation of the four provinces of Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhya, and Kherson in the south and east of Ukraine, a new era is beginning. In this context, it is crucial for Turkey and its NATO allies to have a strong military capable of performing core tasks and deterrence. To achieve this, it is necessary to reduce politicization within the TSK and ensure that it operates as required by its intended role, not the political agenda of the political party. If Erdoğan secures re-election on May 14, 2023, he is expected to consolidate control of the TSK further. This could hamper the TSK's ability to carry out its responsibilities, which would not only affect Turkey's national security. In an increasingly multipolar world characterized by competition among major powers, such a development may also have a negative impact on the overall security and stability of NATO and the region.

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