Making Turkey’s Transformation Possible: Claiming ‘Security-speak’—not Desecuritization!

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Making Turkey’s Transformation Possible: Claiming ‘Security-speak’—not Desecuritization!

Pınar Bilgin

There is an emerging consensus in the literature that considers Turkey’s post-1999 transformation a consequence of AKP-led efforts directed at challenging the ‘securityness’ of issues. The present article argues that change became possible not through ‘desecuritization’, but owing to some societal actors claiming ‘security-speak’ to frame other issues as ‘threats to Turkey’s future’, and pointing to Turkey’s accession to the European Union as a solution that would help stabilize its foreign relations as well as the economy and provide an anchor for reform.

Introduction

This article looks at the ‘transformation’ that Turkey has undergone since 1999, when it was granted candidate country status by the European Union (EU). Since 1999, the constitution has been amended numerous times to improve human and political rights, strengthen the rule of law and restructure the institutions of economy and finance as well as democracy in Turkey. State practices have also begun to reflect these changes. Although a lot remains to be done, the significance of what has been achieved in the last decade or so cannot be underestimated.

Given the resilient nature of a significant portion of the state establishment who have in the past raised national security concerns in order to block potentially destabilizing reforms, how do we understand the transformation process that is underway? The emerging consensus in the scholarly literature on Turkey is that the post-1999 transformation owes much to the AKP government (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi—
Justice and Development Party, in power since November 2002) and its skilled manoeuvring in minimizing the number of issues framed as ‘security problems’. Although I join the current thinking in regarding the state establishment’s use of ‘security-speak’ (and the concept of ‘national security’ that warrants such use) as problematic, in that it has stalled Turkey’s previous attempts at reforming the political and economic system, I part ways with the emerging scholarly consensus that change has (and should) come through minimizing the number of issues framed in security terms. This is because, I argue, the problems Turkey has been facing in democratization and other reform efforts go beyond mere ‘size’ of the security agenda and are rooted in prevalent understandings and practices of ‘security’ and its relationship to (and implications for) ‘politics’.

I make two interrelated arguments. First, through closer examination of two failed attempts to challenge the ‘securityness’ of issues (the 2001 speech by the then Deputy Prime Minister Mesut Yılmaz on the ‘national security syndrome’ and the AKP government’s post-2002 framing of the ‘Cyprus’ issue outside security terms), I argue that their failure was due not only to the resilience of the state establishment but also to a lack of support by civil-societal actors, who were unable and/or unwilling to frame issues that were already on the agenda in outside-security terms. This, I argue, was because civil society in Turkey (as in some other developing-world settings; see Pasha 1996) is a product of the ‘national security project’ of the state establishment and, therefore, does not always constitute an escape from prevailing understandings of security. Second, I suggest that change became possible owing to some societal actors’ two-pronged strategy of claiming ‘security-speak’ in order to frame concerns such as ‘limited life-chance opportunities for a rapidly increasing population’ in security terms (as ‘threats to Turkey’s future’) and pointing to Turkey’s accession to the EU as a solution that would help stabilize Turkey’s foreign relations as well as the economy and provide an anchor for reform. This strategy was successful insofar as it challenged the state establishment’s monopoly over ‘security-speak’ and de-centred existing ‘security problems’ through identifying new ones. These, in turn, allowed room for debate, dissent and change.

Pointing to Turkey as an example of claiming ‘security-speak’ as a tool for ‘progressive change’ has implications for the future practices of societal actors as well as two sets of scholarly literatures: the Security Studies literature on ‘de/securitization’ and the Turkey Studies literature on domestic politics and foreign policy. The two sets of literatures are not unrelated, in that the former regards Turkey’s case as a textbook example of what happens when the state establishment frames issues as ‘security problems’ to block unwanted change. The literature on Turkey’s domestic politics and foreign policy, in turn, takes as its reference point the motto: ‘Security is the conservative mechanism—but we want less security!’ (Waever 1995: 56). The argument posited here challenges the consensus in both sets of literatures, and suggests that ‘desecuritization’ (defined by Waever as taking issues outside the security agenda to be addressed through ‘normal’ political processes) may not be the strategic or the ethico-political option if the aim is to bring about ‘progressive change’. Notwithstanding the risk of increasing the number of issues to be handled through practices informed by statist and militarist understandings of security, claiming ‘security-speak’ may still be the ethico-political option to be
adopted by societal actors, because it would allow for challenging prevalent ways of thinking about ‘security’, its relationship to (and implications for) ‘politics’. Merely taking issues outside the security agenda, in turn, would mean abandoning those issues that remain on the agenda to the statist and militarist understandings and practices of ‘security’ (see Wyn Jones 1999; Huysmans 2006).

The first section lays the groundwork for the discussion on Turkey’s case. The Copenhagen School’s (CS) ‘securitization theory’ is discussed in view of what I refer to as ‘universal desecuritization’; that is, desecuritization as the superior ethico-political option regardless of time and place. The second section focuses on the post-1999 transformation of Turkey. Looking at two failed desecuritization attempts by the then Deputy Prime Minister Yılmaz (in 2001) and the AKP government (after 2002), the article suggests that it was societal actors’ claiming ‘security-speak’ that made possible the change of course in Turkey’s policy towards ‘Cyprus’ as well as the passing through the Parliament of a series of ‘harmonization packages’ towards meeting EU conditionality.

A caveat is in order. Emphasizing societal actors’ role in making Turkey’s transformation possible is not the same as making a case for relying on their agency. Quite the contrary: decisive governmental leadership, a cooperative bureaucracy, and an (international) anchor for reform are all crucial for bringing about ‘progressive change’ as observed in Greek–Turkish relations during 1999. Although Greek and Turkish societal actors (as with the Turco-Greek forum and the Turkish-Greek Citizens’ Dialogue; see Belge 2004, Axt 2005) had been laying the groundwork for a rapprochement for some years, it took two foreign ministers, Ismail Cem and George Papandreou, who were willing to take up this challenge (with some aid from the 1999 earthquakes in Turkey and Greece that helped respective publics of the two countries to reconsider the bilateral relationship), to break with the past. Such a rapprochement would have been difficult had Greece not gained extra confidence thanks to the EU security umbrella and decided that it would benefit from Turkey’s path towards EU membership.

The state of civil society in Turkey is a product of the national security project of the state establishment. It was against this background that some societal actors claimed ‘security-speak’ and presented EU membership as a possible solution to myriad security problems, which, in turn, made the post-1999 transformation possible. Although societal actors were not able or willing to challenge the securityness of existing issues they were, nevertheless, able to de-centre them. This was done by identifying other issues as ‘threats to Turkey’s future’. The number of issues identified as ‘threats’ was increased, thereby setting the stage for all ‘security problems’ to be reconsidered within the broader context of ‘insecurity in Turkey’.

Securitization Theory and the Case against Universal Desecuritization

Following Ole Wæver’s (1995, 1998) analyses of post-World War II dynamics in Western Europe, and the securitization theory he developed together with his colleagues from the Copenhagen Peace Research Institute (the Copenhagen School, CS), it has become commonplace to argue that ‘security’ has served as a ‘conservative mechanism’ when employed as a concept by analysts and as a policy tool by practitioners. Thus,
‘desecuritization’ is viewed as the preferable, alternative strategy. One way of explaining this preference is to argue that it is ‘absurd’ to try to maximize security, for it cannot be achieved (Wæver 1995: 57). Indeed, ‘if the threat were really eliminated, the political identity would be damaged and, depending on how strongly it relies on the threat, it may very well collapse’ (Huysmans 1998: 239). Waever presents a second explanation: ‘if one has...complete security, one does not label it “security”’ (Wæver 1995: 57, see also Woever 1998). In such a situation, he writes, ‘security is simply an irrelevant concern’, as is the case with the 20th-century inter-state dynamics of Scandinavian states or post-World War dynamics in Western Europe. Such relationships are better labelled as ‘asecurity’, Waever submits (1998), for they are characterized by issues being addressed through ‘normal’ political mechanisms. Security ceases to be relevant in this context.

CS scholars consider desecuritization to be the preferable strategy also because of the ways in which the state establishment uses its near-monopoly over ‘security-speak’ to take control of issues that, in turn, facilitate putting an end to democratic debates and justify resorting to zero-sum and militarized measures as warranted by the emergency state of ‘security’. In revealing the workings of security as a ‘conservative mechanism’, CS scholars have developed three sets of arguments: theoretical, historical and ethico-political.

The theoretical argument builds upon the ‘speech act’ theory (Austin 1962; Searle 1969). Contesting the widely held assumption that ‘threats’ to security exist ‘out there’ independent of ‘us’ knowing about and/or representing them as such, the CS insists that there are choices involved in deciding which issues are to be labelled ‘security’ problems, and therefore taken outside ‘normal’ political processes and handled through the adoption of ‘extraordinary’ measures—that is, ‘securitization’ (see Wæver 1995; Buzan et al. 1998). The ‘securityness’ of an issue is not a function of the ‘objective’ qualities of the specific occasion but of intersubjective dynamics, argue CS scholars. An issue does not become a ‘security issue’ unless it is labelled as such by the relevant actors who have the authority to do so. Since the state establishment has traditionally been the ‘powers-that-be’ in the realm of security, it usually identifies issues as ‘threats’ and decides what the security agenda should look like. Although the audience also plays a crucial role in accepting or rejecting such securitization attempts (see Buzan et al. 1998), the power and authority enjoyed by the state elite over the production of security as a ‘good’ and ‘knowledge’ cannot be denied. Thus, security, as studied by the CS, comes across as a tool used by the state elite for ‘framing’ and ‘handling’ an issue, which ‘organizes social relations into security relations’ (Huysmans 1998: 232).

The historical argument rests upon a novel reading of post-World War II experience in Western Europe as a process of ‘turning threats into challenges and security into politics’ (Wæver 1995: 60; 1998). Western Europe was able to distance itself from the violent experiences that characterized the first half of the 20th century, argues Waever, by re-setting intra-European relations outside security terms. In so doing, statist and militarist thinking and practices were marginalized. The ‘successes’ of desecuritization were later extended to Eastern Europe: ‘A great deal of the East–West dialogue of the
1970s and 1980s, especially that on “non-military aspects of security”, human rights and the whole Third Basket of the Helsinki Accords, could be regarded as a discussion of where to place boundaries on a concept of security’ (Wæver 1995: 60). By challenging the ‘securityness’ of previously securitized issues (that is, by asking ‘[t]o what degree were Eastern regimes “permitted” to use extraordinary instruments to limit societal East–West exchange and interaction?’), the parties were able to ‘turn threats into challenges’, thereby taking significant steps towards overcoming them (Wæver 1995: 60). To the extent that such practice has been successful (as suggested by the evolution of the EU), the argument for desecuritization in the Western European context rests on solid ground.

The ethico-political argument of the CS is the most controversial one. It highlights the CS concern that the widest possible concept of security is not always the most progressive, and can easily result in the militarization of wider societal fields (Wæver 1996: 117; see also Booth 1991, 1997, 2005; Bilgin et al. 1998; Wyn-Jones 1999). By way of this argument, CS scholars part ways with many other critics of Cold War approaches to security who have sought to broaden the security agenda without reconsidering the ‘securityness’ of issues (see, for example, Mathews 1990; also see Knudsen 2001 for a more recent example). This is because, argue CS scholars, ‘post-Cold War broadeners’ share a basic premise of the Cold War approach in that they treat security as ‘a reality prior to language, [which] is out there (irrespective of whether the conception is “objective” or “subjective”, is measured in terms of threat or fear)’ (Wæver 1995: 46). This position is in contrast to CS scholars who have argued that security is better understood as a political act that involves making choices about how an issue would be handled: ‘ordinary’ or ‘extraordinary’. For, ‘it is always a choice to treat something as a security issue’ (Wæver 2000: 251).

It is based on the three arguments summarized above that CS scholars express their scholarly (and political) preference for desecuritization. I refer to the CS position as ‘universal desecuritization’ for it rests on the assumption that desecuritization is the preferable ethico-political strategy for scholars and societal actors, regardless of time and space. While Wæver (1995) grants the necessity of securitization in certain contexts, he nevertheless maintains that the ultimate aim should be one of desecuritization. Viewed as such, the CS approach relies on societal actors to attempt ‘speech act failures’, that is, taking issues outside the security agenda to be addressed through ‘normal’ political channels. However, this stance is particularly problematic in developing-world settings, where societal actors are not able and/or willing to challenge established ways of thinking about and doing security. In such settings some societal actors may even join the state elite in calling for ‘more security.’ In some cases, when the state elite seeks to undertake reforms, societal actors in these areas may take the lead in seeking to block ‘progressive change’.

Approaches that rely on the agency of societal actors fail to take into account the imprint that processes of state-building and/or violent conflict leave on a given society, which, in turn, render the society a site for reproduction of the very security understandings and practices that societal actors are expected to challenge. In such contexts, societal actors may be a part of the problem rather than the solution in at least three
ways. First, the historical legacy of the project of building a ‘nation-state’ may be such that ‘as a product of the modern state, with its complex structures and practices, civil society is fully implicated in how the state constructs the social world’ (Pasha 1996: 284). Societal actors who are expected to question the securitiness of issues are products of (and therefore in need of recovering from) the national security project that they are expected to challenge.

Second, societal actors may not be able to constitute themselves as agents of ‘progressive change’, notwithstanding their seeming commitment to democratization, because of recent experiences of conflict (or revitalized memories of old conflicts, as with the Serbian society during the break-up of Yugoslavia). The society often emerges from conflicts as ‘riddled with contradictions and actual and potential sources of intolerance’ (Hutchful 1995: 65). Added to this are the ‘clearly gender-chauvinist, gerontocratic, and authoritarian characteristics’ (ibid.: 67) of some societies, which may be further reinforced through experiences of both nation-state building and violent conflict. The state of civil society in the developing world drives Fayemi (2003: 65) to despair when he asks: ‘How attainable is a complete overhaul of politics from its military roots, especially in an atomized society body politic in which the symbols, values and ethos of the military are replicated in large sections of society?’

Third, there is the problem of autonomy—or lack of it. Often the problem of civil society in the developing world involves not only the ‘characteristics’ of the society but also its relationship with, and lack of autonomy from, the state. Neither societal actors nor the state establishment may be able to constitute themselves as progressive change because ‘[w]hile they are able to use their organizational autonomy to attack the state and regime, and in general to defend democratic principles, they lack material autonomy from the state’ (Hutchful 1995: 70). In those contexts, various actors’ interest in ‘controlling rather than transforming the state’ (ibid.: 70) renders it problematic to rely on their agency to bring about ‘progressive change’.

In situations where societal actors lack the basic security required for ‘doing politics’, calling for ‘turning threats into challenges and security into politics’ may be expecting too much; for those societal actors who dare to challenge the received wisdom on security issues may be subject to finger-pointing as ‘threats’ to ‘national security’ at best, and imprisonment at worst. In such contexts, opening up the security agenda (through claiming ‘security-speak’ that would involve not only challenging the securitiness of existing issues but also framing a myriad of issues as ‘security problems’) may turn out to be both the more strategic and the ethico-political option. Hence my problematization of the case for ‘universal desecuritization’. In light of the above, I call for a more flexible ethico-political stance on security cognizant of different socio-political contexts.

Claiming ‘Security-speak’ as a Tool for Progressive Change

The consensus-in-the-making in scholarly studies is that Turkey is a textbook case of what happens when the establishment broadens the security agenda to block unwanted
change (see, *inter alia*, Özcan 1998, 2004; Savvides 2000; Cizre 2000, 2003; Öniş 2003; Kaliber 2005; Kirişiçi 2006). Indeed, it is not only scholarly observers but also policy practitioners who have identified the uses of ‘security-speak’ by Turkey’s state establishment as a stumbling-block on the path to democratization and reform. In the summer of 2001, Mesut Yılmaz, then Deputy Prime Minister and chair of ANAP (*Anavatan Partisi*—Motherland Party), raised the issue at his party’s convention with his complaint that EU-demanded reforms were being stalled by those who used ‘national security’ concerns as a justification. ‘It used to be that in the past reforming efforts were blocked by those who worried about losing their religion’, he said; ‘[n]ow similar arguments are being made on national security grounds’ (Yılmaz 2001). Yılmaz suggested that opening up Turkey’s all-inclusive security agenda for debate would constitute a first step towards kicking off the ‘national security syndrome’. In turn, this would bring Turkey closer to the EU and further away from the BAAS-style republic resulting from the existing agenda (Yılmaz 2001).11

Deputy Prime Minister Yılmaz’s words seemingly echoed CS concerns that security may be an instrument used by the state establishment to censure democratic debates and block unwanted change. Yılmaz’s preferred solution also echoed that of CS: keep the security agenda narrow (‘as in the EU’, specified Yılmaz). The apparent congruence between Yılmaz’s way of framing of Turkey’s problems and the CS approach is formulated by various contributors to Turkey Studies in the form of a ‘two-step logic’: (1) Turkey’s problems with democratization are rooted in the broad ‘size’ of its security agenda; and (2) the solution is to be found in restricting the framing of issues as ‘security problems’. The same scholarly observers have interpreted the post-2002 reform process12 along the same lines—by giving this logic a ‘backward twist’ and suggesting that Turkey’s transformation must lie in the reformers’ success in kicking off the ‘national security syndrome’ (see, for example, Öniş 2003; Özcan 2004; Kaliber 2005; Kirişiçi 2006).

I join this viewpoint in regarding prevalent understandings and practices of security in Turkey as a problem (see Bilgin 2005). However, I part ways with the emerging consensus in Turkey Studies in that I consider the ‘size’ of the security agenda as symptomatic of broader problems that have to do with existing understanding of ‘security’ and its relationship to (and implications for) ‘politics’. Moreover, I do not consider ‘desecuritization’ as the ethico-political solution in Turkey’s context. Leaving aside, for the moment, the difficulty of achieving that task, it would be problematic in that it would kill much-needed debates on the ‘politics of security’ and ‘insecurity in Turkey’. Whereas debating the former is crucial for the theoretically oriented, the latter is an existential issue for practitioners and cannot be abandoned to the statist and militarist approaches that currently prevail.

In order to understand the reasons why previous attempts at desecuritization failed, the statist and militarist understanding of security continues to prevail, and civil society is unable and/or unwilling to question it, a brief background on the ‘micro-politics’ of security in Turkey is relevant.13

‘National security’ has not always been as central as it currently is in the shaping of political processes in Turkey. The webpage of the Secretariat General of the National
Security Council (NSC) cites Mustafa Kemal Atatürk stressing the need for a well-coordinated national policy to sustain the ‘strength, happiness and security of the nation’ (www.mgk.gov.tr). However, a cursory overview of Atatürk’s speeches reveals that he only infrequently refers to ‘security’ in justifying his policies; phrases such as ‘becoming modern’ and ‘achieving the level of the contemporary civilization’ are the core backbone of his discursive practices. The relative absence of ‘security-speak’ from Atatürk’s political discourse is not surprising, as ‘national security’ became more frequently used worldwide only after it became a part of the policy lexicon in post-World War II United States (see Bock & Berkowitz 1966). It then gradually spread to other regions through scholarships and fellowships or bilateral training and exchange programs available to students, scholars and policy practitioners. What is interesting for the purposes of this article is not the relative absence of ‘security-speak’ from Atatürk’s discourse. Rather, what is more pertinent is the NSC’s attempt to write it back into Turkey’s republican history, thereby legitimizing the present-day uses of ‘security-speak’.

The NSC, which has the responsibility of formulating Turkey’s national security policy and coordinating its implementation, was set up in 1962. Although antecedent institutions responsible for coordinating national defence policy have existed since 1933, the 1962 institution was seemingly inspired by the US example, not least in the decision to shift from ‘national defence’ to ‘national security’ as the key concept organizing thinking and action. The 1982 constitution further reinforced the role played by the NSC through changing its status from an advisory body ‘outlining the principles of the national security policy’ to one that ‘determines the views with regard to the decisions on the formulation, setting, and implementation of the national security policy and maintenance of the necessary coordination’ which are then ‘included in the agenda of the Council of Ministers with priority’ by the Prime Minister and the necessary decisions were taken by the Council of Ministers’ (www.mgk.gov.tr, emphasis added). ‘National security’ is defined by law in suitably vague terms, as ‘the protection and maintenance of the constitutional order, national presence, integrity, all political, social, cultural and economic interests in international field as well as against any kind of internal and external threats, of the State’ (www.mgk.gov.tr). The specifics of national security policy are revealed to a few in the shape of a ‘national security policy document’ (the ‘Red Book’), which is updated regularly to reflect changes in the domestic and global environment. Media and scholarly criticisms of Turkey’s ‘definition of national security’ are in fact directed at this document, which lays out the ‘security agenda’, the substance of which becomes accessible only through intermittent leaks to the media.

The definition of national security, as stipulated in Turkey’s constitution, is neither more nor less broad than that of many other states. What is particularly problematic is the ways in which the national security policy document is prepared and put into effect. During the 1990s, the national security policy document was updated twice to identify (1992) and later prioritize (1997) ‘internal threats’ such as ‘Islamist reactionarism’ and ‘Kurdish separatism.’ These two ‘threats’ are the major axes of domestic opposition to the governing principles of the state establishment. Broadening the list of ‘threats’ included in the national security document has allowed the silencing of public debates and justification of ‘extraordinary’ measures taken in addressing the critics.
What further complicates the dynamics in Turkey is the military’s involvement in the process of drawing up the national security policy document. Theoretically, the military is not the only, nor the most central, actor involved in the process of its preparation. In practice, however, the military’s unquestioned authority over ‘security knowledge’ and the civilians’ lack of interest in security issues has allowed the views of the military to prevail. Over the years, and particularly since the 1980 coup, the military’s active involvement in the formulation of the national security policy document has translated into a security agenda that reflects the military’s threat perceptions. Such active involvement in this process to a large extent clashes with appropriate democratic practice. Moreover, the ways in which the military has used its central role in the security sphere to broaden its room for manoeuvre in domestic politics go beyond what is constitutionally permitted on paper.

In a democratic system, the military is not expected to have a say on issues outside ‘national security’ matters. Theoretically, Turkey is no exception to this rule—as frequently emphasized by Turkey’s highest military echelons. In practice, however, by way of taking the lead in the preparation of the national security policy document, and through using its monopoly over ‘security-speak’, Turkey’s military has broadened its own room of manoeuvre and legitimized its interventions into political processes. In so doing, Turkey’s military has engaged in what is essentially a political act, which denies its own politics but presents itself as an ‘objective’ process. Since, by virtue of its job definition and its own self-imposed ethos, Turkey’s military cannot directly get involved in ‘politics’ (Cizre 2000) (except for relatively brief periods following the two military coups d’état in 1960 and 1980), it seems to have found a roundabout way of doing so—through framing issues as ‘security problems’ and thereby removing them from democratic debates, so as to have an authoritative ‘say’ over both substance and implementation of a wide range of (domestic, foreign and defence) policies.

Understood as such, Turkey’s current problems are far too complicated to be reduced to civil-military dynamics and the ‘size’ of the security agenda. A more comprehensive explanation informed by critical approaches to security reveals four interrelated problems: (1) the drawing up of the national security policy document through a process that takes place behind closed doors and beyond democratic oversight; (2) unquestioned intersubjective understandings regarding the military’s authority over the production of ‘security knowledge’ and monopoly over ‘security-speak’; (3) uses of ‘security-speak’ by the state establishment to marginalize the insecurities of myriad referents and block avenues that would otherwise help bring about ‘progressive change’; (4) limited interest in ‘security’ matters on the part of civil societal actors and their representatives.

In short, the politics of security is a more complex process than allowed for by the current studies on Turkey that are informed by the insights of the CS. Even after the post-1999 changes in Turkey’s constitution and state practice (which includes redefining the NSC’s role as ‘advisory’, decreasing the number of military members of the NSC and the frequency of meetings), one thing remains unchanged: the military remains the major actor shaping the contours of the national security policy document through a mixture of formal mechanisms and intersubjective understandings, which, in turn, are
warranted by the ways in which ‘security’ has been understood and practised in Turkey. So long as the focus of the scholarly debates and political struggles remains the mere ‘size’ of the agenda and/or civil-military dynamics, the ‘politics of security’ would remain unquestioned. In such an environment, it would be unrealistic to expect the military’s role to diminish in shaping political processes in Turkey. For, as Wæver (1995: 54) reminds us, ‘[t]rying to press the kind of unwanted political change on a ruling elite is similar to playing a game in which one’s opponent can change the rules at any time s/he likes’. From a CS perspective, the way out of the current impasse would be to attempt ‘speech act failures’, that is, ‘narrowing the field to which [a] security act [is] applied’ so that issues and developments could be addressed through ‘normal’ politics (1995: 54, 55). Turkey’s experience, however, reveals one blind spot of this strategy, as will be explained below.

The August 2001 ‘national security syndrome’ speech by Deputy Prime Minister Yılmaz was in fact met by a mixed response. His coalition partner from the far-right MHP (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi—Nationalist Action Party) rejected his proposal to open the national security agenda to debate, by invoking assumptions of what I have elsewhere referred to as ‘geographical determinism’ (see Bilgin 2003, 2005): ‘National security policy is not founded on personal assessments’, remarked National Defence Minister Sabahattin Çakmakolu, ‘it is formulated by taking into consideration Turkey’s strategic position and its neighbours’.16 The military, in turn, dismissed Yılmaz’s call for debate by highlighting that the public arena was not the ‘appropriate’ place to discuss security-related issues; ‘it is more appropriate to discuss issues which are about the prosperity and happiness of people, on platforms which are not tainted with political interests’, declared the General Staff.17 Some societal actors also joined Yılmaz’s state-level critics. The chair of ATO (Ankara Chamber of Trade), Sinan Aygün, and the board of directors of Türk-İş (The Federation of Turkish Labour Unions) both issued statements in support of the General Staff’s position.18 The consensus was that since ‘security’ was an issue that concerned everyone in Turkey, it need not be discussed in public fora.

Yılmaz’s words found a receptive ear in other societal actors. MAZLUMDER (The Organization of Human Rights and Solidarity for Oppressed People) backed his call.19 TÜSİAD (The Turkish Industrialists’ and Businessmen’s Association) issued a press release praising Yılmaz’s appeal as a move in ‘harmony with democratic practices’, although it was ‘ill-timed’ given the country’s economic situation (being right in the midst of an economic crisis).20 The media’s reaction was also mixed: while some commentators were receptive, others questioned his choice of topic, venue and (possibly ulterior) motives.21 Overall, the limited and short-lived nature of the debate surrounding Yılmaz’s 2001 speech is indicative of how Turkey’s societal actors were unable and/or unwilling to heed Yılmaz’s call for debate, let alone take the lead in attempting ‘speech act failures’.

The next opportunity for societal actors to contribute to desecuritization came when the AKP government sought to change Turkey’s position towards the ‘Cyprus’ issue by refraining from framing it as a ‘security problem’. The reference to ‘Cyprus’ in the AKP party programme not as a ‘national cause’ but as a mere ‘problem’ had
already signalled a fresh approach in the making. Once in power, the AKP emphasized the need to find a way to resolve the conflict through stressing its economic and political costs. The AKP, in its efforts to get the Annan Plan accepted as a basis of further negotiations between the Turkish Cypriot and Greek Cypriot sides, was backed up by TÜSİAD and some other societal actors whose ‘no solution is not a solution’ position was in contradistinction to the age-old formula: ‘No solution is the solution to the Cyprus issue!’ Demonstrations held in various parts of Turkey expressed support for the latter position with banners that read: ‘Turkey’s defence starts from Cyprus’ and ‘Those who give away Cyprus will also give away Turkey’ (quoted in Kirişçi 2006: 35). Notwithstanding the reminders of some that ‘Turkey cannot give away something that does not belong to it!’ (Oran 2004), the ‘no’ position successfully made use of ‘security-speak’ to bolster its stance.

This is not to suggest that the AKP government’s attempts to introduce a fresh approach to the Cyprus issue have failed. However, it would be problematic to represent the ‘yes’ vote of the North on the Annan Plan referendum (or the ‘neutral’ position adopted by Turkey’s military throughout this process) as evidence of the AKP government’s ‘success’ in ‘desecuritizing’ the Cyprus issue. Recent debates surrounding the opening of Turkey’s ports could be considered as evidence that the AKP government did not succeed in taking societal actors along in framing the Cyprus issue outside security terms. The ‘securityness’ of Cyprus (or the argument about the ‘geopolitical significance’ of the island for Turkey’s defence) emerged to be the flag around which the supporters of the ‘no’ position coalesced. And it was equally relevant for the ‘yes’ coalition, as an excerpt from the exchange between the then TÜSİAD chairman, Tuncay Özilhan and Şükrü Sina Gürel, former Minister of State and Professor of International Relations, suggests. Özilhan called for resolving the Cyprus problem, so as to ease Turkey’s way into the EU, in the following way:

Cyprus is a major obstacle blocking Turkey’s accession to European integration. [It] may be an island of strategic importance. However, there is also the goal of 65 million people to become a member of the EU, increase their quality of life and turn [Turkey] into a rich country. We should not lose sight of this goal because of Cyprus. (quoted in Özcan 2004: 892)

By framing Turkey’s ‘goal’ in economic terms, Özilhan acknowledged the significance of the security framing while suggesting that the economy was equally important. The government response was scornful. Minister of State Gürel criticized Özilhan for commenting on issues ‘about which he knew little’ (quoted in Özcan 2004: 892). Minister of State Gürel’s response suggested that nothing was more important than ‘security’ and that Özilhan could not be taken seriously, since he failed to recognize that. TÜSİAD’S chairman had neither authority over ‘security knowledge’, nor mastery of ‘security-speak’, and therefore his opinion did not count on a matter such as Cyprus, the ‘securityness’ of which was known to all (including Özilhan, who also acknowledged the ‘securityness’ of Cyprus but suggested that Turkey’s potential economic gains were more crucial). This exchange was typical of the debate between those who use ‘security-speak’ and others who prefer using ‘non-security’ framings; the former prevailed by virtue of the evocative character of ‘security’.
The question remains: how was Turkey’s post-1999 transformation possible if not through ‘desecuritization’? I argue that Turkey’s transformation was rendered possible through claiming ‘security-speak’ by certain societal actors who framed other issues—other than those identified in the national security policy document—in security terms, and who pointed to Turkey’s EU accession as a solution to its security problems.

For a long time, societal actors who were otherwise in favour of ‘progressive change’ (such as TÜSİAD) had refrained from engaging in ‘security-speak’. This could be explained by concerns regarding inadvertently invoking military and/or militarized responses, or assumptions regarding the need for mastery over ‘security knowledge’ and authority over ‘security-speak’ to comment upon ‘security’ issues. This has had the unintended consequence of giving those who use ‘security-speak’ the upper hand in domestic debates. What changed in the last decade or so is that a group of societal actors began claiming ‘security-speak’ when making the case for Turkey’s EU accession. Indicative are the writings of General (Ret.) Şadi Ergüvenç and Ambassador (Ret.) İlter Türkmen. Their comments were accompanied by a media campaign that began in the summer of 2002 urging the state establishment to move ahead with EU-required reforms.

General Ergüvenç defined the EU as ‘a solution to Turkey’s insecurity’ in a series of articles (1999, 2000a, 2000b) that criticized the security strategy for its over-reliance on the military without due regard for economic, political and societal costs. He identified two problems with existing policies. First, security in the 21st century could be characterized by ‘sustaining freedom and development in a ruthlessly competitive environment’ (Ergüvenç 1999: 46). Reliance on military means is insufficient: countries require educated human power and civilian infrastructure to compete in the global arena. Ergüvenç’s concern was that further investment into defence in pursuit of costly security strategies diverted valuable resources away from education and research, thereby moving Turkey further away from meeting this target. Second, regardless of whether military expenditures could or could not be sustained, Turkey no longer had the option of resolving conflicts with its neighbours through military means, given that the global community no longer condones such actions. General Ergüvenç contributed to the task of putting the military dimension of Turkey’s security agenda in its proper perspective: insecurity in Turkey.

Voicing concerns similar to those of General Ergüvenç, Ambassador Türkmen wrote:

> In recent years, Turkey has developed certain strategic mission concepts that go beyond its economic and political reach. This has been done in a context shaped by the tendency to see the region and the world as an arena of incessant conflict. Although there exist many conflicts and instability in the region surrounding Turkey, not all of these constitute a direct threat to Turkey’s security. (2001: 61)

Türkmen’s broader point (2001: 61) was that the defence budget should undergo a cutback, for ‘it is not economically feasible to sustain the current level of defence expenditure’. This being the case, Turkey would benefit from EU membership not only economically and politically, but also security-wise. Joining the EU, he argued, would eventually transform approaches to security in Turkey and contribute to the
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politico-military dimension through resolving the Turco–Greek and Cyprus conflicts. This, in turn, would help stabilize the broader Aegean and Mediterranean regions and allow further cuts in the defence budget. By framing Turkey’s EU membership, which had been generally presented as an economy argument, in (beneficial) security terms, Ambassador Türkmen, just like General Ergüvenç, stressed that military dimensions of security should be considered in conjunction with other dimensions of security, and argued that there were more insecurities affecting Turkey’s future than the state establishment chose to stress—insecurities that could be addressed through acceding to European integration.

**Conclusion**

The challenges Turkey has experienced in reforming its economic and political system go beyond the ‘size’ of its security agenda and are rooted in prevalent understandings of ‘security’, as well as their relationship to (and implications for) ‘politics’. The existing literature on Turkey problematizes the all-inclusive nature of the national security policy document on the basis of concerns about the military’s overbearing stance on issues to do with ‘national security’. Treating civil-military dynamics as the main concern, the literature fails to discuss the ‘politics of security’ and the ‘security of doing politics in Turkey’. After all, in those contexts where questioning the securityness of issues is considered a taboo at best and criminalized at worst, doing politics comes with myriad risks.


Taking issues off the national security policy document may constitute a solution; but this would be insufficient, if not outright problematic. Failing to enquire into the politics of deciding what constitutes a security problem would: (1) reaffirm the ‘securityness’ of those issues left on the security agenda without proper debate and/or discussion; (2) uphold the ‘objectivist’ logic used by the military in drawing up the security agenda; (3) abandon the issues left on the security agenda to be governed by the statist and militarized understandings and practices.

Discussing the ‘security of doing politics in Turkey’ is also important because it would be impossible to reveal the ‘politics of security’ unless a certain level of ‘security’ is maintained for those who are asking those awkward questions about the securityness of issues. Questioning existing understandings and practices of security requires a modicum of ‘security’ for societal actors so that they would be able to challenge those others who demand an end to debates for reasons of ‘national security’.
The participants themselves should decide whether the current level of security in Turkey is ‘satisfactory enough’ to allow debate, dissent and change. The fact that this is currently not the case renders it particularly difficult for societal actors to challenge the securityness of issues. So long as the military remains the only actor that invests time and effort into thinking about these questions, it will continue to have the upper hand in domestic debates. The onus is on the civil societal actors to become informed and start debates on what it means to be ‘secure’ in Turkey.

Having said this, change cannot come from the ‘inside’ alone. Full participation in a democratic dialogue requires informed citizenry who are willing and able to question received ‘truths’ about security, absorb existing ‘security knowledge’ and challenge the state establishment’s previously unquestioned monopoly over ‘security-speak’. However, civil societal activism appears to be most efficient in cases where there is an (international) anchor. In Turkey’s case, the EU has so far proven to be that anchor. Given the resilience of state and societal forces in Turkey that are able and willing to stall Turkey’s transformation, and the prevalent understandings and practices of ‘national security’ that have proven infelicitous to ‘progressive change’, Turkey’s reformists need all the help they can get.

Notes

[1] Reform efforts in Turkey are increasingly labelled as a ‘transformation’. See, for example, Sofos 2001; Derviş et al 2004; Kiriçi 2004.


[3] Here, ‘state establishment’ refers to the bearers of the hegemonic ideology of the state (Kemalism). They can be found in military and civilian bureaucracy, academia and civil societal institutions.

[4] I use the terms ‘civil society’ and ‘civil societal actor’ rather loosely, the former with reference to a space and the latter with reference to collectives of individuals and institutions that meet a common purpose and/or value.

[5] ‘National security project’ refers to the set of ideas and institutions that help build and secure a (nation) state. Depending on the context, the adjective ‘national’ may also cloak the regime security concerns of an elite, a social class, tribe or clan.

[6] Defining ‘progressive change’ is not unproblematic. For the purposes of this article, I take progressive change to mean those changes EU conditionality comprises. It is beyond the scope of this paper to question the extent to which EU contributes to ‘progressive change’ in current or prospective member states.


[8] This is not to underestimate the ways in which Turkey’s transformation has been allowed by the convergence of a variety of domestic and international dynamics, including (in no particular order): the delayed effects of the end of the Cold War, which called for an adaptation effort; globalization of world politics, which revealed state institutions’ weaknesses while opening up new opportunities for both state and societal actors’ agency; the 1996 Susürük incident, which unearthed previously unacknowledged links between aspects of state institutions and the underground world (the so-called ‘deep state’) on the one hand, and transnational crime
on the other, thereby exposing the ‘consequentialist ethics’ at work in aspects of Turkey’s security policies; the 1999 earthquake, which revealed the weaknesses of the government and the military in providing basic security to its citizens, while making people aware of their own agency as societal actors; the 1999 decision of the EU to grant candidate country status and the rapprochement in Turco–Greek relations, which provided a future perspective to those seek to bring about ‘progressive change’; the 2001 economic crisis, which eroded citizens’ confidence in the state and political elite’s ability to steer the economy in a globalizing world; the capture, trial and subsequent sentencing of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, which not only slowed down the terrorist campaign in southeastern Turkey but also created a socio-political environment that allowed for self-doubt and critique regarding the Kurdish issues; the September 11 attacks and other al-Qaeda-linked bombings around the world, which indicated the fragility of existing security institutions and the futility of focusing purely on the military instrument.

[9] The term ‘Copenhagen School’ was first used in McSweeney 1996.

[10] The exceptions to such uses of security as a ‘technique of governance’ by the state establishment (Foucault 1984) are those occasions when resorting to extraordinary measures is intersubjectively considered to be necessary—as in the case of ‘enemy’ troops crossing the border in an ‘aggressive’ manner (Wæver 1995). What renders the latter a ‘threat’ and requires taking it outside ‘normal’ politics is the intersubjective character of the agreement that the troops crossing the border are ‘enemy’ (as opposed to ‘neighbour’) and that their manner is ‘aggressive’ (as opposed to, say, a ‘peaceful’ military manoeuvre). Such exceptions aside, maintains Wæver, security functions as a ‘conservative mechanism’ utilized by the state establishment to discipline the citizens.


[12] This is not to deny the significant last-minute efforts made by the previous government to prepare the ‘National Program’ and jump-start the reform process in the summer of 2002. It is the AKP government, nonetheless, that is credited in the literature for attempts to ‘desecuritize’ various issues including the Cyprus problem.

[13] Duru and Hoşder (1994) provide an account of the micro-mechanisms of national security policy-making without touching upon the political aspects discussed here.

[14] This is not to suggest that the military’s threat perceptions are unfounded. On the contrary, the broadening of Turkey’s security agenda took place at a time when globalized insecurity made itself felt, namely: challenges to the state’s monopoly on legitimate use of violence internally (in the form of the PKK using violence to achieve its aims) and externally (as with the EU’s call for a ‘political’ and not ‘military’ solution to the Kurdish problem); the emergence and strengthening of non-state actors who increasingly escaped government ‘control’; the revolution in information technology and media presence (which meant that the struggle against the PKK had to be conducted under the gaze of international media). See Bilgin 2005 for further discussion.


23. The military maintained its neutrality on yet another crucial ‘security’ issue during this period: the 2003 vote on Turkey’s participation in the US war on Iraq. Discussing the military’s motives behind its decided neutrality on these two issues goes beyond the limits of this paper. Unmistakably, what kept the military from speaking out was not desecuritization.

24. In what follows, I focus on key writings by the two authors. However, their influence cannot be reduced to these texts. They contribute to the debates by frequent media appearances and writing weekly columns for magazines and newspapers.

25. ‘Sivil toplum Avrupa dedi’ [Civil Society says Europe], Radikal, 6 June 2002.

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