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How Turkey's military upheaval will affect NATO

By Alexander Christie-Miller

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The resignation of [Turkey](#)'s top four military officers last week has been heralded as marking the end of a near decade-long power struggle between the government and armed forces.

But the resignations, along with the ongoing detention of scores of officers in what government opponents claim are politically motivated criminal probes, have sparked fears that [NATO](#)'s second-largest army could face an operational crisis.

On July 29, Chief of [General Staff Isik Kosaner](#), and the heads of the Army, Navy, and Air Force all requested early retirement. Kosaner said it had become "impossible for me to continue serving" due to what he called the unjust detention of 250 serving and retired military personnel, including generals and admirals.

Their departures came hours after the indictment of 22 high-ranking soldiers allegedly involved in an Internet smear campaign against the government. It also followed a confrontation with the government over an upcoming meeting of the [Supreme Military Council](#), which makes decisions on military promotions.

12 percent of generals, admirals in prison

Traditionally, Turkey's politicians have merely rubber-stamped the decisions suggested by the Army, but since last year, [Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan](#) has demanded the final say in military appointments.

Yesterday, Mr. Erdogan joined remaining senior officers for the four-day meeting in which he could now remold the military leadership.

"The resignations alone are not a problem, but the arrests are a far bigger issue," says [Gareth Jenkins](#), a military analyst in [Istanbul](#) with connections to Turkey's armed forces.

"Twelve percent of serving generals and admirals are in prison. You're getting an erosion not of the political influence of the Turkish military – which is already gone – but of their military capability," he adds.

Turkey is involved in NATO missions in [Afghanistan](#) and [Libya](#). But one Turkish fleet currently operating off the coast of Libya, is lacking its commander; [Vice Admiral Kadir Sagdic](#), head of Southern Sea Area Command, was detained last summer on suspicion of plotting a coup.

Doubts about new chief of staff

Media critical of the government have raised doubts about the experience of the man slated to replace Kosaner, [Gen. Necdet Ozel](#). Formerly head of the military police, he was promoted to acting chief of general staff hours after the resignations.

Such media outlets point out that he has had no experience serving in NATO structures, nor has he received training in the [United States](#).

Meanwhile, the resignations and imprisonments mean that there are now no eligible generals with the four-star ranking required to assume the role of head of the Air Force, and only a single three-star Air Force general.

Mr. Jenkins fears further resignations could mean inexperienced soldiers may be catapulted several ranks into top positions.

Many others have argued, however, that the resignations are unlikely to precipitate any kind of crisis.

"They are going to restructure the military and make it more suitable for a trading state, rather than for a national security state, which Turkey was in the past," says [Soli Ozel](#), a political scientist at Istanbul's [Bilgi University](#).

[Adm. Mike Mullen](#), chairman of the [US Joint Chiefs of Staff](#), told reporters on Sunday that he expected an "orderly transition" of personnel.

“I’ve seen no indication in any of this that the [military] relationship has been affected by this at all,” he said, according to Reuters.

A military defanged

Most analysts welcomed the resignations as a clear sign that Turkey’s once-meddlesome military has finally been subordinated to civilian control.

Traditionally, confrontations between Turkey’s military and political leaderships have resulted in the resignation – and sometimes even execution – of the politicians.

When the Islam-inspired [Justice and Development Party](#) (AKP) won power in November 2002, it was as an underdog to a hostile and powerful armed forces that viewed itself as the guardian of secular political system forged by Turkey’s founder, [Mustafa Kemal Atatürk](#).

After the stark reversal of roles showed by Friday’s resignations, the dismissive reactions of leading politicians seemed to affirm that an army that has carried out three brutal coups since 1960s has now been finally defanged.

“No one should see this as a crisis in Turkey,” [President Abdullah Gül](#) told reporters on Saturday. “The developments were extraordinary within their scope, but as you see, everything is continuing as normal.”