

Middle East Report by Robert Dreyfuss

Turkey pushed to the brink

A vicious cycle of left-right political violence has engulfed the country.

Not long ago a potentially active bridge between Western Europe and modernizers in the Muslim world, Turkey has been set up for destruction of its republican institutions, through either a military takeover or anarchic disintegration on the Iran model. It is not difficult to imagine the sentiments of the U.S.S.R. at being faced across its border with what it would regard as a NATO coup, or with the ascendancy of the National Salvation Party fundamentalists who have done so much to push the nation to the edge of civil war and/or military seizure of power.

The prime vehicle for the destabilization of Turkey has been the terrorists—from both the left and the right—and the increasing violence emanating from the Khomeini-style extremists of the National Salvation Party.

The violence has reached extraordinary levels. Terrorism, shootouts, and bombings have become the hallmarks of daily life in Turkey. Marauding bands of extremists have taken over whole districts, villages and towns.

In the first five days of September alone, 115 people were murdered in terrorist assaults. In August, terrorism claimed an additional 500 lives. All told, 2,500 politically motivated killings have occurred in the nine months since the minority government of Justice Party leader Süleyman Demirel took power.

“The Turkish republic is gradually dying,” commented one Washington source on the civil war conditions in Turkey. “In effect, there is no state in Turkey.”

The fragmentation of the Turkish state along ethnic and tribal lines has long been the aim of Anglo-American policymakers, under the rubric of the Bernard Lewis Plan. This Middle East policy of imposed backwardness is at odds with Turkey’s commitment to rapid industrialization. A weakened, manipulable Turkey on the strategic southern border of the Soviet Union is prized by these policymakers as a base of operations against the U.S.S.R.

The British press has been quick to cover the terrorism as proof that Iran-style anarchy is inevitable in Turkey.

The Sept. 4 *Financial Times* of London stated: “Turkey has reached its present predicament principally because its democratic system and institutions have been unable to satisfy the demands for a higher standard of living. . . . fear the terror marks the first stirrings of rebellion by the masses.”

In the same vein, the Sept. 4 *Daily Telegraph* suggested that a military coup may be on the horizon. “The police are now so divided, the civil servants so demoralised, and the public so fed up with the growing anarchy, that the Turkish generals may be forced into reluctant action.”

What may force the military’s hand is the government’s inability to get the situation under control. Prime Minister Demirel, despite his lip service to stopping the bloodshed, is known to covertly back the right-wing terrorists through his alliance with the neo-Nazi Nationalist Action Party, whose leader, Alparlan Türkes, is the boss of Turkey’s rightist militia hit groups.

Compounding the crisis is the failure of the parliament, after more than 100 rounds of voting over the past several months, to produce a new president. Without a president, the body has been unable to pass the vitally needed antiterrorist legislation the Turkish generals have clamored for.

Now, Turkey has no foreign minister, either.

Last week, Hayrettin Erkmen was forced to resign as a result of a censure motion approved by the parliament. The small but influential Islamic fundamentalist National Salvation Party under the leadership of the pro-Khomeini Necmettin Erbakan accused the foreign minister of being insufficiently “Islamic,” citing Turkey’s refusal to break ties with Israel, its failure to back the Iranian and Afghan rebels, and its weak ties to other Muslim countries.

Erbakan also zeroed in on Turkey’s developing economic relations with Europe. “We shall topple the government as well as the foreign minister,” Erbakan declared in a recent speech. The social-democratic Republican People’s Party opportunistically backed the NSP censure motion.

This column was written two days before the Turkish military assumed power on Sept. 11—ed.