

## Conscription in Turkey

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Turkey's armed forces enjoy strong public support. The military's lasting presence in Turkish society and politics dates back to the country's early history. "In the Ottoman-Turkish policy, the military had always occupied a privileged place and played a crucial role in the political system. Not only was the Ottoman state organized as a warrior state, but the military was also both an object and (especially in the nineteenth century) a primary agent of the modernization process."<sup>1</sup> Conscription was introduced in the late nineteenth century, during the Ottoman Empire, and, despite its gradual disappearance elsewhere, continues to be important to Turkey today. Following a brief historical account of Turkey's armed forces and its structure, we describe suvery-based demographics of Turkish conscripts as well as their perceptions of military service. The great majority of the conscripts in our sample are in their 20s, stem from middle-income families, and have earned a high school degree. When asked if they would like to pursue a military career, over 50 percent of them expressed their wish to remain in the army beyond the conscription period. In addition to pecuniary and non-pecuniary benefits, the main reason for the expected decision of continued service is an expressed "liking" of the military which may support the view that Turkey's armed force is a highly esteemed organization in Turkish society.

### Historical background

The roots of full-time professional Turkish armed forces can be traced back more than five centuries. Traditionally, the Ottoman army consisted of a medieval cavalry unit, the *Timarli Sipahis*, and permanent salaried troops, the *Kapikulus*. Feudal lords or tribal chiefs were exempt from taxes in exchange for training a certain number of cavalymen (the *Timarli Sipahis*), the number depending on the income the landlord received. *Sipahis* fought under their own commanders, took care of their own armor, and were stationed locally to maintain order and to collect taxes for the central treasury. Raising *Sipahis* was one of the main recruitment instruments in the central provinces until the seventeenth century. In contrast, *Kapikulus* were stationed in the capital and provincial garrisons and included infantry regiments (the famous Janissary army), cavalry, cannoners, grenadiers, and other supporting groups. *Kapikulu* corps were not as numerous as the *Timarli Sipahis*, but they obtained the best military training and equipment.<sup>2</sup> The Janissary army was the core of the Ottoman military organization. Its members were conscripted as youths from among the empire's non-Muslim subjects, converted to Islam, and given military training.

By the early nineteenth century, this arrangement had lost its military value and led to the abolition of the Janissary system in 1826. One of the main reasons for this

was Janissaries' resistance to reform which prevented restoration of their fading military effectiveness. For example, few of the men whose names were on its muster rolls showed up on the battlefield. A great number of Janissary corps were concentrating on commercial activities and therefore were unable and unwilling to provide adequate service during campaign. Similarly, *Kapikulu* and *Timarli* cavalry, sent to the provinces to suppress Anatolian rebellions, emerged – with the support of local merchants and guild members – as provincial war lords by acquiring control of state-owned lands and various tax-farms. Thus the various branches of the Ottoman army lost their professionalism, discipline, and proper military training.<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile, European armies had gradually changed from a model in which officers were drawn solely from the nobility to supervise and direct armies cobbled together for the occasion from other (supposedly "lower") classes of men to a model of the mass army from which officers could arise by merit and which used conscription of a state's male citizens, a model that became and remained the standard for military mobilization until well after the end of the second world war.<sup>4</sup> Introduction of conscription in the Ottoman empire followed the European example, although it does not strictly coincide with it. The census of 1844 was specifically designed to ensure efficient conscription within the Ottoman empire. Based on it, conscription by lottery was instituted on Muslim male subjects as from 1846. Recruitment age varied between 15 and 30, and the minimum term of service was twelve years, after which soldiers could opt for civilian life. But to qualify for a military pension, recruits would have to serve until overtaken by old age. Conscription of children, the physically weak, and those who lacked limbs or were suffering from disease was forbidden by law. The system was altered by new army regulations proclaimed in 1869, dividing the army into three categories: the regulars, the reserve, and the guards. The new conscription law of 1870 reviewed and codified the whole system of conscription and served as the basic set of regulations until after the constitutional revolution of 1908.<sup>5</sup> The service period in areas with particularly unhealthy climate, such as Iraq and Yemen, was reduced to two years in 1909. Then, in 1914, the service period was reduced to two years for all conscripts.

Many of the Ottoman officers came from the lower middle class. They regarded conscripts as mere peasant soldiers.<sup>6</sup> Even though there is no reliable data, it is generally agreed that the literacy rate in the Ottoman empire was around five to seven percent in the nineteenth century. Thus almost all of the peasant soldiers surely were illiterate. Conscripts with any sort of education were promoted to corporal or sergeant. Many Ottoman officers regarded military service as an educational opportunity and

**In our samples, over fifty percent of Turkish conscripts expressed a desire to remain in military service beyond the conscription period. The primary reason given is that they "like" the military.**

experience, bringing conscripts into contact with a world beyond their villages. “While the number of peasant soldiers who actually became literate during their normal military service must have been minuscule, the lectures and readings given by the officers went a long way in instilling a common culture and knowledge of ethics, morals, history, religion, and patriotism.”<sup>7</sup> Military service contributed to awareness-building through which it was possible for conscripts to identify themselves with the Turkish state. This tradition of educating conscripts continued in the Republican era of the Turkish army as well.

### The structure of the Turkish army

Turkey’s armed forces, with a combined troop strength of nearly 800,000 soldiers or around 1.1 percent of the population (according to 2005 Ministry of Defense figures), form the second largest standing force in NATO after the United States. Each year 0.1 percent of the population reaches military age. In addition to a strong national defense system, the armed forces contributed in recent years to U.N. peacekeeping operations in Kosovo, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Afghanistan. Additionally, the armed forces perform disaster relief operations, for example in the 1999 Marmara earthquake in Turkey. They also conduct peace-support operations anywhere in the world with a four battalion task force. Conscript soldiers make up nearly 70 percent of Turkey’s forces, and the remaining 30 percent is constituted by career officers and officials.

Traditionally, the Turkish military service system has been a mix of a large core of professionals and a main body of conscripts.<sup>8</sup> Every male citizen between twenty to forty-one years of age is required to complete compulsory military service, a requirement stipulated in the constitution of the Turkish Republic. Even though women are not required to serve, they are allowed to become officers. The onset, duration, and the service category are determined by the education level of the recruits. Those who pursue higher education may postpone service until they have completed the program of study or reach a certain age (29 for a university degree; 33 for a master’s level degree; 37 for a doctorate). The duration of the basic military service, as of July 2003, is twelve months for high school graduates serving as privates (previously sixteen months); university graduates fulfill their military obligation as reserve officers with a fifteen-months period (previously eighteen months) of active service. University graduates not enlisted as reserve officers are expected to serve six months (previously eight months) as short-term privates.<sup>9</sup> After an initial three months of basic training, conscripts are posted to assigned bases. Those physically unfit to serve are exempt from military service.

The army, navy, air force, and gendarmerie form the four branches of the armed forces. The two main personnel categories are professionals (commissioned officers, non-commissioned officers, specialists, and civilian officials and workers) and conscripts (non-professional reserve officers, short-term conscripts, and long-term conscripts). Officers make up the core command structure and come mainly from

military academies and from military students in civilian universities. Outstanding NCOs may also be drawn upon. The remainder are contract officers. NCOs come from the NCO branch schools and serve as the intermediate command level between officers and the enlisted. Specialists are re-enlisted conscripts who have previously shown outstanding qualifications and are employed at critical positions requiring continuity such as Squad Leader, Tank Driver, Tank Gunner, Repairer, and Artillery Sergeant. Finally, civilians employed by Turkish Ministry of Defense are composed of state officials and workers who are employed according to educational proficiency.

### A profile of Turkish conscripts

To profile Turkish conscripts, we carried out two separate surveys among recruits at the Ankara Armored Divisions School, to our knowledge the first time that the taking of such surveys has been permitted by the armed forces. At the time of the surveys, all subjects were undergoing the initial three months military training period before being posted to their bases. The first survey was carried out on 4 August 2003 with 682 participants, the second on 27 December 2003 with 595 participants, for a total of 1,277.<sup>10</sup> Table 1 presents some of the basic descriptive findings. For example, most conscripts are in their 20s and have earned a high school degree. Those who hold a university degree or higher constitute only 10.7 percent of the sample. The majority of the conscripts stem from the Marmara region. Even though the remaining regions’ share in conscripts are close to each other, southeast Anatolia constitutes only 5.1 percent of the conscripts, quite low considering the region’s population share in Turkey’s overall population. One reason for this could be the high number of draft evasion for that region or migration to wealthy cities.<sup>11</sup>

A great majority of conscripts are from the middle class. Monthly total incomes range from \$200 to \$700. More than half of the conscripts are eligible for some sort of social security.<sup>12</sup> However, many already have experienced extended bouts of unemployment in their (young) lives, and 13.1 percent have been unemployed for more than three years. Around 70 percent report that they possess specific skills, and about 45 percent plan to acquire further education. Almost one third have dependants to provide for.

One of the questions in the survey asked whether the recruits would like to join the army as Specialist for at least 36 months. In Turkey’s recruitment system, only conscripts can enlist for further service after completion of the initial service period (“re-enlistment”). It is not possible for civilians to join the armed forces unless they are graduates of military academies or schools where commissioned officers and NCOs are educated and trained. In our surveys, more than half of the conscripts expressed a wish to reenlist for continued service. When asked about the reasons, nearly 38 percent indicated that they like the military and enjoy military life.<sup>13</sup> Around 33 percent saw military service as providing a secure job with stable pay. 18.2 percent gave non-pecuniary benefits as a reason to join the military. Only 2.1 percent

**Table 1: Descriptive statistics for Turkish conscripts**

Variable	Percentage	Variable	Percentage
<b>Age</b>		<b>Duration of unemployment</b>	
- Less than 20	7.8	- Less than 6 months	41.8
- Between 20-25	83.6	- Less than a year	22.4
- Between 25-30	8.4	- Less than 3 years	22.7
		- More than 3 years	13.1
<b>Region</b>		<b>Desiring further education</b>	
- Black Sea	14.2	- Yes	44.8
- Aegean	12.6	- No	55.2
- Marmara	33.4		
- East Anatolia	8.5	<b>Dependents</b>	
- Southeast Anatolia	5.1	- Yes	34.6
- Mediterranean	12.8	- No	65.4
- Central Anatolia	13.4		
<b>Education</b>		<b>Skill</b>	
- High school degree	89.3	- Yes	70.1
- University degree	10.7	- No	29.9
		<b>Expected re-enlistment</b>	
<b>Monthly income</b>		- Yes	53.1
- Less than US\$200	15.4	- No	46.8
- Between US\$200-400	42.6		
- Between US\$400-700	31.3	<b>Reason for expected re-enlistment</b>	
- More than US\$700	10.4	- Secure job	33.3
		- Like military	38.2
<b>Social Security</b>		- Salary	8.2
- Yes	39.0	- Non-pecuniary benefits	18.2
- No	61.0	- Possibility to see places	2.1
<b>Ever unemployed</b>			
- Yes	45.3		
- No	54.7		

indicated that possibility of seeing new places as a appealing reason to join the military. The relatively high percentage of conscripts who “like” the military and thus would like to reenlist surprised us. This finding may reflect the generally positive perceptions of the military in Turkish society. Rather than regarding conscription as somehow “odious” compulsory service, the majority of the Turkish public refers to military service as a duty for the motherland. Military service is one of the main

events in a young man’s life, even to such extent that in rural areas young men are frequently not allowed to marry unless and until they have completed military service. Moreover, anytime a man or a group of youngsters are conscripted, they are sent from their hometowns with celebrations and festivities. Indeed, the imprint of the military is lifelong: in rural areas people are given nicknames derived from their rank in the military such as Sergeant Ahmet or Corporal Berke.<sup>14</sup>

## Conclusion

The traditionally westward-looking Turkish armed forces have generally maintained an image of being one of the state’s most reliable institutions. Indeed, even in spite of repeated interventions in civilian politics, the armed forces have maintained an unusually positive and strong relationship with Turkish society. High support for the armed forces may explain the general perception of conscription as a duty rather than as an obligation.

Following a brief account of the history and structure of Turkey’s armed forces, we reported on an effort to profile current conscripts using survey data. The samples suggest that over 50 percent of the conscripts believe that they would like to enlist beyond the conscription period, and 38 percent of those simply because they “like” the military, the highest percentage for any of the given reasons. It is, however, not known how many of the conscripts who say that they wish to reenlist will in fact reenlist once their term of conscription is fulfilled.

## Notes

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1. Varoğlu and Biçaksız (2005, p. 583).
2. For a brief account of the Ottoman military system, see Ömür (2005).
3. Ömür (2005, p. 14).
4. Olivetta (2005).
5. Zürcher (1999).
6. Yanıkdag (2004).
7. Yanıkdag (2002, p. 100).

8. For a brief account of the Turkish military service and a debate on the military service system, see Varo-İta and Biçaksiz (2003).

9. University graduates who like to serve a longer term as officers are paid wages and are entitled to privileges such as social security benefits. Others do not so benefit, and hence serve shorter terms.

10. To ensure that these are representative samples, we compared the survey data to the 2002 population data, where male population between 20-29 years of age is grouped according to region and education level. The comparison indicates that our samples match male population characteristics in Turkey and thus may be taken as representative samples.

11. The exact number of draft evaders is known to the Turkish National Conscription Board but has never been disclosed publicly. The main reason for draft evasion is economic in nature.

12. All employees must belong to a social security plan that includes insurance for work-related accidents and illness, sickness, pregnancy, old age, and death. Contributions as a percentage of gross salary are payable by individual employees and employers.

13. Ninety percent of those wishing to reenlist are high-school graduates. Among university graduates the rate is only ten percent. This may reflect the fact that the latter have better post-military service employment opportunities.

14. For a brief survey of the social embeddedness of military service in Turkish culture, see Varo-İta and Biçaksiz (2005).

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