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***Suits and Uniforms: Turkish Foreign Policy Since the Cold War,* by Philip Robins**

***Strategic Insights*, Volume III, Issue 4 (April 2004)**

Reviewed by [Barak Salmoni](#)

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Robins, Philip. *Suits and Uniforms: Turkish Foreign Policy Since the Cold War*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003. xix + 388 + biblio & index.

The past year has demonstrated yet again that Turkish foreign policy and the dynamics of its formation are of vital interest to American regional interests, be they in the Middle East, Balkans/Aegean, Caucasus, or Central Asia. The tussle over Operation Iraqi Freedom in particular exposed certain American assumptions and expectations as unreciprocated by our "strategic partner" in Ankara. Likewise, Washington was shown to have an incomplete grasp of domestic politics' impact on Turkish foreign policy making. Philip Robins' *Suits and Uniforms* thus ought to have been required reading for American policy makers handling Turkey, given its breadth of perspective, analytical sophistication, and the kind of empirical depth offering a corrective to misapprehensions concerning a long-standing NATO ally. Though not without drawbacks, the author quite adeptly fulfills his "hope that the greatest contribution of the book is in providing ideas and empirical material that can be plundered" (5) by multi-disciplinary scholars and policy-makers alike. In this respect, his own previous writing on the subject permits him thorough familiarity with the evolving literature and unsurpassed access to Turkish as well as international diplomats and politicians. The reader benefits immensely.^[1]

Three arguments animate this study. First, "in the arena of foreign affairs, Turkey is a status quo power" (6). Stasis in terms of borders, regimes, and existing alliances has remained essential to Turkey since the 1950s, even after the end of the Cold War. In Robins' view, this has rendered Turkey a "passive player rather than an initiator of change" (6) even when "a new normatively-based solidarity among allies" (19) has begun to overturn the previous givens of international relations. Second, Turkey's Western orientation has remained strong, partially to shore up domestically a threatened Kemalist and westernizing elite. Third, Turkey has been and remains an exceedingly cautious international relations player, "determinedly committed to a multilateral political orientation" (8).

Though they bear constant repetition as a warning to those who would deploy Turkey as a regional "go-to guy," such arguments are not as innovative as Robins' narrative structure. After brief discussion of Turkey's responses to the Cold War era's concluding events, the author plots out the architecture of foreign policy making and implementation. By illuminating the roles and priorities of the various players in Turkish international relations, he encourages the reader to view Turkish foreign policy efficacy as a function of the relationships among political parties, prime and foreign ministers, the foreign ministry bureaucracy, and the military. He argues convincingly for a pattern whereby strong personalities devoting time to foreign relations—such as Prime Minister Turgut Ozal in the 1986-1991 period—or a cooperative approach among Foreign Ministry professionals—such as Hikmet Cetin and Ozdem Sanberk until 1994—result in relatively coherent, normalized foreign relations. By contrast, periods of coalition government—

from 1995-1999—produce insecure leaders characterized by "fragmentation and competition" (64) in foreign policies. It is in this latter environment that the military's influence on foreign policies is greatest. Unlike the conventional wisdom of the 1990s, however, he also includes Parliament and public opinion among players with seats, albeit second tier ones, at the foreign policy table. This is a prescient inclusion in light of events in Spring 2003.

Robins then examines the "domestic motivators" of Turkey's foreign policies. Inspired by the aim to espouse a more "holistic perspective" (5), strong chapters on the role of historical memory and ideology in Turkish approaches to the outside world remind us that history is for Turks "a body of critically important stories that says who the Turks are, where they come from, what their formative experiences have been, and even what their mission is in the modern world" (134). Likewise, "ideology is at least as important as geopolitics in the formulation and pursuit of Turkish foreign policy" (159). Examination of pre-WWII Turkish history, as well as case studies of Turkish relations with the Arabs, the European Union, and the United States show how Turkish leaders have read foreign relations both as a quest for total integration into Europe, the West, and its multilateral institutions, and also as a tale of Western designs to fragment Turkey—the Sevres Syndrome—or exclude it from an ethno-religiously exclusive club—suggesting "the lone, friendless wolf of Turkish mythology" (109). As regards US-Turkish relations, American responses to Turkish moves from the 1960s on "have tended to reconfirm the Turkish intuition that the United States cannot be entirely relied upon" (133). The ultimate lesson of historical memory for Turkish foreign policy makers is "to be suspicious, especially of their neighbors" (135) with even the US and NATO allies proving not entirely trustworthy.

These chapters are accompanied by discussions of the role of security, defense acquisitions, and anti-PKK operations in Turkey's international relations. This thematic approach is most helpful, and is all the more inclusive as it addresses the growing prominence of economic development needs in Turkey's foreign policy calculations, from the Ozal years forward. The reader finds that whether in relation to the EU or Russia, concern for economic relations "has helped to create convergences and complementarities at a time when bilateral relations were often under periods of great strain" (238). Such a conclusion has important implications for the future of relations between Turkey and Iran, as well as between Turkey and the evolving Iraq. Just as intriguing given the Islamist-affiliated Justice and Development Party's domination of domestic Turkish politics are sections detailing the Islamist sector's understanding of Turkish history and ideology as relates to foreign relations. Not only does Robins provide a guide to possible future initiatives, but—particularly in reference to the EU—he also delivers a reminder of the Islamist political makeover the current ruling party seeks to effect.

The book closes with strong case studies of all of these dynamics in action. Conveying the sensibility of the 1990s, when this book was conceptualized, chapters deal with Turkish-Israeli relations, interactions between Turkey and the Turkic Republics of the Former Soviet Union, Turkey's role in the Bosnian crises, and the insurmountable challenges faced by Ankara in Northern Iraq, as it sought to avoid offending poorly-articulated American interests while manipulating Iraq's Kurds against the Iran- and Syria-supported PKK. As regards Turkey and Israel, he eschews the jaundiced eye of other Western scholars,^[2] emerging with the well-considered judgment that "the two countries might have looked forward to a broad-based relationship across state institutions and civil society, with a solid bilateral grounding.... [Yet] the broad foundation to the relationship was lost sight of as the military and defense relationship came to eclipse all else" (269). Turks, Israelis, and Americans who have supported this kind of relationship should bear Robins' assessment in mind.

Completed in July 2002, this book suffers the fate of most works dealing with contemporary matters: the narrative has been overtaken by events, most notably the Iraq War. Here, rather than Kemalists, an Islamist government was in power, possessing an absolute majority of seats in parliament—quite rare in Turkish politics. The military has traditionally reacted poorly to Islamist politicians, having unseated the new ruling party's ideological forebears. Now, however, it remained rather quiescent, some even accusing it of diffidence and inactivity. Still, the new

government's leaders—including an interim prime minister and foreign minister, as well as a lurking heir apparent—professed Turkey's enduring pro-US orientation, while possessing very little experience in or inclination towards foreign policy. From December 2002 to March 2003, observers saw two "strategic partners" careen out of control in negotiations for cooperation in the war against Iraq, resulting in serious mid-term damage to bilateral relations.^[3]

At first blush, then, this book's utility is limited to historical inquiry. Yet, the merit of Robins' work is that it discusses those very issues that were central to the failure of Turkish-American cooperation to fully materialize. These include the foreign relations "system" of Turkey,^[4] and how alterations to the cast and relative standing of characters determines Turkish international relations efficacy; the role of historical memory in Turkish attitudes towards other countries and foreign engagements; the attitudes of Turkey's Islamists towards Turkey's role in both the western system and the Middle East; and the importance of economic concerns in foreign relations, particularly at times of domestic economic hardship—the case in 2002-2003. Several sections of this book might thus have been read by planners of OIF as a guide of what not to do in relations with Turkey.

As a comprehensive, multi-region examination of the substance and motivators of Turkish foreign policy over the last decade-and-a-half, Robins' book is an excellent, unique contribution to a literature dominated mostly by single-issue studies by authors from the region.^[5] There are, however, two flaws in this book, one substantive, and the other structural. First, *Suits and Uniforms* is quite simply not about suits and uniforms. In other words, despite the book's alluring title, it does not focus, either thematically or in terms of its empirical case studies, on the relationship between the military high command and Turkey's civilian foreign policy makers, be they career diplomats or elected politicians. The chapter on foreign policy players does have a very short section on the military and notes the importance of the until-recently military-dominated National Security Council. Robins asserts here, however, that "in the area of foreign policy the military has tended to be less overtly involved" (77), except in times of civilian disorganization. The chapter on security in foreign policy, though a strong review of the Turkish military's force transformation and acquisition efforts, again is without substantive examination of the military's ongoing input on foreign policy. Coverage of the dynamics and patterns of the suits-uniforms interaction is thus too minimal to merit its inclusion in the title as suggestive of a study of civil-military relations in the foreign policy making process. This drawback is all the more concerning as observers today remain unsure of why the military high command and civilian policy makers interacted as they did in the course of American-Turkish negotiations over Iraq.

The second chief drawback is a function of the book's structure. Its thematic approach frustrates the reader who pursues a more straightforward and digestible narrative. As compared to more conventional studies then,^[6] *Suits and Uniforms* conveys the impression of detailed yet unlinked vignettes. Since it uses examples of Turkish foreign relations to prove analytical points rather than first presenting a broad narrative on which subsequent analysis is based, one might miss the real comprehensiveness of the book's coverage and emerge with an incomplete grasp of the course of Turkey's global foreign relations. This is unfortunate, since Robins' sophisticated analysis and focus on a wide gamut of issues central to the crafting and implementation of Turkey's foreign policy render *Suits and Uniforms* a first-rate source for students of international relations, security studies, Middle Eastern history, and Turkish domestic politics. This reviewer enthusiastically awaits a revised edition.

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1. For a few examples see his *Turkey in the Middle East* (London: RIIA, 1991); "Between Sentiment and Self-Interest: Turkey's Policy towards Azerbaijan and the Central Asian States," *Middle East Journal* 47 no. 4 (1993); "Turkish Foreign Policy Under Erbakan," *Survival* 39 no. 2 (1997).
2. See Robert Olson, *The Kurdish Question and Turkish-Iranian Relations From WWI to 1998* (Costa Mesa; Mazda Press, 1998); Alain Gresh, "Turkish-Israeli-Syrian Relations and their Impact on the Middle East," *The Middle East Journal* 52 no.3 (1998).
3. For a review of US-Turkish relations surrounding OIF, see Barak A. Salmoni, "[Strategic Partners or Estranged Allies: Turkey, the United States, and Operation Iraqi Freedom](#)," *Strategic Insights*, 2 no. 7 (July 2003)
4. For the notion of "foreign policy system" as applied in the Middle East, see *Michael Brecher, The Foreign Policy System of Israel: Setting, Images, Process* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972).
5. For examples of excellent work by Turkish scholars, see Kemal Kirisci, "Turkey and the Kurdish Safe-Haven in Northern Iraq," *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies* 19 no.3 (1996); idem, "Turkey and the United States: Ambivalent Allies," in B. Rubin & T Keaney, eds., *US Allies in a Changing World* (London: Frank Cass, 2000); also note the succinct, extremely high quality "Policy Watches" of Soner Cagaptay, Soref Fellow of Turkish Studies at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. For the most recent "Policy Watch" on the Justice and development Party's landslide victory in local elections (29 March 2004) see <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/distribution/POL848.doc>.
6. For a work of superb quality in terms of coverage, detail, and easy-to-digest chronological progression, see William Hale, *Turkish Foreign Policy, 1774-2000* (London: Frank Cass, 2000).