

# THE AGENDA-SETTING CAPACITY OF THE NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL AND THE EDUCATION REFORM ISSUE IN TURKEY

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## Abstract

*This research examines the agenda-setting relationships among three key institutions at a time of major political change in Turkey, the February 28 recommendations on educational reform.*

*The central hypothesis is that the politically powerful MGK put the issue of educational reform on the press agenda. A secondary hypothesis is that the MGK also put the issue of educational reform on the agenda of the national assembly (TBMM).*

*This investigation of the agenda setting influence of the MGK in Turkey covers the period between February 1, 1997 and January 31, 1998 and examines the relationships among three key agendas, the MGK, TBMM, and the Turkish press.*

*To determine the agenda setting influence of the MGK, and to ascertain the relationship between these three agendas across time, a series of cross-lagged correlational analyses was carried out.*

*The findings of this study point out clearly that the MGK agenda led both the TBMM and the press agendas on the education reform issue. In other words, the MGK is clearly seen as the most powerful agenda setter on the education reform issue.*

## Özet

*Türkiye tarihinin önemli kilometre taşlarından biri oluşturan 28 Şubat sürecine odaklanılan bu çalışmada, Milli Güvenlik Kurulu'nun 28 Şubat Kararları arasında ön plana çıkan eğitim reformu konusu ele alınarak, gündem belirleme yaklaşımı çerçevesinde, sürecin üç önemli kurumu sayılan Milli Güvenlik Kurulu (MGK), Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi (TBMM) ve basın gündemleri arasındaki ilişki test edilmektedir.*

*Çalışmanın temel hipotezi siyasal olarak güçlü konumdaki MGK'nun eğitim reformu konusunu basın gündemine soktuğudur. İkincil hipotez MGK'nun ayrıca bu konuyu TBMM gündemine de soktuğudur.*

*MGK'nun Türkiye'deki gündem belirleme etkisinin araştırıldığı çalışmada 1 Şubat 1997-31 Ocak 1998 günleri arasındaki döneme odaklanarak, dönemin üç önemli kurumu olan MGK, TBMM ve basın gündemleri arasındaki ilişki sorgulanmaktadır.*

*MGK'nun gündem belirleme etkisini belirlenebilmesi ve zaman içerisinde bu üç gündem arasındaki ilişkinin ortaya konulabilmesi için "cross-lagged" ilişki analizi uygulanmıştır.*

*Bulgular açıkça eğitim reformu konusunda MGK gündeminin hem TBMM ve hem de basın gündemine öncülük ettiğine işaret etmektedir. Başka bir deyişle MGK, eğitim reformu konusunda en güçlü gündem belirleyici olarak görülmektedir.*

## THE AGENDA-SETTING CAPACITY OF THE NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL AND THE EDUCATION REFORM ISSUE IN TURKEY

There are important road bends in the histories of countries. For the history of Turkey, which became a republic in 1929, multiple party choices in 1950, military coups in 1960, 1970 and 1980, and elections in 1983 are examples of major road bends in its history (Akpınar, 2001:13). Since the last military coup, the most important road bend was the meeting of the National Security Council (MGK) on February 28, 1997 (Cevizoglu, 2001a:xiii; Akpınar, 2001:13; Bayramoglu, 2001; Candar, 2001, Kongar, 2000). The high-powered MGK, which serves as a liaison between the powerful military and the civilian leaders, is composed of the Prime Minister, the Chief of the General Staff, Deputy Prime Ministers, Ministers of Justice, National Defense, Internal Affairs, and Foreign Affairs, the Commanders of the Army, Navy and Air Forces and the General Commander of the Gendarmerie, under the chairmanship of the President of the Republic.

On February 28, the regular meeting of the MGK lasted much longer than usual. After a full nine and one-half hours, the MGK announced its adoption of 18 recommendations<sup>1</sup> designed to stem the perceived growth of Islamism in Turkey as seen in the attempt to impose Shari'a (Islamic Law) on all aspects of public life. Military leaders almost certainly were the driving force behind this move (Gunay, 2001).

Military members of the MGK informally gave a diplomatic note with the recommendations to government members in that meeting. Some writers called these recommendations the process of February 28, while others called it a post-modern military coup (Candar, 2001, Ilıcak, 2001). The principal items on the recommendation list were education reform, reorganization of religious education, stopping the accusations against Atatürk, as well as public anti-secular activities, and redefining the relationship between the Islamist Republic of Iran and Turkey (Akpınar, 2001:208-209; Iba, 1999:228-229).

Cengiz Çandar (2001) first identified the process as a post-modern military coup because five months after the February 28 recommendations the government led by the Islamist Welfare Party (RP) changed, and immediately the new government implemented education reform, increasing compulsory primary education to an uninterrupted eight years. Additionally within 11 months the Constitutional Court determined that the RP, the party that not only headed the previous government, but also had the most seats in the Turkish Grand National Assembly (TBMM), was illegal and outlawed it. It was a post-modern coup because its application was different than the previous military coups. The operational organ was the MGK, which is a constitutional institution. Moreover, Major General Erol Ozkasnak who was General Staff Secretary-general, identified on a television program in January 13, 2001 the process of February 28 as a military activity and called it a post-modern military coups and also added that it was an important turning point for the history of the Turkish Republic (Cevizoglu, 2001:56).

### **Agenda Setting Theory**

Agenda-setting theory basically explains how and why the public learn how much importance to attach to a topic from the emphasis placed on it in news coverage. In the

words of the theory, the mass media of communication set the agenda for public attention and lay the groundwork for public opinion (McCombs and Yüksel, 2001:148). The broader process of agenda setting that has evolved from this core focus on the media and public opinion is best described as an ongoing competition among issue proponents to gain the attention of media professionals, the public and policy elites (Dearing and Rogers, 1996:3).

The initial phase of agenda-setting research, centered on the influence of the media agenda on the public agenda, was inaugurated by the Chapel Hill study and continues to this day in new settings, such as the internet and online newspapers. Another phase of the research, which was introduced in the early 1980s, asked who sets the media agenda that subsequently affects public opinion. As an umbrella response to this question, Shoemaker and Reese (1996) cite five major categories: (1) influence from individual media workers, (2) influences of media routines, (3) organizational influences on content, (4) influences on content from outside media organizations, and (5) ideology. This research focuses on the fourth category, the influence of an external organization on the press agenda.

The vast majority of the agenda-setting research in this category extends mass communication research's long-standing fascination with elections and examines the influence of political campaigns on the media agenda. A classic example of this research is the comparative study of the 1983 British general election and the 1984 U.S. presidential election detailed in *The Formation of Campaign Agendas* (Semetko et al., 1991). However, outside an election setting there is a significant subset of studies focused on the influence of the U.S. president's annual State of the Union address on subsequent news coverage of public issues (Gilberg et al., 1980; McCombs, Gilbert and Eyal, 1982; Wanta et al., 1989; and Johnson and Wanta, 1995). Two longitudinal studies also have examined the broader agenda-setting role of the president of the United States (Wanta and Foote, 1994; Gonzenbach, 1996). A recent book extends this look at external influences on the media agenda through an analysis of the agenda-setting relationships among the proceedings of the Canadian Parliament, newspaper coverage, and public opinion trends for eight issues between 1985 and 1995 (Soroka, 2002). Continuing this extended focus on external sources of influence, the study reported here examines the agenda-setting relationships in Turkey among leading newspapers and two major political institutions, the MGK and the national assembly, for the issue of educational reform.

Specifically, this research examines the agenda-setting relationships among three key institutions at a time of major political change in Turkey, the February 28 recommendations on educational reform. The central hypothesis is that the politically powerful MGK put the issue of educational reform on the press agenda. A secondary hypothesis is that the MGK also put the issue of educational reform on the agenda of the national assembly (TBMM).

### **The process of February 28, 1997**

Before the February 28 recommendations of the MGK, many argued that the process started with the general elections on December 25, 1995. Results of the election were that the Islamist RP had 21.4%; True Path Party (DYP) had 19.6%; Motherland Party (ANAP) had 14.6%; and Democratic Left Party (DSP) had 10.7 % of the votes. Neither the military or the central powers of the country wanted the RP in the government (Bayramoglu, 2001:45-46), so ANAP and DYP negotiated a coalition government and received a vote of confidence on

March 12, 1996. To counter this action, the RP took the vote of confidence to court. The Constitutional Court declared the vote invalid and cancelled the government in May 14. By July 8, 1996, a coalition government formed by RP and DYP had received a vote of confidence. For the first time, the Islamist leader of RP, Necmettin Erbakan, became the prime minister.

However, the government's formulas for solving economic problems failed within a few months, and by September the government received major criticisms about Erbakan's visits to Islamic countries to further his dream of an Islamic bloc, the RP's increasing criticisms of Atatürk and secular government regime, then an RP deputy's meeting with the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) for the rescue of three soldiers. In November, the government failed to investigate the Susurluk Scandal, which exploded after a car accident revealed links between right-wing mafia gangs, politicians and the security forces. Also the government attempted to censor the press' criticism of its activities with a new press law. These events were followed by resignations of key cabinet ministers from the DYP wing of the coalition. Most of these former ministers together with other deputies founded a new party, the Democratic Turkey Party (DTP), in January 1997.

Turkey's armed forces struck out at the ruling Islamists with a top general stating at a special briefing for court system members and for reporters that the military's struggle against religious activism was vital to the survival of the secular republic. Also during that time, tensions on the streets were increasing. Most of the democratic mass organizations were declaring their secularist and anti-Shari' a opinions and were visiting the Moseloum of Atatürk. On the other hand, some religious groups were showing their anti-secularist opinions, and Shari' a desires in mosques and on the streets during this time.

Finally, there were two actions that led to a military show of force. The first was "Remembrance night of Jerusalem" an event in support of Shari'a which took place in Sincan whose mayor was a member of the RP and was removed from office by the Interior Ministry and formally arrested. The second action was the words of the ambassador of Iran who had joined the night and criticized the Turkish regime. These events led to tanks passing through Sincan in February 4, 1997. Afterwards, Vice Admiral Güven Erkaya commented that the Shari'a threat is more dangerous than the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (Donat, 1999:167). The Shari'a issue became a leading issue at the February meeting of the MGK.

### **Education Reform Issue**

In the February meeting, the MGK introduced its education reform recommendations of which the most important was to make primary school education obligatory for eight years. The RP was opposed to the uninterrupted eight years of primary education because this would result in the closure of the intermediary levels of the religiously orientated Imam Hatip schools. The RP wanted the eight years of primary education to be split according to the "five plus three" formula, which would allow the elementary level of the Imam Hatip schools to remain open.

June saw the end of Islamic government in Turkey. Islamist Prime Minister Erbakan and DYP leader Tansu Çiller decided to exchange positions and Erbakan gave his resignation to

the President of the Republic, Süleyman Demirel on June 18, 1997. Contrary to Erbakan and Ciller's expectations, Demirel gave the responsibility of forming the new government to the leader of ANAP, Mesut Yılmaz. Consequently, a new term started with a secular three party coalition between ANAP, DSP and DTP deputies. The new cabinet received a vote of confidence on July 7, 1997, and the first action of the new government was to pass the education law.

A public opinion poll conducted July 25-28 by the PIAR-Gallup Company with 1028 people representing the population of Turkish voters in 11 settlement centers found that 58 percent said they were for the extension of elementary education to eight years (Sabah, July 30, 1997). Among those respondents, 39.1 percent said it was because of world standards, 33.3 percent said it was because of the closure of the intermediary levels of the religiously orientated Imam Hatip schools, 9.5 percent said it was because of the MGK recommendations, 6.5 percent said it was to prevent Shari'a activities, and 10.7 percent said they had no idea or do not know about it. Also 0.9 percent has other reasons.

## Methodology

Focusing on this important turning point in Turkey's social and democratic life, this investigation of the agenda setting influence of the MGK in Turkey covers the period between February 1, 1997 and January 31, 1998 and examines the relationships among three key agendas, the MGK, TBMM, and the Turkish press.

The TBMM Minutes Records can be found on the internet, [http://www.tbmm.gov.tr/develop/owa/tutanak\\_ss.sorgu\\_baslangic](http://www.tbmm.gov.tr/develop/owa/tutanak_ss.sorgu_baslangic). The key words, which were used to determine the salience of the education reform issue, were "kesintisiz egitim" [uninterrupted education] and "8 yillik egitim" [8 years education]. The total mentions of these words were used as the indicator of the salience of the issue on TBMM agenda.

The salience of the issue on the press agenda was determined by the number of news stories on the first page of five major newspapers: Cumhuriyet, Hürriyet, Sabah, Türkiye and Milli Gazete. These five newspapers were selected because they were the most popular dailies in Turkey, they have readers who have different political views, and they have different owners. According to the Official Turkish Press and Advertisement Association, these five newspapers had 53.1% of the total average daily circulation in 1997. Cumhuriyet had 1.4 %, Hürriyet had 18.7 %, Sabah had 18.6%, Türkiye had 13.6% and Milli Gazete had 0.8% of Turkish daily newspaper readers. Cumhuriyet has mostly social democrat readers, Hürriyet and Sabah have mostly centralist readers, Türkiye has mostly nationalist readers and Milli Gazete has mostly religious or Islamist readers (Yuksel, 2001:163-164). Also Milli Gazete is known as ideologically close to the Islamist RP.

In contrast to the openness and easy accessibility of the TBMM minutes and the newspapers, the MGK meetings are officially secret. Our only window on these meetings are the brief reports distributed after each session by the official Turkish press agency, the Anatolia News Agency (AA). There were 12 monthly meetings of the MGK during the period of this study, and AA's brief reports were analyzed for any mention of the education reform issue. Given the truncated nature of these reports, the education reform issue was necessarily scored as 0 (absent) or 1 (mentioned) for each month. Because this highly constrained variance for the education reform issue on the MGK agenda in turn truncates its calculated correlation with the other two agendas that are of interest here, the data were grouped by quarters. Within

each of these three-month periods, there is increased variance for the education reform issue, a range of 0 to 3, rather than the limited 0 to 1 for each month.

To determine the agenda setting influence of the MGK, and to ascertain the relationship between these three agendas across time, a series of cross-lagged correlational analyses was carried out.

“The primary advantage of cross-lagged correlation is that they provide direct evidences on the agenda setting relationship across time, a major requisite for asserting that one agenda causes or influences another. The logic behind cross-lagged analysis is that if one variable really is the cause of another, the correlation of X (the cause) at time one with Y (the effect) at time two should be stronger than the opposite cross-lag, Y the effect at time one with the cause X at time two.” McCombs (1977:90)

## Findings

Subsequent to the February 28, 1997, recommendations, the educational reform issue appeared on the MGK agenda at the April, May, June and July 1997 meetings. There was no discussion of the issue in March because the military members of the MGK waited to see the government’s response to their recommendations (Akpınar, 2001:229).

After the February recommendations of the MGK, education reform also became a current issue on the press agenda. During the 12 months of this study Milli Gazete had 32% of the 909 articles, Cumhuriyet had 29%, Turkiye had 16%, Hurriyet had 11% and Sabah had 10 %. The median correlation in Table 1 is +.88 between the dailies for the salience of the issue quarter by quarter. In other words, all the newspapers gave similar importance to the educational reform issue.

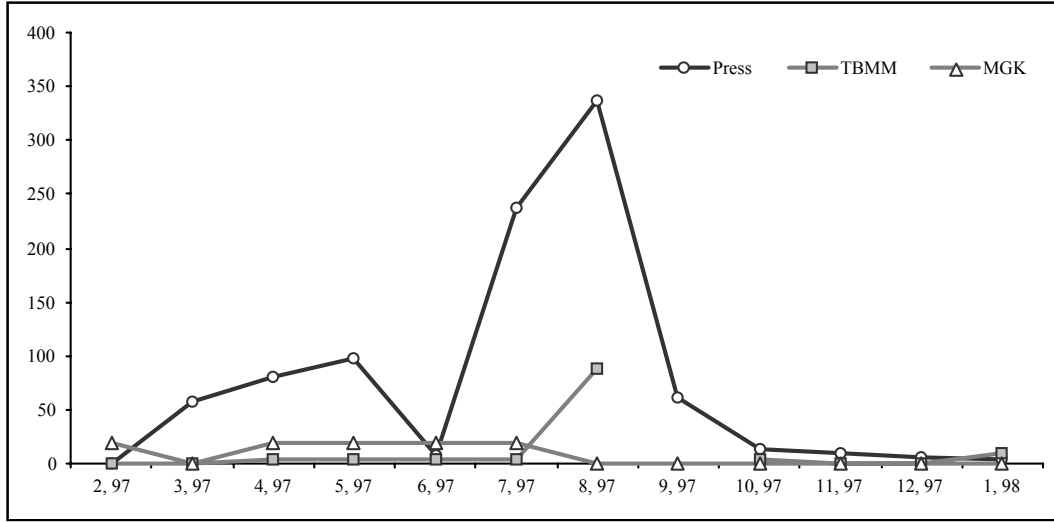
Examination of the salience of the education reform issue on the TBMM agenda showed that the issue was mentioned 115 times during the time of the study. As seen in Figure 1, the appearance of the education reform issue on the press and TBMM agendas starts with March, 1997, that is after the February 28, recommendations.

**Table 1.** Correlations of the Education Reform Coverage between the Newspapers

	Turkiye	Sabah	Milli Gazete	Hurriyet
Cumhuriyet	0.882	0.875	0.732	0.662
Hurriyet	0.932	0.870	0.965	
Milli Gazete	0.926	0.821		
Turkiye	0.974			

The findings from the analyses of these patterns are especially clear: the MGK agenda leads the press and the TBMM agendas on the education reform issue. The cross-lagged correlation between the MGK and press agendas is +.985 (Table 2). The MGK agenda also leads the TBMM agenda with a cross-lag correlation of .763 (Table 2). The reverse relationships are negative. On the other hand, the strongest relationship between the press and the TBMM agenda is a simultaneous correlation of +.687.

**Figure 1. Education Reform Issue**



**Table 2. Simultaneous and Cross-Lagged Correlations Between the MGK, TBMM and the Press**

<b>Simultaneously</b>	<b>Cross-Lagged</b>	<b>Cross-Lagged</b>
MGK-PRESS	MGK =>PRESS	PRESS =>MGK
.206	<b>.985</b>	-.971
TBMM-PRESS	TBMM=>PRESS	PRESS=>TBMM
<b>.687</b>	-.970	.268
MGK-TBMM	<b>MGK=&gt;TBMM</b>	TBMM=>MGK
-.559	<b>.763</b>	-.569

The cross-lagged correlation values are also high between the MGK and each individual newspaper. These are shown in Table 3. The highest relationships are between MGK and Türkiye (+.987) and Milli Gazete (+.986).

**Table 3. Correlations between the MGK Agenda and Newspaper's Agendas**

	MGK-Cumhuriyet	MGK-Hürriyet	MGK-Milli Gazete	MGK-Sabah	MGK-Türkiye
Simultaneously	0.530	-0.074	-0.122	0.427	0.252
	MGK=> Cumhuriyet	MGK=> Hürriyet	MGK=> Milli Gazete	MGK=> Sabah	MGK=> Türkiye
Cross-Lagged	<b>0.799</b>	<b>0.978</b>	<b>0.986</b>	<b>0.960</b>	<b>0.987</b>
	Cumhuriyet=> MGK	Hürriyet=>MGK	Milli Gazete=> MGK	Sabah=> MGK	Türkiye=> MGK
Cross-Lagged	-0.913	-0.650	-0.832	-0.990	-0.952

The correlations between the TBMM and the newspaper agendas are shown in Table 4. In one instance of newspaper influence on the national assembly, the salience of the education reform issue on Cumhuriyet leads the salience of the issue on the TBMM agenda with the cross-lagged correlation values of +.804. For the other four newspapers, the strongest positive correlations are the simultaneous comparisons of the TBMM and media agendas. These simultaneous correlations are especially strong between TBMM and Hurriyet and Milli Gazete with values of +.860 and +.885.

**Table 4.** Correlations between the TBMM Agenda and the Newspaper's Agendas

	TBMM-Cumhuriyet	TBMM-Hürriyet	TBMM-Milli Gazete	TBMM-Sabah	TBMM-Türkiye
Simultaneously	0.337	<b>0.860</b>	<b>0.885</b>	<b>0.506</b>	<b>0.661</b>
	TBMM=> Cumhuriyet	TBMM=> Hürriyet	TBMM=> Milli Gazete	TBMM=> Sabah	TBMM=> Türkiye
Cross-Lagged	-0.974	-0.810	-0.833	-0.991	-0.968
	Cumhuriyet=> TBMM	Hürriyet => TBMM	Milli Gazete => TBMM	Sabah=> TBMM	Türkiye=> TBMM
Cross-Lagged	<b>0.804</b>	-0.343	-0.075	0.361	0.199

## Conclusion and Discussion

Who is the first power? This question was answered by the previous owner of Hürriyet Newspaper, Erol Simavi (1988), during the last military coup in Turkey: "Is the army the first power of the Turkey? No. It's press. The second one is the army. Because the press prepares the ground for the army for the coup." That is an important point in describing the role of the press in a military coup. On the other hand, this study says: No, in some cases, the army is the first power, and it sets the TBMM and the press agenda powerfully. Secondly, the press agenda leads the TBMM agenda.

One of the criticisms about the role of the press in the process of February 28 by the newspaper writer Bayramoglu is that the press put self-censorship into practice during the process (2001:51). The press was a weapon of the army, and the political role of the army was making or shaping the public opinion (2001:88, 94 and 114). On the other hand, Republican People's Party (CHP) chief Deniz Baykal defines the process in these words (Bayramoglu, 2001:189): "The Turkish army worked as a democratic mass organization against the government that wanted to change the regime and assisted to unmask the RP, helping to form public opinion".

The findings of this study point out clearly that the MGK agenda led both the TBMM and the press agendas on the education reform issue. In other words, the MGK is clearly seen as the most powerful agenda setter on the education reform issue.



## Notes

(1) The 18 Recommendations of February 28, 1997. National Security Council Decision No. 406.

1. On February 28, 1997, the National Security Council held its regular monthly meeting. Present at the meeting were the President (NSC chairman), Prime Minister, Chief of General Staff, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of State, Minister of Defense, Minister of Interior, Chiefs of Armed Forces, Chief of Gendarmerie, and the NSC secretary-general.

2. At this meeting, the council examined and evaluated the threat and dangers that result from destructive activities and statements aimed at destroying the republican regime and the democratic, secular, and social-law state-which is committed to Atatürk nationalism and whose basis and characteristics are described by the Constitution-and replacing it with a political religious order.

3. As a result of this evaluation, it is unanimously agreed that

a. Groups aiming to create an Islamic republic based on shari'a law in Turkey constitute a multi-directional threat to the democratic, secular, social-law state as defined by the Constitution.

b. Fundamentalist groups opposing the republic and the regime are trying to weaken the democratic, secular, social-law state by making secular and anti-secular distinctions.

c. In Turkey, secularism is a guarantee not only for the regime but also for democracy and public peace, and it is also a way of life.

d. The concepts of the social-law state and justice, which are the structural essence of the state, cannot be abandoned; failing to investigate the non-contemporary practices that disregard the law is incompatible with the principle of superiority of law.

4. As a result of these views and evaluations, it is decided that

a. The cabinet should be informed that it should take the measures listed in Annex A in the short, medium, and long term in order to prevent the multi-directional threat to our republic-a democratic, secular, social-law state-by groups aiming to create an Islamic republic based on shari'a law in Turkey.

b. The NSC General Secretariat, according to Article 9 of Law no. 2945 on the NSC and the NSC General Secretariat, should, at regular intervals, brief the Prime Minister, the President, and the NSC on the results of cabinet decisions pertaining to the measures listed in Annex A, as well as those measures that did not become cabinet decisions.

(Günay, Nizayi. <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/junior/note10.htm>).

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