Turkey and the Failed Coup One Year Later

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Jul 20, 2017
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Brief Analysis

Watch three expert observers examine a divided Turkey one year after the failed military coup of 2016.

On July 13, Omer Taspinar, Soner Cagaptay, and James F. Jeffrey addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Taspinar is a professor at the National War College and an adjunct professor at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies. Cagaptay is the Beyer Family Fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at the Institute. Jeffrey is the Institute's Philip Solondz Distinguished Fellow and a former U.S. ambassador to Turkey. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

OMER TASPINAR

While the authoritarian trend in Turkish politics is well documented in Washington circles, Fethullah Gulen is still very enigmatic for most Americans (despite his longtime exile in Pennsylvania). Some background on the

Gulen movement's marriage of convenience with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP), therefore, provides important context.

Gulen's intellectual antecedents can be traced to Said Nursi (1877-1960), a scholar from eastern Anatolia who wrote a six-thousand-page commentary on the Quran emphasizing the compatibility of Islam with rationalism. The Gulen movement, a major Turkish sect, continues Nursi's project of modernizing Islam, integrating an emphasis on science and education.

The Gulen movement also encourages a nationalist brand of Islam, whereas Orthodox Islam emphasizes the transcendental brotherhood of the *umma*, or Muslim community, and formative political Islamist thinkers such as Sayyid Qutb saw political Islam as a way of uniting all Muslims. Nursi and Gulen were thus generally at peace with the Ottoman and Turkish states.

By comparison, the AKP derives its identity from the Muslim Brotherhood tradition, especially in the figure of Necmettin Erbakan (1926-2011), who founded the Welfare Party, the AKP predecessor. Emphasizing Islamic over Turkish civilization, Erbakan's movement was always political in nature, whereas the Gulen movement evolved into a social and cultural force. Unlike Erbakan's Welfare Party, the Gulen movement never showed an interest in controlling the state -- or in a "Muslim revolution." Its leaders instead encouraged Turkish Muslims to make money, pay taxes, and contribute to philanthropic organizations, thereby gradually transforming the state in their image.

The military, for its part, long viewed the Gulen movement to be far more dangerous than Erbakan, regarding its educational, cultural, and social agenda as a clandestine means to infiltrate the state -- and an existential threat.

In establishing the AKP to further Erbakan's legacy, Erdogan, too, initially rejected political Islamism, allowing for an alliance with Gulen wherein the movement provided human capital and the AKP furnished a political party. Indeed, Gulen had been grooming intellectuals since the 1970s, and fielding bureaucrats since the 1980s, offering cadres that Erdogan needed to populate his government.

From 2003 until 2011, the AKP and Gulen movement saw a common enemy in the military system -- an enemy of which they were deprived in the Ergenekon trials, which began in 2009 and sidelined the generals. These trials had begun as a legitimate attempt to root out a coup plot but morphed into a witch hunt targeting all AKP opponents.

When the Gulenists refused to fold under AKP control, Erdogan went after them by closing down their schools, and Gulenists responded by fueling a corruption scandal around Erdogan and his family in December 2013. In response, Erdogan cracked down more harshly on the Gulenists, who finally resorted to using their influence in the military -- acquired in the vacuum left by the Ergenekon trials -- to strike back.

SONER CAGAPTAY

Previously, the symbiotic relationship enjoyed by the AKP and the Gulen movement involved human capital provided by the former and a charismatic leader and political party offered by the latter. When they collectively brought down the military in 2011, a raw power struggle ensued between two men, Erdogan and Gulen, whose dramatic fallout has ushered in greater instability in Turkey.

After the failed nefarious coup attempt in July 2016, Erdogan -- instead of serving as a unifier -- sought to widen rifts with opposition groups. His subsequent purge stretched well beyond the Gulenists, ultimately including liberals, leftists, social democrats, Alevis (liberal Muslims), and Kurdish nationalists. Turkey has become significantly more authoritarian as a result, tied to the emerging notion that the rise of the Turkish nation and the restoration of the Muslim community (*umma*) are now inextricably linked to Erdogan's personality. When citizens fail to support Erdoganism -- based on the triumvirate of anti-Westernism, political Islamism, and Turkish nationalism -- they are cast as opposing Turkey and Islam, and as foreign agents, and thus persecuted.

There are two main drivers of Erdogan's authoritarian: The first involves his consolidation of power since 2003, involving crackdowns on demographic groups unlikely to support him. This collective bloc constitutes half of Turkey, and Erdogan thought it could be controlled through authoritarianism alone. The second driver involves the president's working-class roots in Kasimpasa, an Istanbul neighborhood where, in secularist Turkey, his conservative, pious family members were treated as second-class citizens. He and his classmates were taunted at their government-run religious school, and the secularist courts shut down three Islamist political parties that Erdogan joined.

Although eventually becoming the most powerful politician since Turkey's 1950 transition to a multiparty system, Erdogan still feels weak as a citizen. The moment he shows this weakness, as he sees it, he'll be pushed back to the other side of the tracks. Erdoganism thus preaches that authoritarianism is necessary for "making Turkey great again" and restoring the dignity of Muslims -- with Erdogan as the leader.

The post-coup scene in Turkey has had elements of the Orwellian. A few months ago, a laudatory biopic on Erdogan's life, promoted by his administration and called *The Chief*, was released. Last week, the film's producer made another movie marking the anniversary of the thwarted coup. Despite being on the government payroll, he was arrested because his narrative went too far.

The half of Turkey who loves Erdogan welcomes his increased power; the half who loathes him cannot accept it. And the anti-Erdogan constituency is growing. Provinces that voted against him constitute 80 percent of Turkey's GDP. The 18-34 age group voted by the widest margin against Erdogan in the recent referendum changing Turkey from a parliamentary to a presidential system. When, however, the anti-Erdogan crowd despairs of democracy as a tool to oppose him, the potential for radicalism and violence will rise, explaining why it is not actually in Erdogan's interest to end Turkish democracy.

JAMES F. JEFFREY

In 2015-16, before the coup attempt, a tenuous U.S.-Turkey relationship could be defined by two words: the south. Whereas a superficial alignment of U.S. and Turkish interests existed in Syria, these interests differed almost everywhere on the ground. Turkey, for its part, faced three threats from the south: the Democratic Union Party (PYD), a Syrian Kurdish group; the Islamic State (IS); and Syrian president Bashar al-Assad. The PYD, meanwhile -- having been boosted by its successful defense against IS, beginning in Kobane in 2014 -- is a political offshoot of the Turkey-based Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), and when talks between Ankara and the PKK broke down in summer 2015, the Kurdish group became an acute threat to Turkey.

In late 2015, when terrorist attacks in Paris and San Bernardino prompted the United States to take IS very seriously, Turkey was not equally devoted to the cause, while even lending support to IS-aligned groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra. As part of its policy to overthrow Assad, Turkey kept its border open, allowing both anti-Assad and anti-U.S. jihadists to cross. Meanwhile, although the Obama administration agreed in principle with Turkey's "Assad must go" policy, it lacked sufficient enthusiasm for the cause, disappointing Turkey.

The broader U.S.-Turkey relationship is crucial, with Turkish cooperation having played a part in almost all U.S. conflicts. In particular, Turkey was indispensable to the U.S. triumph in the Cold War; likewise, without U.S. support beginning in the 1940s, Turkey could not have remained independent during the Cold War.

A disconnect in communication underlies the current U.S.-Turkey malaise, with Ankara espousing a cynical, realpolitik view of foreign policy, whereas the United States believes it is advancing universal values. Multiple groups lobby against Turkey in Washington -- e.g., Armenian, Greek, human rights -- and to preserve this important relationship, U.S. officials must oversell the country as the best ally the United States has ever had. When Turkey

undermines this image, the U.S. government becomes frustrated.

Washington generally knows about important events in advance, but last year's coup was completely unexpected, and U.S. officials froze in response. The prevailing consensus held that military coups were no longer possible in Turkey. Further, U.S. officials did not realize that the military's Gulenist faction -- rather than its traditional secular core -- was perpetrating the coup. As Washington awaited more information on the Gulenists, officials held off on making statements evaluating the coup, instead defaulting to U.S. interests, particularly a push to reopen Turkey's Incirlik Air Base for operations against the Islamic State.

Predating the coup, Washington was disappointed by Erdogan's harsh response to the Gezi Park protests of summer 2013 and his treatment of the Kurdish-aligned Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) after the breakdown of the PKK ceasefire. Yet Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's visit gives reason for optimism, and the Trump administration can improve ties from where the Obama administration left them. Such improvements, however, should not strive for some ideal former state: U.S.-Turkey ties have always been complicated.

This summary was prepared by Oya Rose Aktas. ❖

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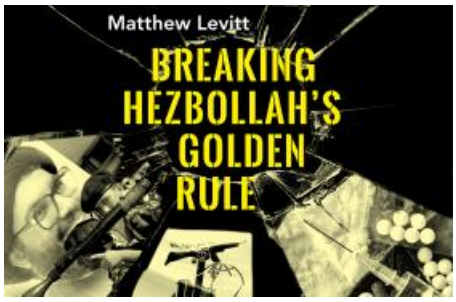

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