

Inside Turkey's Failed Coup: What Happened? Why? What Next?

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Brief Analysis

Two experts discuss how the coup was thwarted, what Erdogan will do next, and how the nascent purges might shift Ankara's relations with Washington.

On July 20, Soner Cagaptay and James Jeffrey addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. 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 former U.S. ambassador to Turkey. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

SONER CAGAPTAY

For most people who were born in Turkey or study the country, the most difficult image to see during last week's events was Ankara -- a city that had not been attacked or occupied since the fifteenth century -- being bombed by Turks. Ultimately, the July 15 plot proved to be a counterfeit coup. Although it was meant to look like a full-fledged coup carried out by the military's top brass, it was in fact a factional uprising within the military. Only about 20 percent of the country's generals were involved; they hoped to harness enough critical mass among top officers to subsequently mount a full coup, but they lacked widespread support. Their only significant backing came from the air force and gendarmerie -- there was no real support in the army, which comprises 65 percent of the armed forces. In fact, their nefarious plot began to unravel when the commander of the 1st Army went on television and declared,

"This is not a coup."

The plot failed in part because it was poorly conceived. For example, it was carried out at 10:00 p.m. when everyone was out in the streets, instead of well after midnight when coups are generally executed. When the plotters realized that Turkish intelligence had discovered their plans, they launched the coup prematurely, which led to its unraveling.

The plan also failed because the forces supporting President Recep Tayyip Erdogan were too powerful. An assassination attempt against him was, thankfully, unsuccessful because intelligence informed him of the plot. He was also able to connect with the masses and galvanize them to action. The plotters took over TRT, a state-run television channel that is not among the country's most-watched networks. Erdogan responded by going on CNN-Turk over FaceTime and calling on his supporters to flood the streets. Meanwhile, the national police remained loyal to him and prevented the gendarmerie from leaving their barracks, enabling armed pro-government groups to outnumber pro-coup forces. Moreover, social media was abuzz with anti-coup messaging, and the mobilization of pro-Erdogan masses demonstrated the victory of the digital age over an analog coup. Ironically, Erdogan was saved by the very social media outlets he has been trying to ban.

The coup would have been bad for Turks no matter how it turned out. To be sure, a successful plot would have been worse -- Turkey would have become a more oppressive country run by generals, perhaps even descending into civil war. Yet even with an apparent Erdogan victory, Turkey will still become more oppressive. In the wake of this attack against the constitutional order, the president now has carte blanche to crack down on the opposition. Since 2003, he has built a cult of personality as a kind of authoritarian underdog, portraying himself as a victim who is forced to take action against those conspiring to undermine his authority. Now this conspiracy theory has legs -- in the eyes of Erdogan and his supporters, opposing the president really does mean plotting a coup.

In some respects, Erdogan's response to the plot will likely resemble the U.S. response to al-Qaeda. Yet he will probably wind up casting too wide of a net, targeting liberals, civil society institutions, and democratic opposition factions that were not linked to the coup -- this despite the fact that all Turkish political parties and media outlets, along with many NGOs and the TUSIAD business lobby, stood against the plot from the beginning. (Although Erdogan has perhaps recognized this loyalty -- the head of the main opposition party was recently invited to appear on TRT for the first time in six years -- he still maintains his divisive "us vs. them" rhetoric.)

Going forward, Erdogan will use this opportunity to expand his power, seeking to become head of government in addition to his current capacity as head of state. This would allow him to become the most powerful person in Turkey since Kemal Ataturk. But even as the new Ataturk, he would only be embraced by half the country, so the risk of domestic instability will be high in the coming months.

Turkish relations with the United States could become more complicated as well. The two biggest bilateral issues will be the Gulen Movement and NATO membership.

On the first issue, Erdogan believes the movement -- whose leader, Turkish Muslim cleric Fethullah Gulen, lives in the United States as a permanent resident -- is completely behind the coup plot. Ankara will therefore press hard for his extradition, and Washington will need to give the request thorough and swift consideration. At the same time, Erdogan must not link this issue to military cooperation against the Islamic State -- if he tries to present the United States with an ultimatum, it will backfire.

As for NATO, the current mood in Ankara is very dark, nervous, and angry, with some even claiming that the United States was behind the coup because Gulen lives there. Thus, for the first time in recent memory, some Turks are seriously questioning their country's NATO membership. If Washington does not convince Turkey of its commitment to cooperate on Gulen, Ankara could quickly pivot toward Russia -- a sobering thought given that Erdogan is scheduled to meet with Vladimir Putin the first week of August.

JAMES JEFFREY

By far, the number-one victor in the aftermath of the coup attempt is Erdogan. He has gained enormous power within the part of the population that supports him and achieved legendary status by evading assassination. The steps he takes now will be motivated by a dual desire to prevent additional conspiracies and further expand his control.

Three potential scenarios may help explain Erdogan's post-coup approach. First, the Gulen Movement is widespread in the police and judiciary and may be just as extensive throughout the bureaucracy -- it is difficult to determine the extent of the cult-like, impenetrable network. Accordingly, the government might have a real rationale for rounding up as many people as it has. A second alternative is that the movement was involved in the coup, but the government is spreading its net very wide in order to purge everyone who has opposed Erdogan. A third scenario is that Gulen was not involved, and Erdogan simply views the coup attempt as a "gift from heaven" (as he described it the day after) that gives him the excuse he needed to purge the bureaucracy and expand his power.

Whatever the case, Ankara's response will create major problems for relations with the United States. Turkey is already a polarized society, and this split will widen it further. Internal turbulence will drive down Turkey's economic standing in the short term, and as rule of law and judiciary independence are called into question, the economy's long-term prospects will suffer as well. Human rights violations will further strain bilateral relations, and Washington will be compelled to condemn Erdogan's violations of democratic freedoms.

Yet the situation would have been worse if the military power grab had succeeded. Unlike the 1980 coup, even people who oppose Erdogan's government did not want military intervention. Furthermore, half of the population strongly supports him and would have resisted if the military had come to power. The resulting scenario would have looked less like the 1980 coup and more like the Syrian civil war.

So far, the Obama administration has handled the situation well, but every day will bring new challenges. Turkey is important for regional stability and international peace, but the U.S. government has limited options at the moment. Washington will have to be very open and frank in publicly standing up for its values, but instrumentalizing this stance and convincing Turkey to listen will be more difficult. Turkish society has a long tradition of blaming Washington for its problems, but persistent conspiracy theories about American involvement in the coup could push the United States too far.

The most immediate issue is the question of Gulen's extradition. In general, the U.S. extradition process has three steps: (1) the administration reviews the request to ensure it meets bilateral treaty requirements, (2) U.S. courts process the case in accordance with the American legal system, and (3) the person is sent to the requesting country to stand trial in its legal system. The challenge that Washington faces in Gulen's case is that Turkish authorities have been playing fast and loose with the authority of their court system, undermining the legitimacy of extradition requests. And even if the request is legitimate on paper, U.S. courts and administration officials will have to weigh whether Gulen would truly receive a free trial if he is sent to Turkey. From a policy perspective, the administration would likely be better off swallowing its concerns, sending this case to the courts, and letting the judicial system reach a decision. In this delicate phase of relations with such an important ally, realpolitik must guide the handling of such matters.

This summary was prepared by Oya Aktas. ❖



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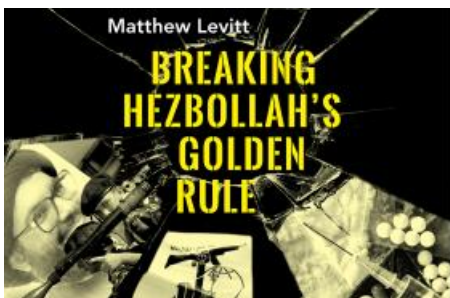
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