

Troubling Forces Unleashed in Turkey

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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An in-depth conversation about why the coup happened and what implications it holds for Islamist mobilization in the streets, public perceptions of the military, and cooperation with the United States in Syria.

In an interview with the Cipher Brief, Soner Cagaptay, the Beyer Family Fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, says he finds it "incredibly worrisome" that the failed military coup in Turkey could be the beginning of civil strife in that nation.

The Cipher Brief: Who instigated the coup attempt against Erdogan? Who do you think they drew support from? How is this different from previous coup attempts?

Soner Cagaptay: This coup goes beyond everything we know about the Turkish military in the sense that when the military orchestrated coups in the past, they were usually top down. This time, it seems to have been splintered within the military, with some high level officials taking part, but not the chain of command of the top brass. Definitely not the chief of staff -- who was taken hostage by pro-coup forces. So number one, it goes against everything we know about the Turkish military.

Number two, in the past, when the Turkish military carried out coups, it never fired at its own people, and this time the military fired on its own people. This is going to have long-term debilitating effects on the military's standing.

It's hard to talk about who is actually behind it. It's definitely not the Turkish military as a whole but a group within the Turkish military. And it's not as small as people suggested originally. It's a pretty sizeable group, for example, 20 percent of all admirals and generals and one-third of all one and two star generals. So it's a very sizeable population.

Other people say that the Gulen movement was behind the coup, which is going to become an issue because the founder of the movement, Fethullah Gulen, lives in the United States. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan believes that Gulen and the Gulen movement were 100 percent behind this, so Erdogan will press the U.S. very hard for his extradition. That will become a major issue in the U.S.-Turkish relationship.

It used to come up in bilateral meetings, now it's going to be issue number one. There's still a slight chance that U.S.-

Turkish military cooperation could become hostage in the long-term, including U.S. access to Incirlik Air Base and other bases in Southern Turkey, if Turkey's demands for Gulen's extradition are not met.

TCB: Is there any one main factor that drove this coup attempt?

SC: Not necessarily. The motives will not be clear to us for a while.

What is really important is to remember that for a while now, Turkey has been deeply polarized, between supporters and opponents of the ruling party, the AKP. In this coup, the military, which is based on universal military conscription, was the only organization in which all Turks participated until this coup. When the military fired at its own people, it sort of fired on itself. The military is no more a unifying institution. The worry is that there will be civil strife in Turkey. And when that happens, there will not be a military to unify the country.

TCB: How has the coup attempt been viewed by Turkish citizens? Has there been a strong Islamist response from the Turkish government?

SC: Any democratic regime is better than even the best coup. But the aftermath of the coup is troubling, because the forces Erdogan unleashed that prevented the coup are not the forces of democracy and liberalism, nor are they garden variety conservative AKP supporters. Rather, they seem to be Islamists, and in some cases jihadists, who have taken to the streets.

That started when Erdogan issued a call on his phone using a Facetime interview to put a social media message out at the same time that the Diyanet, which is a government public office that controls all mosques, asked all imams in the country that they should use their mosques to call for prayer and also to call them to rally in support of Erdogan. So that's a kind of religious mobilization that we have never seen before in Turkey at least not since the end of the Ottoman Empire.

The call to defend Erdogan was not a call to defend democracy, par excellence, but it was a call for a religious duty to politically side with Erdogan. That mobilization triggered a massive outpour of Islamists and even jihadists to the streets. Those Islamists and jihadists have still not gone back home since. So Turkey keeps having rolling rallies and rolling calls for prayer throughout the day, which keeps both religious excitement up as well as serving as a political call, making it a politico-religious duty to defend Erdogan. This is the most dramatic development, even at least as dramatic as the coup itself.

The coup has unleashed the religious political movement on the streets, which now seems to be rising because Erdogan has been pumping it up. The question is, what happens with it next? Erdogan may instrumentalize that movement, number one, to make sure that the last outstanding pockets of resistance turn themselves in because he is still not fully in charge of the country. Or, number two, he may instrumentalize those sentiments, this religious movement on the street, to build momentum for early elections in which the AKP would get a super majority that would allow them to make changes to the constitution and make him an executive-style president. If Erdogan becomes head of state, head of government, and head of the ruling party, that will make him the most powerful person in Turkey since Turkey became a multi-party democracy in 1950.

Or a third way, whether he will use the force that he has unleashed, which is unique in Turkey in over a century. The last time there was a politico-religious movement in the streets was in the time of the Ottoman Empire when, ironically, there was a counter-coup in 1909 to take out the secular young Turks, which failed. That was the last time, during the counter-coup of 1909, that you saw a politico-religious movement in the streets. We will have to wait and see whether Erdogan instrumentalizes this movement, which we haven't seen in over one hundred years, to move forward and basically transform what was a religious counter-coup into an Islamist counter-revolution.

The chances of the third scenario seem to be smaller than the chances of the first and the second. But they have

never been higher.

TCB: What kind of backlash do you see from the opposition parties and Turks who don't affiliate with Erdogan's party?

SC: The opposition parties have stood in support of democracy, which is good. The next takeaway from this is that all Turks of all stripes stand for democracy. The media, even as the coup was unfolding, stood with democracy. Civil society organizations, opposition parties stood for democracy. This was the first time in years that all four opposition parties, which are so divided and despise each other so much that they could not even get together in a coalition government last year when elections produced a split parliament, they now get together and issued a declaration.

Anyone who is not of Islamist or jihadist ilk is choosing to stay at home. They are afraid, they are avoiding being out there because the streets are now dominated, for the first time in 107 years, by Islamists. That's a very shocking development. It will be a while before the opposition regroupes and shows itself on the street.

And if it does, it might not be pretty, because there have already been cases of the Islamists harassing people from the opposition, leftists and others, so you can see even further aggressions. That's why it's really important to see where Erdogan will take this Islamist tide next; if he will instrumentalize it and put it back into the bottle like the genie, or if he will let it out entirely.

TCB: What impact will this coup attempt have on the fight against ISIS? How will it impact U.S.-Turkish relations?

SC: The failed plot could not have come at a worse time for the U.S., because this is after the U.S. had worked with Turkey diligently to build counter-ISIS cooperation. That included talks with Turkey for two years. Turkey had finally come on board, first opening its bases to U.S. missions flying into Syria last summer, and coming on board a few months ago in the battle against ISIS in northwest Syria. Turkish-backed rebels supported by Turkish special ops pushing against ISIS in a corridor that ISIS uses for smuggling fighters into and out of Syria, Europe, and Turkey. The corridor is also a major financing lifeline for ISIS. Turkey has been pushing to take control of this corridor. So ISIS has felt the burn of Turkish pressure. In my view, that was the reason that ISIS carried out the Istanbul airport attack -- it was direct retaliation for Turkey's involvement in Syria. The attack also ironically heightened in the Turkish view the threat perception of ISIS, almost aligning it with the U.S. threat perception about ISIS.

So the coup could not have come at a worse time because now, the military is split. The government will want to conduct a full review of the military to see why this happened, who is behind it, and if there is an ideological or political split. This will mean that they will freeze, at least temporarily, cooperation with the U.S.

It's not a good sign. I can say that cooperation against ISIS will at least freeze or plateau temporarily and might even be set back because of the fact that the Turkish military is demoralized and the government will roll back or freeze some of its activities. What is more, the military will lose many of its talented officers, some of whom will be implicated in the coup. That will really cripple the military's ability to do things, to project power. It's really not good news overall.

TCB: How will this incident affect relations with the EU?

SC: Regarding EU accession, forget about it. That's basically a joke at this stage.

This has been a transactional relationship, for a while now, with Turkey helping the EU manage the refugee crisis and in return the EU turning a blind eye to Erdogan's undemocratic transgressions. Now this could be the final nail in the coffin if Turkey brings back capital punishment to execute coup planners. There cannot be accession talks with the EU if they persist with capital punishment. Turkey has not executed anyone since the 1980 coup, but there are discussions about bringing back the capital punishment. Erdogan might do that or might not, but if he does it will be over. This fantasy of EU accession will not be possible because the EU will basically say, "That's it. Goodbye."

Thank you."

TCB: What effects will this have on the Turkish economy?

SC: Probably not very positive, because Turkey's long-term stability will now be brought into question. ❖

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