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TURKEY'S COUP THAT WAS NEVER A COUP

Note: I first wrote most of the words that follow these in August, 2016, a month after the “coup” in Turkey. Between then and now, things in that splendid country have only gotten worse, and there are places in the following paragraphs where I note such developments...

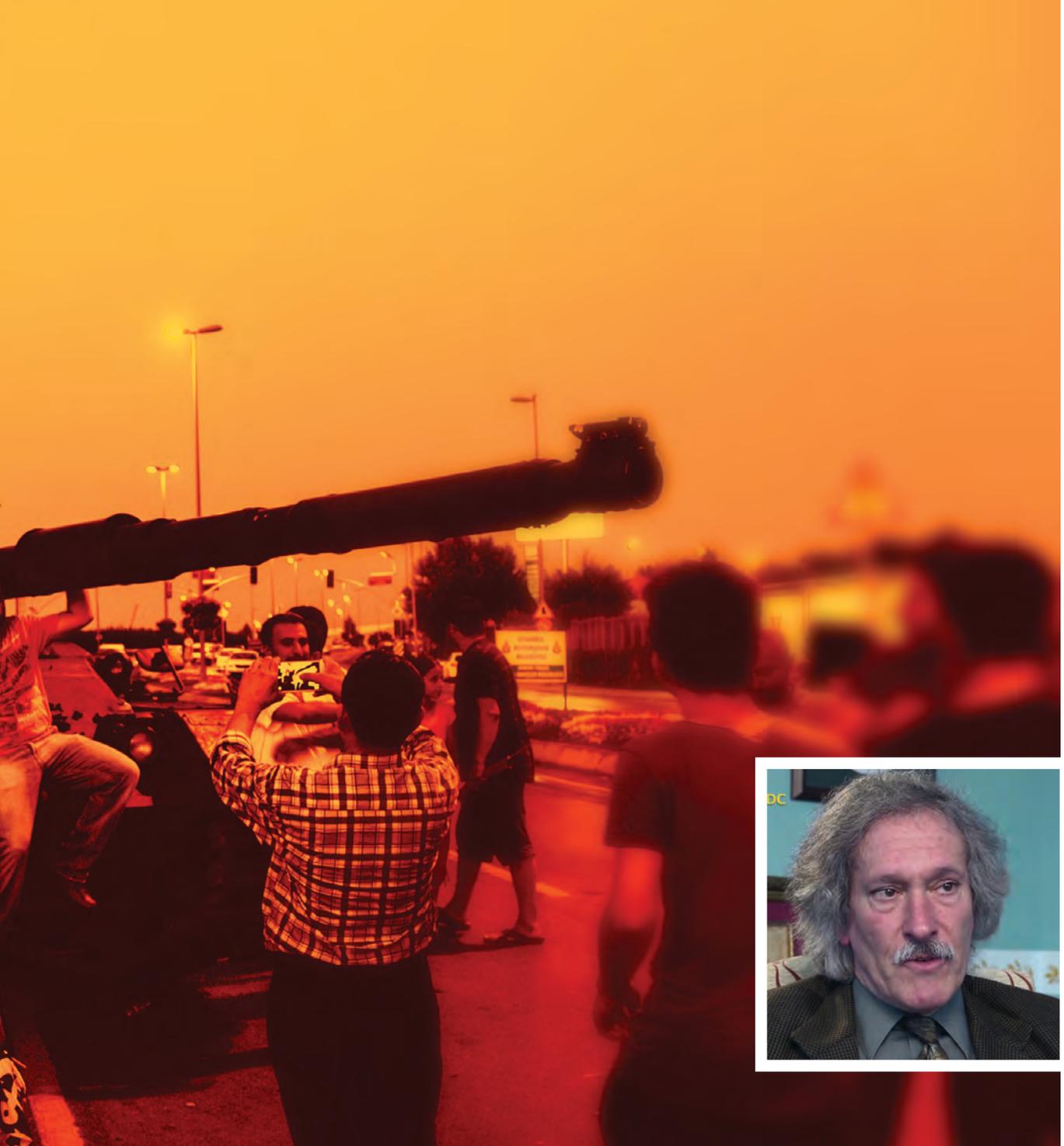
It is hard to believe that anyone who is astute—and certainly anyone who has been watching

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan degenerate into a tyrant over the last several years—could take the story he has been presenting about the recent so-called “coup” attempt seriously. It’s just as difficult to imagine any serious observer believing Fethullah Gülen was in any way, shape, or form behind the failed “coup.”

Mr. Erdoğan first came to power as Prime Minister nearly a decade and a half ago, following a very successful tenure as the mayor of Istanbul—a magnificent, ancient

city that he revitalized in many ways. He was elected after a succession of inept and/or corrupt leaders had pushed Turkey toward social and economic oblivion. He gained the support of Fethullah Gülen, who saw in Erdoğan someone who could help pull the country into the modern era while restoring its sense of an Islamic-based identity.

As Mr. Erdoğan became more comfortable and confident, he saw less and less need for the support of Mr. Gülen and his thousands, per-



haps millions, of followers. By the end of the Prime Minister's third term a clear schism had opened between the two. One of two things seems to have occurred. Either Erdoğan had been clever enough to mask his true intentions and ambitions all along—and if so, then he was engaging in a twisted version of what is referred to in Arabic as *taqiyya* – dissimulation.

Not all Muslims accept *taqiyya* even under circumstances of threat to one's survival—and few

legitimate scholars of Islamic jurisprudence would embrace the sort of dissimulation in which Erdoğan may have been engaged, although he would not be the first individual to pervert the concept. In any case, if he was dissimulating, not only was much of Turkey duped, but so was Gülen—and most of the world, including the United States government—or the power that he achieved gradually corrupted him, breeding an unslakable thirst for *more* power and an increasing dis-

taste for anyone who might stand in the way of its acquisition.

The growing split has led Erdoğan to attack the Hizmet movement in a manner reminiscent of how Hitler targeted the Jews in Germany in 1933-35. He has gone so far as to accuse the group, which he has come to see as the most serious threat to his demagoguery, of seeking to shape a “government within the government.” Among the ironies in this is the fact that Gülen has consistently, for five decades,

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advocated for social Islam, and never for an Islam to be abused in politics—on the contrary, arguing that his followers should support the government, but if it is lacking, seek to shape societal improvements through education and good works, rather than by attacking the government—which is part of why he had supported Erdoğan in the first place.

At the same time as he began leveling anti-Hizmet accusations, Erdoğan initiated a succession of acts that demonstrate how desperate he had become to assert and maintain his authority. I offer a few instances, large and small. Consider the 2013 corruption scandal—in which he spirited hundreds of millions of dollars into his own pockets, and during which his son was recorded asking his father, by telephone, where to place several million that couldn't be hidden away quickly enough. (Did the funds for the enormous, multi-million-dollar palace that he has built for himself fall from heaven?) Consider the 2014 mining disaster in Eastern Turkey, in which Erdoğan hurried to the area, proceeded not to commiserate with but to lambast the miners. When a relative of one of the deceased miners objected to the then-Prime Minister's cruel rhetoric, Erdoğan slapped the man in the face—a simple but highly symbolic act, accompanied as it was by his assertion that nobody dare criticize the national leader.

In a different arena, President Erdoğan is also known to have played a major role in the Mavi Marmara Gaza flotilla catastrophe of May, 2010, which left ten people

dead and relations between Turkey and Israel in tatters. Indeed, when he reached the end of the permissible term limit (three) for a Prime Minister, Erdoğan manipulated the political system not only to become president, but to elevate that role so that he functionally continues as Prime Minister—a page out of Vladimir Putin's book.

All along the way, while he has subverted the rights of Turkish citizens on the one hand and all but destroyed Turkey's relationship with every country with which it had decent relations in the Middle East on the other, he has very publicly tried to look the part of a pious man, praying where he can be seen, (such displays of false public piety would be labelled *shirk* in Islam) and he has with increasing vehemence continued to attack Fethullah Gülen and anyone believed to be associated with Gülen. He has abrogated Turkish law in order to shut down Hizmet's schools—secular schools, that have always followed government guidelines with regard to curricula and conduct—as well as its newspaper and other media outlets. His government has also, periodically, arrested members of the professional Turkish world who support Hizmet.

Nothing but extermination, however, will apparently satisfy Erdoğan's animosity for a man and a movement that stand for everything he is not. So along comes this “failed coup.” Except that there was apparently no leadership behind it, no organization to it, no substantial numbers who were part of it—the oddest

coup in Turkish history (a country with a history of skilled military coups, nearly one a decade until the advent of Erdoğan) or any other country's history. Surprise! Erdoğan has accused the Hizmet movement of fomenting it!

Hizmet's inspiration, Fethullah Gülen, has been living in eastern Pennsylvania since 1999. He came to the United States to deal with a heart ailment, and also because he was accused of trying to foment a coup against the Turkish government at that time. (Erdoğan was similarly accused at that time!) He was exonerated of all charges by the Turkish courts. And what is it that Gülen is all about? He believes that Turkey lost its soul when it became emphatically secular under Atatürk—but he also believes that the way forward is for a Muslim Turkey to be completely open to other faiths, (including atheism); and that a better future for a more perfect world will come through members of diverse faiths, cultures, and ethnicities engaging in dialogue. He has steadfastly asserted that one must work with and through governments, and must never try to undermine them.

Why do I assert this? I have read most of what Gülen has written and have seen the kinds of prior thinkers who have most strongly influenced him—such as Rumi, the thirteenth-century Sufi poet who, although unequivocally a Muslim, nonetheless wrote eloquently of God's embrace of all faiths; and such as Said Nursi, the early twentieth-century thinker who steadfastly refused a place in Atatürk's government, because of his belief in the need to shape a more effective social, not politically abused Islam. I have met Gülen and spoken with him. The need for the mystic to eliminate his ego in order to be filled with God could not be more evident than in his bearing and his being. I have, by now, met scores of individuals affiliated with Hizmet—and unless

they are all going to the same acting school, they invariably walk the real walk and don't just talk the talk of seeking a better world, by working across sectarian lines with not merely tolerance but love, and through a consistent stream of projects that serve others.

Simply put: these people are the opposite of everything that Erdoğan has come to stand for in his ego-ridden, tyrannical, *crush-anyone-who-disagrees-with-me* manner of being-in-the-world. The Hizmet members I know are far less likely to have had anything to do with the so-called coup attempt than he, who will do anything to expand his control and to destroy those who don't agree with him.

All roads point to this as an action shaped by Erdoğan himself to give him the excuse to arrest Hizmet members and demand Mr. Gülen's extradition from the United States. It is perfect, if we allow ourselves to be duped or blackmailed by him.

Erdoğan arrived too quickly on the scene of the "coup" with too large a list all ready, too soon, of those who needed to be arrested for his assertion to smell of anything less than Hitler's actions after the burning of the Reichstag in 1933, which was accomplished by Hitler's followers so that he could accuse his political opponents of having set the blaze and arrest them. Since July, 2016, Erdoğan

has cleaned out the army, the judiciary, the educational system, and the media, of anybody he deems oppositional—and regardless of their politics, (in other words, including secularists hostile to Mr. Gülen) the nearly 200,000 people (and still counting) stripped of jobs and/or in prison are accused of association with the Hizmet movement. As in the darkest days of Stalin's Russia, people disappear into prisons from which they do not return—or return, marked by the torture to which they have been subject—and someone safe today may suddenly find him or herself in danger tomorrow.

Erdoğan has reached beyond his own borders, feuding with Germany, insulting the EU, and providing economic assistance to organizations he claims to be fighting. Conversely, he has blackmailed poor countries from Nigeria to Pakistan where Hizmet has provided schools and hospitals, all but forcing them to eliminate the very people and institutions such countries so desperately need.

I understand why we may need to pretend—still, a year later?—that Mr. Erdoğan saved the democracy that he has steadily subverted—another famous autocrat, Augustus Caesar, claimed in his *Last Will and Testament* that he had saved the Republic of Rome as he drove the last nails into its coffin (and indeed, the Roman senate still existed—as a rubber stamp for the will of the Emperor). Turkey is, it is true, an essential ally, due to geography and our ongoing struggle with the likes of ISIS. But surely we are clever enough not to believe the tale that is—still—being told, or to succumb to Erdoğan's attempted blackmail of Mr. Gülen and his followers. The assertions of someone who emulates a quadrumvirate of Hitler, Putin, Stalin, and Augustus Caesar should hardly govern our response to this moment in history. ▲

