

Erdoğan's Fight against the Hizmet Movement &

THE DEMISE

OF TURKISH STATE RATIONALITY

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Graft probes in 2013 implicated four top ministers from Erdoğan's inner circle: (front row, from left) Egemen Bağış - Minister of EU Affairs; Muammer Güler - Interior Minister; Erdoğan Bayraktar - Environment Minister; and Zafer Çağlayan - Economy Minister.

Below. Reza Zarrab, the Iranian businessman who is in the center of Turkish graft probes. He is now under arrest in New York.



Since the corruption scandal of December 2013, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has waged an all-out war against the Gülen (or Hizmet) movement. The anti-Gülenist campaign started with the closing of private tutoring centers operated by members of the movement and was followed by the jailing and mistreatment of journalists, bureaucrats, and businessmen who were claimed to have connections with the movement. The operation has become Erdoğan's main source of legitimacy in recent years. Erdoğan has not only utilized the brute force of the state apparatus, but also the soft power of manipulation and propaganda, to suppress and criminalize the movement and tarnish its reputation around the world.

Erdoğan's strategy against the Gülen movement can be characterized by "the Diversionary Theory of War" in political science, according to which leaders generate foreign policy crises to divert the public's attention from discontent with their rule and to bolster their political fortunes through a "rally 'round the flag." By exploiting existing religious and ethnic cleavages and dubbing some civil society organizations, including the Gülen movement, as national

security threats, Erdoğan has long chosen to rule on dissonance and difference and has practiced the Diversionary Theory of War within domestic politics through the demonization of domestic actors.

A prime example of tactic in Erdoğan's policy was his classification of the Gülen movement as a terrorist organization. By equating the movement with radical terrorist organizations such as ISIS [1], he hoped to shatter and alter the favorable global perception of the movement and its activities.

However, this intense psychological and rhetorical warfare did not serve any purpose but to harm the country's credibility abroad, as the categorization of the movement as a terrorist organization was found to be irrational and inconsistent with Erdoğan's former attitudes toward it. His fight against the movement has been perceived as a continuation of his power games and as an indication of his increasing authoritarianism in the country [2].

Erdoğan's diversionary political tactics are also reflected in his portrayal of foreign actors. For example, in order to appeal to his voter base, the conservative and nationalist masses within Turkey, he recently claimed that a new type of crusade has started between Christian Europe and the



Islamic Middle East, between the cross and the crescent [3]. This is both anachronistic and antagonistic that does nothing but consolidate his power through the fictitious creation of an enemy. It undermines the dialogue and cooperation between the EU and Turkey, and between the East and the West in general.

Which Erdoğan is the real Erdoğan? Is it the one expressing this antagonizing and polarizing worldview or the one who founded the alliance of civilizations in 2005, in an effort to defuse the tensions between the Western and Islamic worlds? The answer is neither, for there are various types of Erdoğans, each fitting a different situation. For instance, the Erdoğan of 2005 was a reformist which gained him the support of Liberals and EU advocates. This support translated into electoral victories and prestige abroad. Whereas the Erdoğan of the 2010s has been extremely concerned and worried about his authority and charisma, in part due to the corruption scandals and newly emerged foreign policy issues. The Erdoğan of the 2010s has been adamant and determined to go back to the classical strategy of divide-and-rule.

His rhetoric over the last half decade is a sign of this shift in political stratagems. His language is telling: *“The country is in an all-out war and surrounded by internal and external enemies”*; *“the world is on the verge of a new series of crusades”*; *“the Gülen Movement is the fifth column and the extension of such dark forces that are striving to undermine the state and fabric of Turkish society.”* Erdoğan is the epitome of Machiavelli’s ideal leader as he is, at most, concerned with his own political career and personal image rather than the image of the country in the international arena. He may appear to be subscribing to a Manichean world-



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view where history is perceived as a struggle between good and evil, between the divine and evil forces, but this is a sleight of hand. His nod to this Manichean view of the world is predicated upon his characterization of events, actors, and personalities as either favorable or unfavorable to his political interests. The good is what serves his political interests and the bad is what risks and dooms his political fortunes, a moral approach

that is neither embedded in religious nor secular understandings of morality.

Even though, Erdoğan has been relatively successful delegitimizing and suppressing the Gülen movement within Turkey by sidelining and subjugating the judiciary and state institutions, the dramatic shift in his attitudes towards the movement has confused the international community [4]. Erdoğan’s last visit to



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the United States on May 16, 2017, when he came hoping the U.S. would declare the Gülen movement a terrorist organization, was even more surprising in that regard. His hopes were in vain, however, as President Trump consciously avoided characterizing the organization and its activities as detrimental to American society. This was indicative of the fact that President Erdoğan was having a hard time justifying his enmity towards the movement to others and was losing credibility in the eyes of international actors.

Despite all of this, why does Erdoğan adamantly persist in his global psychological warfare against the movement? The answer is quite simple. He wants neither to win nor lose this psychological battle, but rather wants the Turkish public to believe that he is in an all-out war against the enemies of the state, embodied by the Gülen movement in the form of a so-called parallel state. What Erdoğan means by “the protection of the state” is not the protection of democracy, nor the protection of rule of law, nor the protection of the separation of powers; rather,

he means the protection of his firm monopoly on power.

This manufacturing of pseudo-domestic and foreign enemies, and the promotion of a political culture saturated by existential threat narratives, has disillusioned the public about the meaning of elections in the country. Over the last five years, the public has constantly been under the impression that they were not making a choice between different political parties in the elections, but rather between whether the country would maintain its existence – by providing Erdoğan with another election victory – or submit itself to chaos and destruction. This way of framing the elections, coupled with intense pro-government propaganda and the banning of many liberal and critical newspapers, media outlets, and social media platforms such as Twitter, and even Wikipedia, has left almost no room for political dissent, resistance, and advocacy on the part of civil society.

In a nutshell, Erdoğan's divisive political rhetoric and his attempts to foster anti-Gülenist sentiments have perfectly served his own political interests within the country, but they have not served the country's interests in the international arena, as they raise serious doubts about the credibility and rationality of the state as embodied in Erdoğan's personality. ▲

Notes

1. <http://www.newsweek.com/Erdoğan-says-Gülen-kurds-and-isis-are-preparing-invasion-turkey-487120>
2. <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/articles/2017-02-01/turkeys-recep-tayyip-Erdoğan-moves-aggressively-against-dissent>
3. <http://www.dw.com/en/Erdoğan-accuses-eu-of-crusade-against-islam/a-37979126>; <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/turkey-eu-headscarf-ban-court-justice-ruling-erdogan-clash-islam-christianity-cross-crescent-a7633276.html>
4. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-security-germany-idUSKBN16POLQ>