



# WHAT REALLY HAPPENED IN TURKEY ON JULY 15, 2016?

## An Alternative to the Turkish Government Narrative

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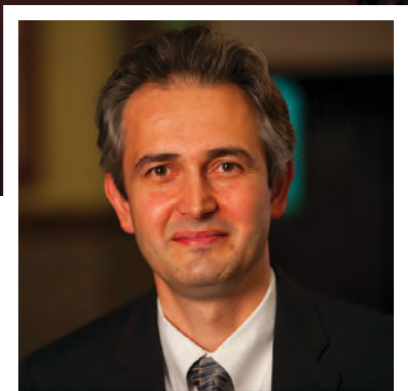
**O**n July 15, 2016, Turkey experienced a horrific event: an unsuccessful military coup. But a year after the tragedy, questions about what really happened remain unanswered. What we know for sure is that the failed coup provided President Erdoğan with an excellent excuse to consolidate his power: despite widespread claims of voter fraud, he secured a narrow victory in an April 2017 referendum – which was conducted under state of emergency conditions – to amend the constitution and open his path to becoming the executive president of Turkey in 2019. This article highlights the Turkish government’s specious claims about the attempted coup and its alleged planners and provides a counter-narrative.

### Erdoğan’s claim and responses by Western governments and intelligence services

With the coup attempt ongoing, Erdoğan claimed, on national TV, that Fethullah Gülen, a retired preacher and a vocal Erdoğan critic, was the coup’s mastermind. Gülen condemned the attempt while it was in progress and denied any involvement. He challenged the Erdoğan government to allow for an international investigation into the event. He pledged to abide by its ruling. Erdoğan did not respond to this call.

Western governments and observers have not accepted Erdoğan’s narrative of July 15<sup>th</sup>, either. In particular:

- Former U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry said that the Turkish government, as part of the extradition process, must link



Gülen to the incident with evidence that withstands scrutiny in an American court. As of this writing, approximately one year after the incident, the Turkish Government has not submitted evidence that meets this criterion.

- James Clapper, former director of U.S. National Intelligence, said Gülen’s involvement in the coup didn’t pass the “smell test” of credibility.
- The United State House Intelligence Committee chairman Devin Nunes told Fox News that it was “hard to believe” that the U.S.-based Turkish cleric was behind the attempt.

- When asked by *Der Spiegel* whether Gülen was behind the coup, Bruno Kahl, Head of Germany's BDN Foreign Intelligence Agency, responded, "Turkey has tried to convince us of that at every level but so far it has not succeeded."
- The European Union Intelligence Center INTCEN's report on the incident contradicted the Turkish government's claim that Fethullah Gülen was behind the plot. The report concluded that the coup was mounted by a range of Mr. Erdoğan's opponents. The Service found it unlikely that Gülen himself played a role in the attempt, according to the *Times of London*. It also determined Erdoğan's purges were planned well before the incident.
- *German Focus magazine* reported in their July 2016 issue that British signals intelligence agency GCHQ intercepted communication between top Erdoğan brass about half an hour after shooting started that the coup would be blamed on Gülen and purges would start the next day.
- A report by the Foreign Affairs Committee of the British Parliament on UK-Turkish relations stated that the "UK government does not have any evidence that U.S.-based cleric Fethullah Gülen organized Turkey's July coup attempt." The report went on to say:

Given the brutality of the events of 15 July, the severity of the charges made against the Gülenists, and the scale of the purges of perceived Gülenists that has been justified on this basis, there is a relative lack of hard, publicly-available evidence to prove that the Gülenists as an organisation were responsible for

the coup attempt in Turkey. While there is evidence to indicate that some individual Gülenists were involved, it is mostly anecdotal or circumstantial, sometimes premised on information from confessions or informants, and is—so far—inconclusive in relation to the organisation as a whole or its leadership.

#### Why the Turkish government's narrative was not found credible by the West

- The day after the coup attempt, the Turkish government began purging thousands of members of not just the military, but also the judiciary. Western observers noted that it would be impossible for the government to identify those responsible for the incident on such short notice.
- The lack of concrete evidence linking Gülen to the incident. The few testimonies extracted from officers who "confessed" their links to the Hizmet movement were not found credible because, ironically, pro-government media channels aired photos of those same officers showing clear signs of torture.
- Finally, Erdoğan's own narrative is full of contradictions. Erdoğan claimed that he or his intelligence service knew nothing about the preparations for a military coup attempt up until the day of July 15. Western observers found it inconceivable that an event of this magnitude, which would require weeks if not months of preparation, could be orchestrated from another continent and not be discovered by Turkish Intelligence and a host of other intelligence agencies. Erdoğan claimed to have learned about the event not from his intelligence service, but from his brother-in-law. Yet, he did not

dismiss the head of the intelligence service who, according to his own narrative, not only failed to detect the preparations for the incident, also failed to inform or protect the president after receiving a tip from an informant on the afternoon of July 15. Similarly, the chief of general staff was not dismissed despite failing to stop the incident after having learned about it several hours in advance.

Some observers also noted the following two reasons why Gülen organizing such an attempt would be implausible and irrational:

Starting in the early 1990s, Hizmet movement participants have set up schools, hospitals, medical clinics, and other civic institutions around the world. A coup attempt masterminded by Gülen, if successful, would send an alarming message to world leaders and spell the end of Hizmet around the world.

The top brass of the Turkish military consists mostly of Kemalists, or those sympathetic to the ideology of the founder of Turkish Republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. There has never been a credible allegation that the top brass had any Gülen sympathizers. In fact, none of the top brass, including the chief of general staff, second chief, force commanders or army corps commanders has been accused of being a Gülen sympathizer. In an information age, it is impossible for lower level officers to stage a coup without the knowledge and approval of the top brass. If they did, there would be strong reaction from within the military itself. On the night of the coup, there was very little reaction from within the military itself.

Adding to suspicions about the government's narrative was the Erdoğan government's apparent unwillingness to fully investigate the incident. The parliamentary commission was delayed because

the ruling AKP party delayed appointing members to the commission. Once formed, the commission, dominated by AKP members, refused to call key witnesses for testimony. Mithat Sancar, an opposition member of the commission, said the following:

The ruling AKP did not form this commission to illuminate the coup attempt. They constructed a coup narrative... They were expecting (this commission to produce) a work that would support this narrative.

Only information or rumors that support the government narrative have been allowed to be disseminated, and all other information has been censored by government authorities and a compliant media. Scores of lawyers have been arrested and attorney-client privilege has been revoked under a state of emergency, leaving accused individuals unable to defend themselves through due process.

Below we provide a narrative based on the information available from public sources and received in personal communications with the lawyers, relatives, or friends of individuals accused by the Turkish government. The author of this document is not in a position to claim that the following is what happened, but the alternative scenario provided here answers more questions than the government narrative, and therefore deserves to be considered as part of an independent investigation.

#### Possible narratives about July 15, 2016

We will discuss two narratives here due to space limitations:

##### *The Broad Coalition Narrative*

The prevalent view among Turkey observers in Europe and the U.S. is the following: A broad coalition of military officers, from different ideological backgrounds, had discussed an intervention against



*Kemal Kilicdaroglu, chairman of main opposition party CHP:*

"The real coup was done on July 20, after the controlled coup of July 15<sup>th</sup> was over. Nobody should forget July 20<sup>th</sup>. This is the date when the executive branch got the approval for the state of emergency from the parliament. Now, the real putschists of July 20 want to constitutionalize the current situation."

the Erdoğan government. They believed Erdoğan undermined Turkey's democratic institutions and secularism. This coalition included but was not limited to officers who feared being purged at the August meeting of the Military Supreme Council. An informant alerted Turkish Intelligence of the plot on the afternoon of July 15, forcing some officers to start the action early. However, many officers gave up and refrained from participating, and hence the action of the remaining officers was doomed to failure.

##### **The Collusion Narrative**

The collusion narrative is a variation of the broad coalition narra-

tive. This theory also recognizes the presence of strong anti-Erdoğan sentiment within the military, and discussion of an intervention, but posits that an ultra-nationalist faction associated with the Eurasian-oriented Homeland Party (Vatan) colluded with Erdoğan and the Turkish intelligence to stage a pre-emptive coup on July 15. The collusion narrative suggests that the incident on July 15 was a mobilization of a very small portion of the military, a weak and compromised action designed to fail.

According to this narrative, the attempted coup was, borrowing the language of a political commentator, "A genuine plan that was compromised and weakened, and allowed by President Erdoğan to play out in order to crush it and achieve his strategic goals."

The so-called "Eurasianist clique" within the Turkish military<sup>1</sup> was described in a 2003 leaked cable by U.S. Embassy in Ankara as pursuing Eurasianism as an alternative to the U.S. "without understanding the Russia-dominated nature of the 'Eurasia' concept". In 2003, the pro-U.S. and pro-NATO group called the "Atlanticists" were seen as losing influence within the Turkish General Staff.

What happened on July 15<sup>th</sup> does not exhibit the pattern of a coup planned by the military, but rather one planned by the intelligence service where military officers unwittingly played a crucial role. From their testimonies, these officers were mobilized under the pretense of participation in a regular exercise, educational exercise, "unconventional exercise," operation to protect general staff headquarters, or protection of a military or civilian compound from a terrorist attack. It is also important to note here that there is not a single officer who states in his testimony that he acted by the directives of a civilian. This is worth not-

ing, for the government narrative claims that officers associated with Gülen staged the coup with directives from civilians affiliated with Gülen.

Other indicators also substantiate the argument that the coup attempt was premeditated to provoke public outrage and pave the way for Erdoğan's autocracy. For instance, evidence including witness testimonies indicated that many civilian deaths happened not in the hands of soldiers, as Erdoğan's media claimed, but by some paramilitaries allegedly connected to SADAT, a defense consulting company, which is becoming "Erdoğan's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps."<sup>2</sup> Erol Olçok and his son were killed on the night of the coup, and Olçok's wife is telling, based on eye-witnesses, that they were killed by snipers.<sup>3</sup>

Bombing of the Parliament has also left a lot of questions. The images of the parliament building show a much less damage than F16 fighter bomb would leave behind; they are more like a C4 explosion from *inside*, not from *above*.<sup>4</sup>

### Contradictions in the Erdoğan camp

The statements by President Erdoğan and his allies, including Hakan Fidan, the director of National Intelligence Service (MIT) and the chief of general staff, include many contradictions and leave many important questions unanswered.

Although Erdoğan said he learned about the coup on the night of the coup from his brother-in-law, Hüseyin Gürler, a non-commissioned officer, says in his testimony that they informed the President on June 11, 2016.<sup>5</sup>

Erdoğan's refusal to fire, or even investigate, his intelligence chief and military chief despite their failure to inform or protect him remains a puzzle.

Erdoğan's claim that he was first informed about the event by

his brother-in-law around 9:30 pm and that he could not reach his intelligence chief were contradicted by Chief of General Staff Akar. In his written statement to the parliamentary investigation committee, Akar stated that Intelligence Chief Fidan called and spoke with the head of Erdoğan's guard while in his presence before 8:30 pm. *Hürriyet* columnist Ertuğrul Özkök wrote on July 18, 2017, that Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım said in an interview with Fikret Bila that he called Director Fidan at around 10:30 - 11 pm that night, and Mr. Fidan did not say anything to him nor to President Erdoğan about the coup attempt.

Erdoğan claimed that his airplane was assaulted by pro-coup fighter jets but protected by pro-government jets. The Greek Air Force refuted Erdoğan's claims stating that no such air fight occurred.

On the afternoon of Friday, July 15, a captain referred to as O.K. informed MIT (National Intelligence Organization) headquarters that an attack on the headquarters was planned, with the goal of capturing MIT Chief Fidan. This officer was never identified publicly, ostensibly to protect him, and he was later discharged from the military, rather than given a medal of honor. He was later re-admitted to the military and given a position at MIT.

MIT Chief Fidan sent his deputy to the Office of General Staff at 4 pm and later met with the Military Chief Gen. Akar at 6 pm. According to the accounts of President Erdoğan and PM Yıldırım, Fidan did not inform or protect the president or the prime minister. In fact, they claimed that they could not communicate with Fidan until 10 pm.

Fidan's account of the events is full of puzzles and contradictions. According to Gen. Akar's testimony, Fidan called Erdoğan's guards and asked them if they were pre-



*Selahattin Demirtaş, the co-chair of HDP, the second largest opposition party, in a speech at Turkish parliament stated that Erdoğan knew about the coup attempt and foiled it before it started and his men added some dramatic elements (such as bombing the parliament) so that Erdoğan can take full political advantage of the incident. Demirtaş also claimed that many in the parliament are aware of this but afraid to speak publicly. Demirtaş was arrested in February 2017 under terrorism charges.*

pared for an attack, without specifying the nature or the scale of the attack and without asking to speak with President Erdoğan. Instead of staying with Gen. Akar to investigate and take precautions against a possible coup, Fidan left the general staff headquarters to attend pre-arranged meetings.

Gen. Umit Dundar, commander of the 1<sup>st</sup> army in Istanbul, pledged allegiance to Erdoğan during the early hours of the attempt, accord-

“(On whether Gülen was behind the coup) Turkey has tried to convince us on a number of different levels. But they haven’t yet been successful. The Gülen movement is a civilian association for religious and secular education. For years, it was a collection of tutoring centers and training facilities that worked together with Erdoğan.”

*Der Spiegel interview with Bruno Kahl, German Intelligence Chief*

ing to Berat Albayrak, Erdoğan’s son-in-law. It is unlikely that the military leadership would consider committing to a coup without the participation of the commander of the 1<sup>st</sup> army. It is possible, therefore that Dundar earlier gave the impression that he was in favor of a coup and misled some officers while intending to side with Erdoğan.

Military units in Istanbul closed access to the Bosphorus Bridge around 8 pm. It was later revealed that these units were under the impression that they were participating in an exercise. Gen. Dundar did nothing to stop the bridge closure despite the fact that the bridge lies in the area of the 1<sup>st</sup> army.

Gen. Hulusi Akar, Chief of General Staff, did not go along with the demands of the pro-coup officers. However, some of his actions raise questions. Could top level commanders hold meetings about a military coup without his knowledge and approval? Was he threatened by Erdoğan to play along with his plan? Why did he

not protect himself or the general staff headquarters, or inform Erdoğan? Why did he not take more effective actions between 4 pm, when he was first informed by MIT Chief Fidan, and 9 pm, when he was reportedly taken hostage?

Gen. Akar was also criticized for not recalling force commanders, who were attending wedding ceremonies, to return to their headquarters and resume command of their forces. Despite the early information, these commanders did not take precautions to protect themselves and were later taken hostage. Their self-reported actions to try to stop the coup attempt were meager and raise many questions.

Gen. Akın Ozturk, the former commander of the Air Force, was charged with being the military leader of the coup by the government. However, the Office of the Chief of the General Staff issued a message describing him as a hero who tried to stop the pro-coup officers and prevent bloodshed. This message was later removed, but is available on other sites. He was charged nevertheless, then arrested and jailed.

Selahattin Demirtas, the co-chair of the *HDP, the second largest opposition party*, in a speech before the Turkish parliament, stated that Erdoğan knew about the coup attempt and foiled it before it started and his men added some dramatic elements (such as bombing the parliament) allowing Erdoğan to take full political advantage of the incident. Demirtas also claimed that many in the parliament were aware of this but afraid to speak publicly. Demirtas was arrested in February 2017 under terrorism charges.

**Responses to the government’s “evidence” against Gülen**

The Erdoğan government’s alleged “evidence” implicating Gülen and his sympathizers fails to convince.

The affiliation of the three police officers, who allegedly participated in the attempt alongside soldiers, with the Hizmet Movement is questionable. These officers were not among the thousands of police officers purged by the Erdoğan government prior to July 15. In any case, if Erdoğan’s claims of Gülen having thousands of sympathizers within the police force is true, it doesn’t make sense that only three would participate in the attempt.

The confessions of affiliation with Gülen by officers like Levent Turkkan and General Sağır were taken under duress. These confessions are not reliable, as they later said they were tortured for those confessions.

Both Gülen and Gen. Hakan Evrim, who allegedly made the offer for Akar to speak with Gülen, denied this claim. Akar was not called to give testimony to the parliamentary commission about this and other allegations involving him. He did not address this issue in his written responses to the commission.

The government claimed that Adil Oksuz, who is a professor of Theology at Sakarya University, was the organizer of the air force officers affiliated with Gülen. Besides the fact that it is impossible to stage a military coup with the air force alone, this allegation has many problems. The government claimed that Adil Oksuz was arrested near the Akinci Air Base, the alleged headquarters of the attempt. According to an interview given by Adil Oksuz’s family, when he met with them before his disappearance, Oksuz claimed that he was brought to the base against his will after being detained at a police checkpoint. Despite the alleged presence of an intelligence service file on him, he was deliberately let free by two judges on July 16 and at a mandatory report at the courthouse on July 18. He then traveled on a commercial flight to Istanbul,

going through airport security checkpoints with his own ID, and then disappeared after meeting his family. It appears that the government wanted Oksuz to disappear so that the claims against him and the alleged link to Gülen could be circulated without challenge.

Gülen acknowledged that around 30 years ago, when Oksuz was a student, he was part of a study circle within the movement. “Adil Oksuz, at one time, I think when he was studying at school, he became part of our study circle,” he replied.

But while he acknowledged the Turkish government’s account that Oksuz had visited the Golden Generation Retreat and Recreation Center before the July 2016 coup bid, Gülen dismissed allegations that the visit constituted the smoking gun in the coup investigation. “A few years ago, he [Oksuz] came here once. I later saw in the media this picture of his child with me. This is something hundreds of people do. From taking a picture to making that kind of connection would be jumping to conclusions.”<sup>6</sup>

### Strategic goals achieved by Erdoğan thanks to the coup attempt

The July 15<sup>th</sup> incident gave Erdoğan an excellent excuse to pursue his goal of consolidating his power.

- The morning after the coup attempt, a huge purge started, with over 2,700 members of the judiciary and over 120,000 government employees sacked, 8,000 military officers dismissed, including 150 NATO officers.
- None of the army or army corps commanders have been accused of being Gülen sympathizers. However, Gen. Adem Huduti, commander of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army, was known as a Kemalist/secularist commander, and Gen. Erdal Ozturk, commander of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Army Corps, was also

known as a Kemalist/secularist commander. Both were arrested. What these commanders had in common – along with Gen. Semih Terzi, commander of Special Forces’ 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade, who was killed by an inferior officer – was their strong opposition to the Turkish military’s incursion into Syria. Shortly following the coup attempt, in August 2016, the Turkish military began an operation in Syria.

- Erdoğan’s bid for an executive presidency gained momentum. In a constitutional referendum in April 2017, Erdoğan narrowly secured the path to his executive presidency.

### Concluding remarks

On July 15, 2016, a horrific and an unprecedented incident happened in Turkey. It cost the lives of hundreds of soldiers and civilians, and was crushed primarily by the efforts of the police force and civilians. Many aspects of the incident baffled observers, and many unanswered questions remain. As shown in this article, the actions of many of the primary actors don’t make sense if the government’s narrative is to be accepted. However, if an alternative narrative is considered, these actions make sense and the questions are answered. Based on many indicators listed above one highly likely narrative suggests it was a trap from the very beginning; it was planned and directed by MIT and its affiliates in the army with an impression as if it was a collective action in the chain of command. Officers who had already been profiled as oppositional were called in – they only obeyed orders without realizing it was a trap.

At this point there is not enough evidence to fully support these alternative narratives. This discussion is not intended as an accusation, but rather as a call for an independent investigation, full of



“... none of us believes that Gülen was behind the coup. It is convenient for Erdoğan to blame his principal opponent because it will facilitate the arrests of any and all opponents not linked to the actual coup by claiming that they are Gülenists.”

*Philip Giraldi, a former CIA officer, executive director of the Council for the National Interest.*

international experts, to ensure independence from the political pressures in Turkey. For such an investigation to accomplish its task, the Turkish government should also guarantee the safety of accused military officers and their families so that the officers can give their testimonies without fear of reprisal by the government. ▲

### Notes

1. <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/07/13/turkeys-post-coup-purge-and-erdogans-private-army-sadat-perincek-gulen/>
2. <http://www.newsweek.com/michael-rubin-turkey-headed-bloodbath-515787>
3. <http://www.aktifhaber11.com/15-temmuz/erol-olcok-nasil-vuruldu-sorulari-h100746.html>
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