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THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE GÜLENISTS:

THE ROLE OF THE GÜLEN MOVEMENT IN TURKEY'S COUP ATTEMPT

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SUMMARY

- According to the Turkish government, the Gülenist movement is at the heart of the failed coup attempt of 15 July. Fethullah Gülen, the movement's leader is a former ally of the Turkish president and one of the country's most powerful and influential forces.
- With the help of the Turkish government, the Gülen movement successfully created a deep state within the Turkish bureaucracy and persecuted political enemies in show trials in 2008-2013.
- The movement is opaque and secretive in the state bureaucracy. There is enough evidence linking followers of Gülen to the coup but evidence pointing to Fethullah Gülen himself remains scant.
- Turkey's extradition request for Fethullah Gülen will continue to create a turbulence in Turkey's relationship with Washington. For the US, this is a legal matter; for Ankara, a prerequisite for partnership.
- The Turkish government has embarked on a massive purge to "clean the state", involving tens of thousands of state employees, banks, and companies. In its quest to protect Turkish democracy by purging Gülenists, the Turkish government needs to make sure it does not destroy the frail democracy it is trying to save.

On 19 May 2009, tens of thousands of Turkish citizens filled the streets of Istanbul, ostensibly for the funeral of Türkan Saylan, Turkey's leading advocate for women's education. In fact, Saylan's funeral was really a massive protest rally against both the government and one man that many Turks blame for persecuting Saylan in her final days – Fethullah Gülen.

In 2011, it was thousands of fans of Fenerbahçe, the crown jewel of Turkish soccer and a bastion of secularism, who rocked the stadium with slogans against Gülen, who they held responsible for the imprisonment of the club's chairman on charges of match-fixing.

Gülen was virtually unknown in the West at this point, despite living in exile in the Poconos Mountains of rural Pennsylvania. But in Turkey he was already both revered and hated as the spiritual leader of an opaque Islamist organisation.

Gülen's movement was known to have millions of followers and tens of thousands of members within the state bureaucracy. But no one was sure who they were. It was rumoured to have woven its supporters deep into the fabric of key institutions, including the police, the intelligence agencies, and the judiciary. But no one could pinpoint where its sympathisers were and how they worked. It was difficult to separate fact from fiction – myth from fear. In the eyes of many Turkish citizens, Gülen's followers seemed able to tap the phones of even the most powerful people in Turkey and launch investigations and prosecutions on flimsy evidence according to whim. But no one could identify its leaders or trace their orders.

For many years, this sect was aligned with the ruling pro-Islamist AK party (AKP) and with then-Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The Gülenists helped the government rid the state institutions and the military of the Kemalists and secularists who had run a “deep state” within Turkey for many years – at times resorting to mind-boggling conspiracies and show trials with fabricated evidence. Sure enough, the Kemalist “deep state” had set the boundaries on what political reforms were acceptable and overthrown civilian governments that failed to comply. Together, the Gülenists and the AKP went a long way towards eliminating this threat. But, in time, the Gülenists became AKP’s version of the “deep state”.

Beginning in 2012, they started to fall out with each other. The conservative AKP government and the Gülenists began to engage in a silent “civil war”, although much of their conflict remained somewhat hidden from public view.

Their struggle, however, burst onto the international scene with the dramatic attempt to overthrow the Turkish government on 15 July. The government instantly blamed the Gülenists, began a massive purge of the state apparatus, with tens of thousands removed from their jobs with no recourse to appeal, and loudly demanded Gülen’s extradition from the United States.

But even as the drama of Turkey’s Islamist “civil war” became violent and took to the streets of Istanbul, the West remained broadly ignorant of just who the Gülenists are and what role they have played in Turkey’s recent history. Who is Fethullah Gülen, and how did a softly spoken 75-year-old man in Pennsylvania amass such power? What is a Gülenist, and how do we know one when we see one? What role does their spiritual leader play in the movement? And, perhaps most importantly, what was its role in the failed effort to overthrow the Turkish government?

A preacher and an organisation man

Fethullah Gülen was born in Erzurum, in eastern Anatolia, in 1941. He was a pupil and a follower of Said-i Nursi, a Kurd and Sufi Islamist. Nursi’s teachings and modern-day interpretation of Islam inspired millions of Turks and Kurds across Anatolia who felt spiritually disposed during the hard-line secularist policies of the early republican era.

Sufi orders and religious sects were banned by Turkey’s founder Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in 1925 and deemed a threat to the regime by subsequent governments until the AKP period. Fethullah Gülen and other orders of the Nur movement therefore survived over decades by establishing underground networks and trying to get their followers to enter the government service so as to be able to ward off reprisals from authorities. Like most religious orders in Turkey, Gülenists revered the Turkish state. In the tradition of religious orders in republican Turkey, “the state” was both the nemesis and the ultimate obsession.

As a preacher, Gülen was charismatic and inspirational, though by no means as moderate as he later became. Although he was born in eastern Turkey, it was in western Turkey in the late 1970s that Gülen worked as an imam (a government job) and built his network. When he was in the east, he had established local chapters for the Association for Fighting Communism. Later, in the west of the country, people were drawn to his message of a pious nationalist society.

Of all the religious groups at the time, Gülen’s network stood out for its organisational capability and ability to inspire thousands of small-sized Anatolian businessmen to establish schools. Education, albeit non-religious education, was one of the core activities of the Gülen network from the start. In the 1970s and 1980s, Gülen stood apart from the more revolutionary political Islamists in Turkey who were inspired by the Iranian revolution and talked of changing the system of governance.

He was chiefly a Turkish nationalist and not enamoured of the resurgent Islamic movements in the Arab world or the regime in Iran. Instead, Gülen was interested in amassing power within the existing Turkish state mechanism and creating a young group of elites, called the “golden generation”, who would run Turkey in future decades.

The Gülen movement had both a public and clandestine nature. The public face was made up of schools, foundations, publishing houses, corporations (such as Kaynak Holding, a conglomerate of companies from publishing to construction, and the Feza Media Group, which publishes the *Zaman* and *Today’s Zaman* newspapers), and since the 2000s, universities, NGOs, think-tanks, websites, television networks, businessmen’s associations (such as TUSKON), more newspapers, and unions.

At the height of its power in 2012, the Gülen movement was an economic powerhouse –made up of contributions from thousands of small to medium-sized businessmen from Anatolia, a leading Islamic bank (Bank Asya), a media holding, and several corporations – all with a net worth of \$15–\$25 billion, according to various sources.¹

The global expansion and the increase in economic power came after Gülen’s move to the United States in 1998, and over a decade the movement was able to boast of having over 1,000 “Turkish schools” spread across 170 countries from the United States to Bangladesh to Uganda.² The schools were funded by donations from Turkey and usually referred to as “Turkish schools” even though they often provided top-quality education in developing countries for locals and children of the elite. Wherever Muslims lived, Gülenists and Gülen schools existed – with the exception of Saudi Arabia

¹ Estimates of the net worth of the movement vary from source to source. Jane’s Defence Weekly has estimated it to be around \$25 billion. See Burhan Gurdogan, “Religious movements in Turkey”, *OpenDemocracy*, 20 December 2010, available at <https://www.opendemocracy.net/burhan-gurdogan/religious-movements-in-turkey>.

² The figure is cited in Gülenist publications and newspapers, and by the Turkish president. See, for example, “Ankara bids to prevent use of ‘Turkish school’ in title of foreign Gülen-linked schools” *Hürriyet Daily News*, 8 September 2016, available at <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/Default.aspx?pageID=238&nID=103729&NewsCatID=341>.

and Iran, which never allowed them. They were the modern-day version of Protestant missionaries who heeded a call for public duty to spread the movement's power and Turkey's influence simultaneously.

Abroad, the Gülenists were often working hand-in-glove with the Turkish government. Starting from 2010, Turkish diplomats were instructed to help Gülen schools in their respective countries. The AKP's foreign policy initiative of "Africa expansion" in 2011 and 2012 was largely coordinated with Gülenists. The movement would open schools in various African capitals, Turkish Airlines would start direct flights, and the foreign ministry would open embassies stocked with newly recruited Gülenists to the foreign service.

Charter schools in America

In the US alone, the movement claims to have 120 charter schools in 26 states, from Texas to New Jersey,³ and established foundations, cultural organisations, and think-tanks. Not having its own network overseas, and suspicious of the Turkish establishment, the AKP government outsourced its lobbying efforts on Capitol Hill and in the European Union to the Gülen network during 2010–2013. A minister once revealed to me: "When I visit Brussels, it is much easier to call them and ask TUSKON [Gülenist business association] to organise my meetings, rather than going through the hassle of the Turkish foreign ministry."

Hundreds of think-tankers, congressional staffers, and several members of the US Congress visited Turkey on tours organised by such Gülen outfits as Rumi Forum. The group's pro-Western views and moderate form of Islam were particularly attractive in the post-9/11 atmosphere. A congressman who came to Istanbul in 2012 on such a tour did not know much about the movement (or the Gülenist-led trials where dozens of journalists were behind bars) but described the group to me in glowing terms as "the anti-mullahs".

Gülen-related entities and individuals were also able to do fundraising at the local level, since many had become naturalised residents of the US, and could make contributions to election campaigns in Texas, New Jersey and, New York at a national level.

Several FBI inquiries into Gülen-linked schools in the US have not uncovered traces of Islamic indoctrination, as the schools are largely secular and claim to have no apparent affiliation with Gülen himself – who explains that he simply inspires followers to start or donate to schools and does not run them himself. "Studying physics, mathematics, and chemistry is worshipping Allah", Gülen has preached in his sermons, in line with the Turkish Islamist tradition and the teachings of his mentor Said-i Nursi.

3 Scott Beauchamp, "120 American Charter Schools and One Secretive Turkish Cleric", the *Atlantic*, 12 August 2014, available at <http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2014/08/120-american-charter-schools-and-one-secretive-turkish-cleric/375923/> (hereafter, Beauchamp, "120 American Charter Schools").

There were, however, issues with legal and financial transparency – ranging from the 10 percent voluntary donation Turkish employees are encouraged to contribute to the movement (called *himmət*),⁴ to the tendency to hire Turkish immigrant teachers on H1-B visas.⁵ In Ohio, the investigators noted that the school's money – public funds since these are charter schools – was donated to Gülen-affiliated organisations and used to bring teachers over to the US from Turkey.⁶ In Texas, 33 Gülen-affiliated charter schools were reprimanded for using \$100 million of taxpayers' funds, the *New York Times* reported in 2011, and for giving \$50 million to Gülen-connected contractors, even though others had lower bids.⁷ An audit in Georgia produced similar findings.

All in all, the movement was running the largest charter-school network in the US and, while run by Turks, had non-Turkish students in most states. The schools denied any direct affiliation with Gülen and performed exceedingly well in some states.

An opaque brotherhood

There was a darker side to all of these good works – and that wasn't the small-scale irregularities or favouritism in US-based charter schools. The problem was the extent to which it had infiltrated the state, enabling it to orchestrate conspiracies to get rid of political enemies. The movement's inner workings and hierarchy were also highly secretive to outsiders.

The cloak-and-dagger nature of the network started at the recruitment level and culminated in its hidden power within the bureaucracy. The Gülen movement had concentric circles of loyalty, the outermost being the more loosely defined allies, supporters, and recruits, and the inner circle being the more operational core that defined a course of action in state institutions.

In the innermost circle, students from Gülen schools or student recruits to the movement would gather regularly at weekend homes (called *ışık evleri*) to pray and listen to recordings of Gülen sermons led by a mentor (called *abi*, Turkish for an "older brother") who would help the students with their classes, in finding housing or jobs, in establishing a business, or even in finding a suitable wife. The system demanded strict obedience and secrecy but the recruits were amply rewarded with jobs in the public service. The system of mentoring continued well into the upper echelons of bureaucracy. In sensitive institutions like the military, Gülenists would, reportedly, not know the real name and identity of their "older brother".⁸

4 The concept of "himmət" – monthly contributions of 5–20 percent from salaried employees – is at the core of the network's operations. For additional detail, see Helen Rose Ebaugh, *The Gülen Movement: A Sociological Analysis of a Civic Movement Rooted in Moderate Islam* (Springer, 2009) (hereafter, Ebaugh, *The Gülen Movement*).

5 Beauchamp, "120 American Charter Schools", and "FBI investigating Gülen schools in US", *Hürriyet Daily News*, 21 March 2011, available at <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/default.aspx?pageid=438&n=american-media-has-discovered-gulen-charity-schools-2011-03-21>.

6 Beauchamp, "120 American Charter Schools".

7 Stephanie Saul, "Charter Schools Tied to Turkey Grow in Texas", the *New York Times*, 6 June 2011, available at http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/07/education/07charter.html?_r=0.

8 "FETÖ orduya ne zaman ve nasıl sızdı?", CNN Turk, 8 August 2016, available at <http://www.cnnturk.com/video/turkiye/feto-orduya-ne-zaman-ve-nasil-sizdi>.

Gülenist students have traditionally been encouraged to go into the public service and were concentrated in the police force, the judiciary, and, we now know, the military. Anecdotaly, Gülenists and ex-Gülenists describe how decisions to pursue one educational path over another were usually taken in consultation with the “mentor”, and not necessarily the family.

The group’s almost obsessive interest in law enforcement set it apart from all other religious orders in Turkey. In a famous sermon from the late 1990s, Gülen advised his followers to continue living incognito “inside the veins of the state” until enough power had been amassed: “You must move in the veins of the system, without anyone noticing your existence, until you reach all the power centres. [...] You must wait until such time as you have gotten all the state power, until you have brought to your side all the power of the constitutional institutions in Turkey. [...] Until that time, any step taken would be too early, like breaking an egg without waiting the full 40 days for it to hatch.”⁹

In contrast to their more transparent presence in education, the network had a very centralised internal structure where each of the 81 provinces of Turkey had an “imam” who acted as the senior-most Gülenist and coordinated donations, schools, outreach activities, and newspaper sales (of *Zaman*), and regularly reported back to Gülen. Continents and various industries and institutions also had their own imams, such as the imam for the air force or the imam for Latin America.

Weekly house gatherings and informal discussion groups helped solidify the grassroots discipline and inform the followers of the direction of the movement.¹⁰

As the Gülenists amassed more and more power in state institutions, each and every institution acquired a Gülen-appointed “imam” from either inside or outside the institution. The imam was supposed to be the superior of all Gülenists in that organisation. For example, a senior Gülenist in the police force would report to his “imam” and regularly update him on what was happening in the institution – and, in some cases, receive instructions for various internal policies. There was a tendency to promote loyal Gülenists to key positions and, if the movement was supportive of, say, a particular person or investigation, followers of the network would toe the line. In some institutions, complaints started piling up starting in 2009 that non-Gülenists were removed from positions by unsigned letters of complaint or investigations.¹¹ Both grievances towards, and fear of, the movement built up throughout Anatolia.¹²

9 “Fethullah Gülen – Devlete Sızma”, YouTube, 10 April 2014, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VZtJTr2lNjY>.

10 Ebaugh, *The Gülen Movement*.

11 This criticism of the movement surfaced widely with the dismissal of three senior non-Gülenist police chiefs who all faced investigations allegedly prompted by Gülenists. There were complaints in other institutions. Since the coup, the Turkish media has been full of accounts of “victims” of such conspiracies, some of whom are starting legal procedures to reclaim their previous posts.

12 For accounts of such grievances, see Binnaz Toprak “Being Different in Turkey: Religion, Conservatism and Otherization”, Boğaziçi University, Open Society Foundation (Turkey), 2009, available at http://www.aciktoplumvakfi.org.tr/pdf/tr_farkli_olmak.pdf.

At the height of its power, in 2012, and as an ally of Turkey’s ruling AKP, the Gülen network was the single most cohesive force within the Turkish bureaucracy, judiciary, and law enforcement, providing many of the human resources in key institutions, ranging from the tax authority to the Banking Board or the High Committee of Judges and Prosecutors (HSYK). Judicial appointments to anti-terrorism courts during these years entirely favoured Gülenists, who then prosecuted opponents of the movement as well as opponents of the AKP. By the end of 2013, 77 out of 81 provincial police commissioners were Gülenist sympathisers, according to Turkey’s Minister of Interior.¹³

Gülen has been living in a remote compound in the Poconos, in rural Pennsylvania, since he left Turkey in 1998 – to escape an investigation for, among other things, infiltrating state institutions. His refuge soon became a site of political pilgrimage for his supporters and aspiring Turkish politicians. Turkey’s leading businessmen, journalists, bureaucrats, media tycoons, and even several government ministers visited Gülen in his compound – including Ahmet Davutoğlu, who as foreign minister in 2013 secretly visited Pennsylvania while attending the UN General Assembly in New York.¹⁴

You can only beat a deep state with another deep state

Details of the intricacies, practices, and reach of this organisation set the stage for understanding what the movement is, but in order to understand its power within the Turkish state and the possible role of Gülenists in the July 15 coup attempt, it is important to revisit the trials of 2009–2013 that were led by Gülenists and that involved a number of controversial practices.

Complicated as they sound, these trials reveal a troubling aspect of the movement’s modus operandi within the state system. These trials, and particularly the so-called Ergenekon probe, started out as an investigation into an alleged network of nationalists (from ex-military to journalists) who the police claimed were conspiring to kill minorities, Kurds, Alawites, and religious leaders, and even plan a coup. The case was largely led by Gülenist police officers and prosecutors. By mid-2009, Ergenekon had already spiralled into a witch-hunt for hard-line secularists and Kemalists within the state apparatus, and even the broader civil society. Many of the accused often had no proven connection to each other or to any particular acts of violence but still served time in prison.

The trials were considered in Europe as a Turkish effort to reckon with its dark past, and were described in successive EU progress reports on Turkey’s accession process as investigations into “illegal networks” inside Turkey. But they

13 “Efkan Ala: 81 ilin emniyet müdüründen 74’ü FETÖ’cü çıktı”, *HaberTurk*, 19 August 2016, available at <http://www.haberturk.com/gundem/haber/1284610-efkan-ala-81-ilin-emniyet-mudurunden-74u-fetocu-cikti>.

14 “So who authorized Davutoğlu’s Gülen visit?”, *Hürriyet Daily News*, 14 May 2015, available at <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/so-who-authorized-davutoglus-gulen-visit.aspx?pageID=238&nid=82373>.

were deeply controversial within Turkey itself. Indeed, anyone who read the thousands of pages of the indictment could not miss the hyperbolic nature of the prosecutors' claims. The case essentially rewrote the last 30 years of Turkey's political history as a series of behind-the-scenes manoeuvres by a dark, secretive organisation called Ergenekon.

Most of the people who were rounded up or investigated during the probe – ranging from retired generals and former university deans, to senior military intelligence officers and mafia leaders – were the types who may have welcomed attempts by the Turkish military to “rein in” the AKP government. But beyond that ideological affinity, it was difficult to establish a hierarchical structure or the existence of a real organisation, let alone any real connection among all the suspects. The prosecutors overcame this problem by pointing out that one does not necessarily have to be aware of the existence of an organisation in order to be a member of it, and that the suspects were helping create a fertile psychological environment for a military coup.

Türkan Saylan, whose funeral served as an opportunity to protest against Gülen – see the beginning of this paper – was one of those caught up in these investigations. As a doctor and a crusader for secular education, Saylan had a dedication that made her a household name across Turkey. At the time of her death from cancer, her philanthropic network, which gives scholarships for girls' education and raises funds to build schools, was one of the largest NGOs in Turkey. But notwithstanding her good work, her hard-line Kemalist positions made her a suspect.

A month before her death from cancer, police raided Saylan's home in the middle of the night. Saylan's organisation was accused of aiding the Ergenekon network by creating an educational institution that secretly encouraged and trained young girls to prostitute themselves to military officers. The purpose, the police claimed, was to create a link between the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) – a listed terrorist organisation in Turkey – and the Turkish army.

The Ergenekon investigation was led by a new team of police officers and prosecutors known to be followers of Fethullah Gülen. So it was no surprise that at Türkan Saylan's trial, the outpouring of secular anger was directed not just at the government but also at Fethullah Gülen, with a leading chant being “Tayyip go to America, go to Fethullah's side”.

Beginning in 2009, the then-prime minister started replacing key figures in police intelligence, narcotics, anti-terrorism, and surveillance units by known Gülenists, who in turn led the Ergenekon investigation. All eavesdropping capabilities of military and police were combined under one newly created body, which was also stocked with Gülenists. For the purposes of the Ergenekon trials, the investigators, the prosecutor, and later the judges were a clique who have mostly graduated from Gülen schools, participated in Gülen network's gatherings, were allies of the movement, acted in unison, or were openly known as Gülenists within the police

force. Major stories about the case were first published in Gülen-related news outlets, such as *Samanyolu*, *Zaman*, *Bugün* or *Taraf*. A noticeable number of those arrested in the case and in subsequent probes were nationalists or hard-line Kemalists who had criticised or attacked the Gülen network over the years.

The Gülenists' efforts against the deep state were strongly backed by Erdoğan – who proudly said “I am the prosecutor of this case” and sent his personal armoured vehicle to the actual prosecutor, Zekeriya Öz, as a goodwill gesture. Once dubbed as “Turkey's Di Pietro”, after the famous Italian prosecutor who challenged the mafia in Italy in the 1990s, Öz is today considered an enemy of the state by the AKP government, is facing charges, and has fled Turkey.

Over the next couple of years, dozens of trials, all launched by an increasingly bold Gülen apparatus within the security bureaucracy, hundreds of military officers, generals, journalists, writers, and bureaucrats were imprisoned. Gülenists and Gülen-friendly cadres often filled the vacuum they left behind as the AKP did not have enough of its own educated people to replace the departing secularists.

Their efforts, as well as the wide-scale use of wiretappings of public figures to humiliate or discredit the suspects, had a chilling effect on the public. If one visited Istanbul or Ankara during those years and wanted to have a political conversation, one would notice that most Turks would take the battery out of their cell phones or put the phone in another room. The public, as well as the mainstream media, was in awe of the “faceless” Gülenist-power within law enforcement.

And for good reason. In 2009, the year that the Ergenekon indictment was produced, with many wiretaps leaked to the media, Turkey's Minister of Justice, Sadullah Ergin, announced that 113,000 citizens' phones had been tapped by the centralised Directorate of Telecommunications.

For most journalists, prominent business people, and community leaders, the fact that their private conversations were possibly in the hands of authorities was intimidating enough to make them stay quiet about the excesses of the trials. There was investigation after investigation – attributed to Gülenists within the police intelligence and anti-terrorism units – on issues ranging from a probe into Fenerbahçe soccer team for match fixing, to one about television rating agencies.

The following list is just a sample of some of the more bizarre and tragic circumstances of the various trials in this period:

- Hundreds of military officers and several admirals – many in succession for leadership roles within the Turkish military – were jailed in 2010–2011 in another coup trial called “Sledgehammer” for having their names on electronic documents ostensibly related to a 2002 coup plot. The incriminating

documents were forensically proven to have been fabricated after 2008 but the judges nonetheless sentenced the officers.

- A senior police chief (Hanefi Avcı) who wrote an exposé of the Gülen movement's power within the police was arrested for being a member of an unknown leftist terrorist organisation – Revolutionary Headquarters – in 2010. His book became a best-seller but he remained in jail for five years.
- A middle-aged crusader for secular education was accused of helping the PKK and her non-profit organisation was humiliated for having been in possession of “animal porn” after a police raid. Dozens of Ergenekon suspects were similarly accused of possession of “animal porn” or “child pornography” by police officers – thereby also facing additional charges from local courts in addition to being tried in connection with Ergenekon.
- A small-sized business owner was described as the “financier” of Ergenekon (Kuddusi Okkir) and eventually died in custody from cancer. At the time of his death, he was so poor that the local municipality had to take care of the funeral.
- A promising young Alawite navy officer (Ali Tatar) committed suicide when he was about to be detained for the second time on accusations of indoctrinating the military cadets with PKK ideology and selling them drugs.
- Another navy colonel (Berk Erdem) killed himself when leaked pictures of his wife leaving a building were published as proof of adultery in a publication close to the Ergenekon prosecutors. Several navy officers committed suicide due to instances of public humiliation.
- A journalist (Ahmet Şık) who wrote a book about Gülen's influence within the police force had his manuscript confiscated before it was published. He was put on trial for forming an organisation with the purpose of tarnishing the Ergenekon trials with a bunch of other journalists, one police chief, two academics, and one senior intelligence officer – who all met in prison and whose only common denominator was their criticism of the Gülen movement within the judiciary and the police.
- One of the leading critics of the Ergenekon trial, the secularist Republican People's Party (CHP) leader, Deniz Baykal, had a secret recording of his rendezvous with his mistress leaked to the internet in 2010, ending his long career in politics.

- A string of sex tapes of senior members of the ultra-nationalist Nationalist Action Party (MHP) were released just before the 2011 elections, following strong anti-Gülenist statements by its leader Devlet Bahçeli, leading to the resignation of nine party officials.

None of this changed the narrative of a “reformist” Turkey in Europe, and if any attention was paid to the excesses of these trials, it was mostly overshadowed by an overall desire – in Turkey and abroad – to reduce the influence of the *ancien regime* – the Turkish military and Kemalists – and establish greater civilian control over Turkish democracy. For the liberal intelligentsia, as well as the AKP government, the military and the Kemalist deep state was a bigger evil, and the Gülenists were a small price to pay for doing away with the vestiges of the Turkish military in politics.

Critics in the media and in Turkey's former secularist establishment had long argued that the clandestine nature of the organisation, and its concentration in the judiciary, police, and intelligence, as well as in the technology and national surveillance departments, presented a national security threat.¹⁵

The Turkish military has periodically purged Gülenists from its ranks and military academies starting from the late 1980s. The Gülenist recruits within the military were told not to reveal their sympathies with the movement and its leader, and were taught to profess that they had no knowledge of its publications.¹⁶ The purges pushed the movement further underground within the armed forces. But starting with the Ergenekon and Sledgehammer trials, the AKP was able to exert civilian control over the Turkish armed forces and change the line of succession and leadership in the Turkish Chief of Staff's office.

In 2010, on Erdoğan and President Abdullah Gül's initiative, the Gülen movement was removed from the list of national security threats in the National Security Political Document – the paper that spells out Turkey's national security doctrine and is approved by the National Security Council.

Overall, the trials managed to destroy many of the centres of secularist or Kemalist resistance to the AKP government and weaken Turkey's “deep state”. But in the process, the Gülenists themselves had become AKP's “deep state”. In the words of Ahmet Şık, a left-wing journalist who wrote an exposé of the movement's strength within the police force and was arrested for terrorism, “Anyone who touches [them] gets burnt.”¹⁷

¹⁵ See Gareth H. Jenkins's study for an early account of the Ergenekon trials in 2009: Gareth H. Jenkins, “Between Fact and Fantasy: Turkey's Ergenekon Investigation”, Silk Road Studies, August 2009, available at http://www.silkroadstudies.org/resources/pdf/SilkRoadPapers/2009_08_SRP_Jenkins_Turkey-Ergenekon.pdf.

¹⁶ Irfan Bozan, “Kritik Yıl 1986”, *Al Jazeera*, 20 July 2016, available at <http://www.aljazeera.com.tr/al-jazeera-ozel/kritik-yil-1986>.

¹⁷ Guillaume Perrier, “Turkish authorities launch raids to censor book before publication”, the *Guardian*, 5 April 2011, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/apr/05/turkey-censorship-ahmet-sik-perrier>.

The breakup with the AKP: A silent civil war

The first sign of strain in the AKP's relations with the group was subtle. Insiders noted that Erdoğan's failure to include dozens of Gülenists in AKP lists in the 2011 general elections, despite an earlier promise to Gülen, led to frustration in Pennsylvania.

In 2012, the Gülenists opposed Erdoğan's peace talks with the PKK. A recording of a conversation between Turkish intelligence and senior PKK leaders in Oslo was leaked on the internet. That same year, a Gülenist prosecutor attempted to detain Hakan Fidan, Erdoğan's intelligence tsar, for negotiating with the PKK when the Turkish premier was about to have colon surgery.

But for the public, the real breakup came in November 2013, when Erdoğan decided to shut down the Gülenist "prep schools" that prepared children for high school or university exams. The school, used for both fundraising and recruitment, were the bread and butter of the Gülen movement.

Just a few weeks later, on 17 December, the Turkish police began a string of corruption investigations that went to the heart of Erdoğan's power. Based on dozens of leaked wiretaps, the police had started a high-level investigation into four government ministers who were receiving kickbacks from an Iranian gold trader. The trader, Reza Zarrab, is now on trial in New York for money laundering and circumventing Iran sanctions through illegal gold trading.

The ministers were charged with embezzlement but Erdoğan fought the charges. A week later, on 25 December, Erdoğan's son and son-in-law, as well as the current Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım, were implicated in another investigation into the soliciting of businessmen to buy-up the *Sabah* newspaper. Dozens of recordings of private conversations between Erdoğan and his family were leaked during this period, including private conversations with businessmen close to the government.

The effort to go after Erdoğan's family marked the beginning of a "civil war" among Turkey's Islamists, even if very few in the West were paying attention. All of the prosecutors, police officers, and judges involved in the December 2013 corruption investigations were arrested and charged with trying to overthrow the government. Erdoğan called the group a "parallel state", and since then he has been trying to purge known members of the group within the police force. It is true that with the corruption cases the Gülenists had tried to overthrow the Erdoğan government. But they had also caught the ministers red-handed.

Since then, the government has shut down all Gülen-related newspapers and TV networks, seized companies belonging to close supporters of Gülen, and purged hundreds of police officers, judges, and prosecutors. All that was before the coup. At the request of Erdoğan, Turkish intelligence prepared lists of military officers to

purge in August – a move that set in motion a counter-strike in the form of the 15 July coup.

The coup de grace: 15 July

The Turkish government's assertion that followers of Fethullah Gülen within the military are responsible for the coup has merit – although, legally speaking, evidence linking Gülen himself to the 15 July attempt remains scant.

The nerve centre of the coup attempt was Akincilar air base, in Ankara, where a close confidant of Gülen, a softly spoken professor of theology who was reportedly the Gülen movement's civilian "imam" in charge of the air force, was present on the night of the coup. The professor, Adil Öksiüz, was detained along with all the officers who were at the base that night, but was subsequently released by a judge within 15 minutes after claiming that he happened to be in the area looking to purchase land. He was escorted out of the court house by a Gülenist TV reporter and has since been at large. The theology professor, despite his rather meagre salary, had travelled abroad 109 times over the past couple of years, according to Turkish news reports, and had just returned from the US, where he had stayed for two days. According to the government, he is one of the key figures linking the coup attempt to Gülen himself.

No one in Turkey doubts that there are Gülenist fingerprints on the 15 July coup, even though non-Gülenist generals were also involved.

However, sympathisers of the movement outside the military and public service have also faced a massive crackdown since the coup.

Western media stories and the widespread belief that the coup was orchestrated by the Turkish government in order for Erdoğan to consolidate his power have no basis in reality. The 15 July attempt is the most serious coup plot in Turkey since military takeover in 1980, and involved the mobilisation of hundreds of officers and up to 10,000 soldiers from the army, air force, navy, and gendarmerie.

The coup nearly succeeded. It failed because the *putschists* panicked when Turkish intelligence identified unusual activity among military cadets the afternoon before the coup, forcing the plotters to initiate the coup at the rather inconvenient hour of 9pm (as opposed to the planned 3am).

How do we know that this coup involved Gülenists or was directed by them? Government sources and Gülen experts close to the investigations have told ECFR that the planning was largely carried out by "civilians" who provided the coordination between different units. "A Gülenist within the military doesn't necessarily know who the other Gülenists are", said a senior police intelligence officer close to the movement for many years. The fact that the *putschists* relied on outsiders to coordinate the coup was ingenious. But it was also its downfall when

things started going south and the civilian coordinators were no longer around. Army units could not talk to one another. Investigators also claim that non-Gülenists were not involved at the planning stages of the coup nor were they present at the Ankara air base headquarters.

It is not easy to identify the Gülenists within the military – especially when a hyped-up media mixes propaganda with facts. This is where it gets confusing both for the public and for the investigators. With the exception of a dozen high-profile media figures and people around Gülen, no Gülenist ever calls himself one. The movement prefers the term “community” (“camia”) or “Service” (“Hizmet”) to refer to itself. Even the loyalist members usually begin each sentence with “I am not a Gülenist myself...” Within the army, none who have come through the system acknowledge their affiliation.

But there are interesting coincidences that point in the direction of Gülenists. According to the Turkish government, many of the senior-level *putschists* had one-dollar bills with them, allegedly given by Gülen as a lucky charm. While the nerve-centre of the coup was the air force, generals who took part were overwhelmingly from the ranks of those who were promoted into the vacuum created by the imprisonment of secularists in the Sledgehammer trials in 2010–2013.

Several “known” Gülenists within the armed forces – such as the senior members of the military judiciary and personnel departments who rose to prominence after Sledgehammer – were involved in the attempt. Senior defectors from the Gülen movement, such as Latif Erdoğan, claimed on Turkish television that he recognised the detained officers lined up with the former head of the air force, four-star general Akin Öztürk, who took part in the events on the night of the coup. Moreover, according to Turkish government sources, hundreds of officers and judges were discovered to have membership and passwords to a communication program called ByLock that Turkish intelligence claims is used by Gülenists to avoid detection. It had 39,000 active members, including state employees and members of the judiciary. Although there isn’t evidence implicating all 39,000 users in the coup, the Turkish government uses membership of ByLock as an indicator of membership in what is now referred to by Turkish law enforcement as the Fethullah Gülen Terrorist Organization (FETÖ).¹⁸

The coup plotters were exceptional in their ability to hide their plans. The *aide-de-camps* of all the force commanders and of the chief of staff of the armed forces, Hulusi Akar, took part in the coup. The government alleges that they were Gülenist sleeper cells hiding their identity for decades. Akar’s *aide-de-camp* confessed to being a closet Gülenist, albeit under ill-treatment as evidenced by photos of his badly beaten body. He is also reported to have confessed to

18 Joe Parkinson and Adam Entous, “Turkey’s Powerful Spy Network Failed to See Coup Coming”, the *Wall Street Journal*, 29 July 2016, available at <http://www.wsj.com/articles/turkeys-powerful-spy-network-never-saw-coup-coming-1469823062>; and Murat Yetkin, “Turkish intelligence unveils secret codes used before coup attempt”, *Hürriyet Daily News*, 13 September 2016, available at <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkish-intelligence-unveils-secret-codes-used-before-coup-attempt.aspx?PageID=238&NID=103843&NewsCatID=409>.

having a civilian contact – an “older brother” – that he met on some weekends and of having planted a listening device on the previous chief of staff, Necdet Özel.

In his testimony to the police, Hulusi Akar, chief of staff of the Turkish armed forces, who remained hostage throughout the night of the coup, claimed that one of the generals in charge of the coup at the air base suggested putting him in touch with Fethullah Gülen, according to Turkey’s semi-official Anadolu Agency.¹⁹ Akar himself has not spoken about this to the public.

Five out of the six military liaison officers attached to the presidency also took part in the plot – but failed to pinpoint Erdoğan’s exact location because his staff were suspicious of their questions. A police officer who was purged by the government for being a Gülenist after the corruption cases of late 2013 was captured inside one of the tanks on the night of the coup wearing military camouflage.

The extradition saga

None of this necessarily points to Fethullah Gülen himself, though the presence of his followers in the organisation of the coup is hard to ignore.

In recent comments to Politico, Gülen said: “If anybody who follows my works acts illegally or unethically, or if they disobey the lawful orders of their superiors, that is a betrayal of my teachings and I fully support their being investigated and facing the consequences” – thereby distancing himself from the coup-plotters but leaving open the possibility that they might be Gülenists.²⁰

The Turkish public and many government officials believe the US is behind the coup effort and must have known about the plot – due to Gülen’s residency in the US.²¹ Erdoğan himself has said on several occasions that the coup was the work of a “mastermind” – using a reference to the US that he often employs in the context of Gülenists, the various corruption allegations against his inner circle, or the Gezi uprising.

Washington’s view of the Gülenists has changed over the years. In diplomatic cables published by WikiLeaks, successive US ambassadors in Ankara described the Gülen network and its power within the security forces. In 2007, the Bush administration opposed granting permanent residency (a green card) to Fethullah Gülen for fear it would anger the Turkish military. According to a senior administration official at the time, the State Department and Pentagon opposed giving Gülen a green card, and lawyers from the Homeland Security argued against granting Gülen status

19 Aylin Sırıklı and Hüseyin Gazi Kaykı, “Genelkurmay Başkanı Orgeneral Akar’ın savcılık ifadesi”, *Anadolu Adansı*, 25 July 2016, available at <http://aa.com.tr/tr/15-temmuz-darbe-girisimi/genelkurmay-baskani-orgeneral-akar-in-savcilik-ifadesi/615133>.

20 Nahal Toosi, “Fethullah Gülen: ‘I don’t have any regrets’”, *Politico*, 9 September 2016, available at <http://www.politico.eu/article/fethullah-gulen-full-interview-politico-turkey-coup-erdogan/>.

21 See, for example, Tim Arango and Ceylan Yeginsu, “Turks Can Agree on One Thing: U.S. Was Behind Failed Coup”, the *New York Times*, 2 August 2016, available at http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/03/world/europe/turkey-coup-erdogan-fethullah-gulen-united-states.html?_r=0.

as an exceptional leader in the field of education. But a US judge overruled the diplomats when Gülen lined up letters of support from academics and former US officials, including former US ambassador to Turkey Morton Abramowitz, and long-time CIA employees Graham Fuller and George Fidas. But, over the next few years, the dynamics in Turkey changed dramatically. The Gülen movement's pro-American attitude, its rapid expansion and lobbying in the US, and the strong support from the elected Turkish government, promoted the view that the Gülen movement was one of the new powers to be reckoned with in Turkey.

In the wake of the attempted coup, Erdoğan has personally asked Washington to extradite Gülen to Turkey, both in conversations with US President Barack Obama by phone, and in face-to-face meetings at the recent G20 summit in China.²²

The extradition request is not an easy matter for the US administration since Washington cannot simply wrap up Gülen with a bow and send him to Turkey without due process. US officials have told the Turkish government to provide evidence that would stand up in a US court of law, and have provided legal assistance to that effect, since extradition will be decided by independent US judges.

Any evidence is likely to be circumstantial. Dani Rodrik, a Harvard economist who has become one of America's leading experts on the judicial power of the Gülen movement, has demonstrated some of the difficulties. Along with his wife, Pinar Doğan, whose father, a Turkish general, was implicated, he has exposed many of the contradictions and fabrications of evidence in the Sledgehammer trial.

In addressing Gülen's possible role in the coup plot Rodrik wrote, "The Gülen movement is a highly hierarchical organization. People who have followed it closely over the years report that very few important decisions take place without Gülen's blessing. There is certainly no tradition of autonomous, independent decision-making or dissent in the movement. It would be surprising if Gülenist officers had planned this on their own, without seeking at least the assent of their spiritual leader."²³

But to matter for extradition, this assertion would need to be backed up by witness testimony and other evidence from the Turkish investigation. Examining such evidence and settling the matter will likely be the task of the next US administration. Gülen can fight an extradition request in US courts so the issue will likely plague Turkish-US relations for some time to come. Both Fethullah Gülen and the Turkish government have hired expensive lawyers and public relations firms to fight out their feud in the US.

At the end of the day, Washington sees the extradition demand as a legal matter. There is little knowledge in

²² Mehul Srivastava, "Turkey submits formal request for US to detain Fethullah Gülen", *Financial Times*, 13 September 2016, available at <https://www.ft.com/content/5205a128-799b-11e6-a0c6-39e2633162d5>.

²³ Dani Rodrik, "Is Fethullah Gülen behind Turkey's coup? (with update)", Dani Rodrik's weblog, 23 July 2016, available at http://rodrik.typepad.com/dani_rodriks_weblog/2016/07/is-fethullah-g%C3%BClen-behind-turkeys-coup.html.

the US government of the many aspects of the Gülenists beyond the friendly public face of a group devoted to philanthropic work and inter-faith dialogue. Gülenists in the West speak English well, have pro-Western values, and can tap into the growing international criticism of Turkey's domestic conduct. As such, they are seen as a persecuted religious minority by most Americans who come in contact with them. Turks do not understand that the world does not know all that much about the Gülen movement and the little they know, they seem to like.

It doesn't help that Turkish officials fail to describe the Gülen movement to Western audiences in terms they can understand or accept. They throw in references to groups like the Illuminati, Opus Dei, the Moonies, or even al-Qaeda that sound ridiculous to US audiences. They also make exaggerated claims by trying to pin the 2013 Gezi uprising, the downing of the Russian fighter jet in November 2015, or the economic slowdown on the Gülenists.

The crackdown

Meanwhile, Turkey's own domestic conduct since the coup has not helped its cause. The massive crackdown on Gülenists and all types of government critics since the coup has become a source of criticism for US and European governments. The Turkish government is taking a maximalist position in purges, going after people who have simply an affinity with or membership of the Gülen network, even for having opened accounts in the Gülenist Bank Asya after the fallout with the AKP, rather than going after those who actually participated in the coup.

In addition to the arrests of roughly 10,000 coup-plotters, and an equal number of detentions under the emergency law, almost 100,000 state employees and private sector teachers have been dismissed from their jobs with no possible recourse to legal action. Since the government declared a state of emergency, pre-trial detention has been expanded to 30 days and no legal challenges to government decisions are possible. Erdoğan has used the occasion to consolidate his power within the entire Turkish government apparatus. All of this raises questions about the future of Turkish democracy.

The Turkish foreign ministry, law enforcement, and intelligence services are all tasked with fighting the Gülen movement in Turkey and abroad. This is a particular strain for Turkish diplomacy in the West, where concerns about the crackdown are growing. In the US, Europe, and Africa, where Gülen schools are numerous, diplomats are required to convince their host governments to shut down schools and raise awareness about the dangers of the organisation. This is particularly difficult in some African countries and in the Balkans, where Gülen schools are among the best educational institutions in the country.

The purge touches every ministry, every government office, and every state institution. It includes the dismissal of up

to 50,000 teachers, as well as university deans, judges, prosecutors, and journalists. One thousand companies directly linked to Gülenists and thousands of assets owned by senior Gülenists have been seized. Liberal dissidents and Kurds have also suffered in the crackdown. Authorities have arrested dozens of Kurdish activists, politicians, and mayors, and dismissed 11,500 teachers belonging to a left-wing union.

Protecting Turkish democracy

The attempted coup was a real and serious attack on the constitutional order of a democratic country. The state of Turkey has the right and the duty to defend itself against a secretive movement that has infiltrated its key institutions and works outside the hierarchy of the bureaucratic order. Anyone examining the trials of 2008–2013 would see that a coterie of law enforcement and judiciary representatives were acting in unison to persecute their political enemies.

At the same time, the massive post-coup purge and Turkey's failure to undertake any reforms that would signal a return to democracy threaten to weaken the public's confidence in the state institutions and Turkey's evolution. With an ever-widening net, over-zealous investigators detain not just coup-plotters but many who were drawn to Gülen's message and supported his cause. Ironically, it is a repeat of the Ergenekon-era purges on an exponentially bigger scale. Overall, the securitisation of the Turkish political space undermines its democracy and tarnishes its image at home and abroad. At times, the post-coup period itself feels like a coup in and of itself. The risk is that, in its righteous anger and its attempt to clean the state, the Turkish government might destroy the frail democracy it is trying to save.

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Asli Aydintasbas is a senior policy fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations and an expert on Turkish domestic and foreign policy. She is also a renowned Turkish journalist whose career included regular columns in publications such as *Cumhuriyet* and *Milliyet*, a talk show on Turkish politics on CNN Turk, and frequent contributions to publications such as *Politico*, the *New York Times*, and the *Wall Street Journal*. Much of her work focuses on the interplay between Turkey's internal and external dynamics. She has been a steady supporter of Turkey's reform and democratisation process.

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