

Anatomy of a Failure: The Structure, Dynamics and Repercussions of Turkey's Failed Coup Attempt

Al Sharq Forum

Abstract: The first confirmation that there was a coup attempt against the democratically-elected Turkish government was a military force taking control of the Turkish Radio and Television Corporation headquarters and broadcasting a statement announcing that a coup had taken place. The statement included serious allegations about the democratic regime, saying that it was undermining both democracy and secularism in Turkey. In the same statement, the putschist faction within the military announced its control over the country and the establishment of the "National Peace Council" to manage state affairs. It also announced the imposition of a curfew in all parts of the country and pledged to set out a new constitution at the earliest possible opportunity.

Investigations showed that the military network behind the coup attempt had penetrated all the branches of Turkey's armed forces—ground, naval and air—and were deployed all over the country: in the north, south, east, west, in Anatolia and in Europe.

During the coup's first few hours, the putschists committed several mistakes and faced several factors which led to the failure of the coup attempt. It is clear, in any case, that the government aims at purging the defense department, the security department, and the state bureaucracy to eliminate the group that was spearheading the coup, which is the secretive Gülenist organization.

ON FRIDAY JULY 15TH, AFTER 10PM LOCAL TIME (8PM GMT), military and gendarmerie units started moving outside their camps in several cities in Turkey, and Istanbul and Ankara in particular. Within an hour, they had reached and attacked the Radio and Television Corporation headquarters in Ankara and Istanbul, cut off the Fatih Sultan Mehmet and Bosphorus Bridges, which connect the European and Asian sides of Istanbul, and cut off many roads in the city and access to many main squares. Units occupied the entrance of Ataturk airport, Turkey's largest airport, and attacked the general command of the army and the gendarmerie command headquarters in Ankara. The putschists simultaneously attacked the Turkish intelligence headquarters using tanks and helicopter power. Other aircraft supporting the coup shelled the parliament in Ankara.

The putschists arrested the Turkish Commander of the Armed Forces and his deputy, as well as the commanders of the ground forces, navy, air force and gendarmerie. They ordered the bombing of the hotel where President Erdoğan was staying on the Marmaris coast in the southwest of the country and sent a force by air to capture him. President Erdoğan escaped this attack by leaving the hotel 10-15 mins before the putschists arrived. The putschists were unsuccessful in capturing the Commander of the First Army (who used the Selimiye Barracks in Istanbul as his headquarters) and who seems to have been a key target in the coup, because he was not present in the barracks in Istanbul at that time.

Following the temporary capture of the Radio and Television Corporation (TRT) headquarters in Ankara, the Gülenist faction within the Turkish military forced one of the broadcasters to read its first statement. In the statement, it accused the government of undermining democracy and secularism in Turkey, announcing that the army had taken control of the country, a "National

Peace Council” had been established to manage state affairs, a curfew had been instituted in all of Turkey, and pledging to draft a new constitution at the earliest opportunity. They also committed to remaining faithful to Turkey’s international obligations and NATO ties. The statement, which was also distributed through the Chief of Staff’s website, indicated that this military operation was a combined operation from all the Turkish army, a claim which soon proved to be inaccurate.

Thus, there was no doubt that Turkey was facing a military coup.

However, in no more than a few hours after the start of the coup attempt, it began to crumble.

This is a preliminary reading of the coup attempt, the causes of its failure, its national and international repercussions and its possible consequences for the Turkish political situation.

The Course of the Coup and its Structure

In an early statement against the coup—the first official government announcement—Prime Minister Binali Yildirim described what was happening as the rebellion of a small section of the armed forces against legitimate democracy, the military command, and the rule of the people. In fact, this attempt was extensive and its size indicated it had a chance of success.

The coup network was comprised of tens of generals and colonels including the Second and Third Army Commanders, the Commander of Malatya Garrison, the Commander of the Aegean Basin Army, the Commander of Military Intelligence, two commando brigade commanders, and the Commander of the Marines. The network also included a number of staff officers, the commander of a tank unit, at least one from the First Army, a num-

ber of naval commanders, gendarmerie force commanders, an undetermined number of air forces commanders, pilots, and a number of air and military college officers. The coup network also includes a limited number of police officers and a coast guard commander. Some early evidence indicates that General Akin Ozturk, the previous Air Forces Commander, who ended his tenure in 2015, has been a prominent figure in the coup attempt.

The putschists took full control of the Akinci airbase, near Ankara, and made it their headquarters during their coup attempt, as well as the Diyarbakir and Balikesir airbases. They also used Konya’s third airbase and were present at Malatya airbase.

It is believed the putschists expected, if the coup succeeded, to be supported by a large number of judges and prosecutors from different areas of specialization, including high court council members, two constitutional court judges, and an undefined number of city governors, academics, businessmen and state bureaucrats.

The military network responsible for the coup infiltrated all Turkish military forces—ground, naval and air—and was distributed all over the country (East, West, North and South, and in Anatolia and Europe). Dozens of generals led the coup attempt, including major generals and brigadier generals. One of these generals carried the rank of lieutenant general and was only passed over for the rank of chief of staff due to seniority.

This network has been forming for years, not months, perhaps since the 2012 beginning of the conflict between the Justice and Development government and the Gulen movement, a highly secretive cultish group which was designated as a terrorist organization by Turkey in 2014. Current sources indicate that a large segment of the officers who led the coup attempt belong to the Fethullah



Gulen movement, but not necessarily all of them. As such, the central bloc of the coup members was composed of Gulenists, but the military coup network involved other members as well, especially senior officers opposed to democratic rule. It is suggested that Gulen's military supporters are the only people capable of planning and executing such an operation, especially after the weakening of the Kemalist military bloc through various judicial investigations. The evidence for a large number of these cases were later found to be fabricated by the Gulenist network within the state bureaucracy amid power struggles beginning in 2007.

Now, the question is how the coup network was established within the army without raising the suspicion of the security apparatus.

The Supreme Military Council (YAS) meeting was scheduled to meet in August 2016 for its annual meeting. Due to the coup attempt, that meeting was later rescheduled for July 28, 2016. The YAS is the highest military authority, and it decides on the promotion, demotion, or firing of military officers. Prior to the coup attempt, the media had already widely reported that hundreds, if not thousands of Gulenist officers would be discharged from their posts; a significant number of them would have been forced into retirement. Moreover, it is widely believed that a major judicial investigation into the military wings of the Gulenist network was in the offing prior to the coup attempt. These factors seem to have led to some level of urgency amongst the putschists as regards the date of the coup attempt. In other words, it is believed the putschists' decision to execute the coup came about as they realized that some of them would be removed from the army during the imminent YAS meeting and highly anticipated judicial investigations.

At the same time, parts of the government and state were unaware of this immense coup network. Military intelligence is responsible for security and political censorship in the military forces, and it submits its reports directly to the Chief of Staff. By infiltrating the Chief of Staff headquarters and the military intelligence, the putschists provided themselves with protection from discovery or pursuit.

Failure: Calculations and Gaps

The putschists made several mistakes in their attempt in addition to some factors which combined to foil the coup attempt within a few hours of it beginning. Between 11pm (July, 15th) and 3am (July, 16th), the coup attempt failed and an extensive and ongoing operation to pursue the putschists and purge the military forces and the other departments in the state continued.

It seems that the putschists planned to begin their coup attempt on July 16th at 3am, but some putschist officers at the military headquarters discovered at around 5pm on July 15th that the intelligence apparatus (National Intelligence Organisation (MIT)) had foreknowledge of the planned attempt. This pushed the putschists to begin carrying out their operation several hours before the agreed upon time.

The rush may have caused the putschists to lose of part of their ability to coordinate between the different coup participants. In addition, as the coup attempt occurred while many civilians were still awake and outside, there was increased opportunity for popular crowds to gather in support of the government.



The putschists committed another mistake when they did not seek to gain the support of any political parties or major media institutions beforehand. This deficiency is perhaps connected to their belief that such efforts would not achieve effective results or that such efforts would lead to the early discovery of the coup attempt.

The putschists made a major mistake in deciding to bomb the Turkish parliament, which has never before been bombed, not even during the British occupation of Istanbul after the defeat in World War I. The parliament bombing was an emotive issue among many different sections of Turkish society, increasing their opposition to the coup and their determination to defeat the putschists.

On the other hand, the following factors also played a major and direct role in the failure of the attempt:

First: The Turkish National Intelligence Organization (MIT) knew that a group was planning a military coup against the Turkish government as of 3.30 pm on Friday July 15th. The first tipoff that MIT received/intercepted was about a planned assassination of Hakan Fidan, the Chief of National Intelligence. This information led Fidan to hold an immediate meeting with the Chief of Staff to warn him. The latter ordered the army to stay in the barracks as a precaution to prevent any external movements, but he did not estimate the size of the planned coup. The Chief of Staff's sense of reassurance about his personal situation indicates his belief, perhaps, that the military coup attempt would occur outside Ankara.

Directly after Fidan's departure from the military headquarters, the putschists, who were present inside the Armed Military Command Headquarters, realized that their coup attempt had been exposed. They moved

to quickly kidnap the Chief of Staff and his deputy. They then invited the Land Forces Commander to a fake meeting with the Chief of Staff to capture him too upon his arrival. They then decided to begin their public movement to seize pre-determined targets as early as possible.

The putschists sent three helicopters to the wedding of the air force commander assistant's daughter, which was being held in a club on the Asian side of Istanbul. There, they captured the Air Forces Commander, his assistant and a number of air forces staff chiefs who were opposed to them. They also issued orders to capture and detain the Naval Forces Commander.

At half past eight in the evening, the Turkish Intelligence Chief realized that the Chief of Staff had been detained and the putschists were carrying out their plot.

A little before 11pm, the putschists moved to seize the Intelligence Headquarters. Fidan ordered his staff to fight the attackers to their last breath. It can be said, the putschists' failure to take control of the Intelligence Headquarters in Ankara was the first failure of the coup attempt, especially as killing the President and the Chief of Intelligence were among the putschists' top priorities. In the next phase, following the failure of the coup attempt in the early hours of July 16th, the intelligence apparatus played a principle role in tracking down the putschists and the network that was supporting them within the state apparatus.

Second: President Erdogan showed courage in the face of the coup, and his stand was greatly welcomed large numbers of the general public, who responded publicly to defend the legitimacy of the government in various places. Shortly after clarifying the truth of the coup attempt, President Erdogan spoke at around 00:30 on July 16th, via FaceTime through a



mobile phone to CNN TURK from the hotel where he was spending his annual vacation. He insisted that the government and the presidency would face down the coup attempt, emphasizing that it wasn't an attempt conducted through the normal chain of command; rather, it was an attempt undertaken and spearheaded by the Gulenist rogue element within the military. President Erdogan called on the Turkish people, in a determined step, to take to the streets, squares and sites controlled by the putschists and especially to Ataturk airport to expel the plotters. After this conversation, President Erdogan left the hotel by helicopter, soon reaching Dalaman airport. From there, Turkish Airlines provided him with three civilian planes that took off simultaneously to Ataturk airport in Istanbul. President Erdogan misled the plotters by not using his private jet, and the putschists were uncertain in which of the three civilian planes he was present.

Within minutes of Erdogan calling out to the people, hundreds of thousands came onto the streets and the squares in Istanbul, Ankara and the other major Turkish cities. Bloody confrontations took place between the people and the putschists on the Bosphorus Bridge in Istanbul and in many other sites in Ankara and Istanbul. In different parts of the country, crowds attacked a number of military barracks, and civilians parked their cars in front of the barrack gates to prevent tanks from leaving them. In Malatya, people prevented army warplanes loaded with ammunition from leaving the military airport to bomb targets in Ankara by closing airport runways with heavy vehicles.

Ordinary people succeeded in defeating the putschists in many places, including in the Turkish Radio and Television Corporation, with the assistance of the security and police forces. The most significant success was persuading coup forces to withdraw from Ataturk airport. This paved the way for the

plane carrying President Erdogan to land safely in Istanbul and allowed him to appear in public amongst the crowd. The power balance shifted to the side of the people and the government first in Istanbul, which was prominent as the main scene of the military coup.

Third: The Prime Minister, members of his government, and parliament members present in Ankara were no less courageous than the President. The Prime Minister was the first statesman to denounce the coup attempt, announce its political and military illegitimacy, and inform the Turkish people that his government was functioning and that they were determined to face these plotters and hold them accountable. Various ministers made similar announcements, amongst them the Minister of Interior, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Minister of Justice, and the Minister of European Affairs. Parliamentarians and the Speaker of the Grand National Assembly present in Ankara gathered first in the main parliament hall, but when the putschists' helicopters started bombing the parliament they moved to a safer hall. There they issued a statement insisting on upholding electoral and constitutional legitimacy and their opposition to the coup attempt. There is no evidence that any parliament members or ministers demonstrated support for the putschists or were connected to them.

Fourth: The coup attempt not only faced the people's united will, but it also became clear early on that no political powers or civilian organizations supported the plotters. The chairman of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) and the chairman of the secularist Republican People's Party (CHP) both called the Prime Minister confirming their opposition to the coup and their support for the government. All private TV channels, pro-government and opposition channels, perhaps after a momentary hesitation, opposed the



coup and provided a platform for the President, Prime Minister and ministers to make announcements while the Radio and Television Corporation was under the putschists' control.

Fifth: Despite the size of the coup network and the putschists' success in detaining the Chief of Staff, the Commander of the Land Forces, the Commander of the Air Forces, and the Commander of the Naval Forces, they were unable to gain the support of these commanders even after threatening them with death. The opposition of General Hulusi Akar, the Chief of General Staff, and the Land Forces Commander, deprived the putschists from gaining the legitimacy of leadership and the chain of command, which are the basis of any military operations in modern armies.

The opposition of General Ümit Dündar—the Commander of the First Army, the most important Turkish army corps—to the coup attempt from the beginning was a principal factor in weakening the putschists' position as they failed to take control of the military and the country. General Dündar, like the Intelligence Chief, had realized since 8pm that a coup attempt was imminent, and he later called the President to encourage him to come to Istanbul. His contribution encouraged the Prime Minister to nominate him, a few hours after the start of the coup attempt, as the interim Chief of Staff, to fill the gap in leadership and command which resulted from the Chief of Staff's detention.

Sixth: It is clear that the campaign of purges led by Interior Minister Efgan Ala from 2013 onwards largely succeeded in removing Gulenists from within the Ministry of Interior and all its police and security branches. The campaign also succeeded in changing its affiliates' culture to one that was respectful of the people and the law. Since the first moments of the coup, the majority of police officers and security forces responded to the

Minister of Interior's order to confront the putschists and protect the people. General Zekia Aksakalli, Commander of the Special Forces subordinate to the Ministry of Interior, played a tangible role in confrontations with the putschists in many sites in Ankara and in the subsequent arrest of many of them in the second stage.

It is possible to say that the Turkish government did not seek the assistance of the military forces to confront the putschists or pursue them except in limited cases, such as calling upon Eskişehir air base to protect the President's plane and target one of the putschist helicopters which participated in bombing the Intelligence Headquarters in Ankara. This approach was adopted either due to ambiguity about the loyalty of the military forces or for a fear of an armed and bloody split in the army. The responsibility for confronting and pursuing the plotters fell entirely to the people, intelligence officers, security and police forces, and the Ministry of Interior Special Forces.

Seventh: The coup leaders and officials lied and deceived the soldiers who were ordered to participate in the coup operation. They told some of the soldiers that they were participating in a military exercise in the city and others that they were participating in an operation to save the country and that the people would welcome them with flowers. After midnight and directly after the President's call for people to take to the streets, the Directorate of Religious Affairs issued an order to all mosques in the country to issue the call to prayer. In the Turkish Ottoman traditions, the Sultan used to order mosques to issue the call to prayer at times outside of official times to call for people to participate in an urgent military campaign. Raising the call for prayer confused the coup units in the city and served as a moral motivation for the popular crowds to fill the streets and squares.



In conclusion, it seems that Turkey has changed significantly since the last successful military coup in 1980 and the last direct military intervention in political affairs in 1997. The changes since affected not only the Turkish people and their will to resist the military regime, but also the culture of the army command, the Ministry of Interior and the political class. It is truly amazing that no popular gatherings showed support for the putschists. The expansion of the middle classes in number and power in Turkey during the last quarter of the century, and the enormous popular power of what is referred to as the conservative base, made it difficult for the putschists to deceive people and gain any popular support. The plotters were unaware of these factors either due to their wild ambitions, their own ignorance or the ignorance of those who encouraged them.

After failure

At dawn on July 16th, the Turkish government pledged to conduct a widespread campaign to pursue and arrest the putschists, and detect the civilian elements in the state and judicial institutions who were connected to the military network responsible for the coup attempt. By July 18th, the government had arrested around eight thousand people, more than half of whom were military personnel.

Some of the soldiers were arrested within the first few hours of the failed coup attempt from the streets and institutions that they were controlling. Others were arrested after the army command and Akinci air base were liberated from the putschists. The features of the coup network became clear very quickly because investigations started directly with those arrested. Some officers had documents with them which clarified issues, and other officers were disheartened and willing to talk to the investigators. Following the pre-

liminary arrests, raids continued to arrest suspected officers from their barracks and different locations.

It is clear the government is determined to remove members of the secretive Gulenist network entirely from the military, security, state bureaucracy, and judiciary. This explains the decisions to dismiss or force into retirement thousands of judges, prosecutors, education sector employees, state bureaucrats, and personnel in the various branches of the security apparatus, the police forces and the Interior Ministry.

National and International Interactions

The coup attempt witnessed quick support from some Arab, Syrian and Egyptian media outlets and others related to the United Arab Emirates. Some circumstantial evidence, which remains unconfirmed, points to some Arab countries having prior knowledge of the coup scheme, and at least one Arab country may have provided/pledged financial support to the Gulenist network. The size of the coup network and the ranks of the implicated officers makes it difficult to believe the United States did not have prior knowledge of the attempt, without this necessarily meaning the Americans aided the putschists directly or showed any support for their plans. Nevertheless, inside and outside Turkey there are those who say that those who knew in advance and did not express clear opposition, and did not pass the information to the Turkish government, must be at least sympathetic to the coup plan and looking forward to its success.

The Turkish government, even if it possesses evidence that shows a prior relationship between its western allies and the putschists, will probably not publicly announce this, at least not in the current situation. Politically and due to Turkey's role and position in the world, it is unwise to say at this point in time that its western allies are not real al-



lies. In the next stage, Turkey will highly likely continue to insist that Washington hand over Fethullah Gulen and to that end it will finish preparing the extradition request file as soon as possible. By evading the issue, Washington will damage security cooperation between the two countries.

After the start of the coup and as evidence emerged in the early dawn hours of its failure, the President of the United States and the Secretary of State released statements of support for the democratic regime in Turkey. The statement denounced the coup attempt, called for self-restraint and the avoidance of bloodshed. The European Union released a similar statement which was subsequently followed by statements from various European capitals.

There are indicators that Russia was not reassured by the coup attempt despite tensions in relations between Moscow and Ankara since November 2015, and that the Russian leadership was happy with the failure of the coup. The Russian stance can only be explained by president Vladimir Putin's administration considering the coup attempt was the action of forces with strong ties to the United States and NATO, and the success of the coup would lead Ankara to lose much of its ability to take independent decisions regarding its relationship with Washington.

Regionally, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Iran did not issue statements supporting the legitimate Turkish government until the afternoon of July 16th, much later than other countries. The Jordanian government issued an ambiguous statement tepidly welcoming the failure of the coup. Egypt did not issue a statement following the failure of the coup. The Egyptian delegate to the Security Council objected to the draft statement the Council proposed issuing which denounced the coup attempt and supported the Turkish government.

In the few days following the coup attempt failure, a campaign by western officials and media began denouncing the Turkish government's attempts to dismantle the coup network. The campaign accuses Ankara of adopting a policy of revenge against those who oppose the Justice and Development Party government. Western governments and the European Union have warned Turkey that Ankara reintroducing the death penalty will lead to a complete halt of Turkey's European Union membership application. Arabic media outlets that showed early support for the coup attempt have contributed to this new campaign, denouncing the Turkish procedures. The campaign, which ignores the putschists' violence and plans, the size of civilian losses, and the judicial supervision of the Turkish government campaign, has reaffirmed doubts about the genuine attitude of some western and Arab countries.

It is expected that countries attitudes, regionally and internationally, will become a further determinant of the nature of relations between Ankara and these countries in coming months and years.

Possible trajectories

This is the first military coup in the republic of Turkey of this size and efficiency which has started effectively and yet failed. Without a doubt, the facts gradually revealed about the size of the network, and what is known about the unity of the people, government, parliament, and political forces in facing the coup attempt will greatly impact on Turkey and the Turkish state structure. The failure of the coup highlights the depth of the political and social transitions that Turkey has witnessed in the last decades. The failure also provides an immense opportunity to restructure the Turkish republic.

In the short term, the Turkish government's first priorities will be changing the structure of the state and judicial institutions.



Restructuring the army and intelligence organizations will take center stage in the government's priority list, as the military as an institution has experienced damage unprecedented in the republic's history. There is also a window of opportunity to find a common ground between political powers on the new constitution and the burning issue of Turkey's system of governance. Although the government is continuing its confrontational policy against the Kurdistan Workers' Party, this new political climate might prove permissive for a relaunch of the political process to settle the Kurdish issue.

President Erdogan seems to have emerged from the failed coup attempt stronger. His strategic choices will be a crucial determining factor for the Turkish Republic in the short and medium terms.

At the foreign policy level, the Turkish government will probably not retreat from the policy of reconciliation that it started in the months prior to the coup. However, Ankara appears to have become more independent in its relations with the United States and western European countries, more determined to improve its relations with Russia, and less keen to join the European Union.

From a broader perspective, the coup attempt has shown the size of the interest of the Arab world in Turkey and its transitions. Even if the failure of the coup did not have a direct, immediate effect on the Arab political arena, there is no doubt that the Turkish people's victory in defending their freedom will stand in favor of revolutionary and transitional powers against counter-revolutionary forces.

***This case report was first published
by Al Jazeera Center of Studies***

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