



A Coup as Audacious as Turkey's Future

By [Reva Goujon](#)

The bizarre scenes of Turkey's fleeting coup attempt are imprinted on our minds: a TRT news anchor declaring at gunpoint that the military had seized control of the country, a frazzled CNN Turk journalist holding up her iPhone for a puffy-eyed president calling on the nation to take to the streets, the rat-a-tat-tat of Cobra helicopters raining down bullets on a fleeing crowd, calls to prayer wailing through the night to bring the faithful out to protest, terror-stricken forces in army fatigues being hauled off by police and civilians, a bloodied soldier lynched by a mob of the president's supporters, and jubilant Syrians enjoying the irony of Turkey's chaos as their own country remained under siege.

But there was one subtler scene that stuck with me as I watched the events of July 15 unfold. It was past 3 a.m. in Turkey, roughly five hours after the putschists had started to move. The coup was already showing signs of fraying, and our team crowded around a screen to watch the tiny plane icon that was tracking President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's flight to the Istanbul Ataturk Airport. Coup plotters with an imperative to cut off the head of the Turkish state still had F-16s in the air, raising the stakes of Erdogan's short and precarious journey from his vacation spot in Marmaris to the seat of empire in Istanbul. The flight's transponder went off and we waited in suspense, wondering whether Erdogan had made a safe return. Several minutes later, the president — still wearing the suit and tie from his bold FaceTime appearance — came on NTV and vowed to purge the military of the "parallel" forces behind the coup. As Erdogan spoke with fresh vigor and vengeance, a large, somber portrait of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk stood over him, witnessing the twisted fate of the republic he had built more than nine decades ago.

Several observers were quick to frame the attempted coup as a repetition of history: The military was stepping in to defend the secular principles of Ataturk's republic against an Islamist civilian order, just as it had done between the 1960s and 1990s. But this is an overly simplistic and obsolete read of Turkish politics. The Turkey of the 21st century does not live under the guns of the secular elite and armed forces, nor is it dominated exclusively by a monolithic camp of Islamists. Turkey's fault lines are far more complex, and understanding them is critical to understanding not only the roots of the audacious coup attempt but also the country's geopolitical future.

Divided Between Empire and Nation-State

Turkey suffers from [an inescapable identity crisis](#). If we were to paint Turkey in broad strokes, we would see [the portrait of a nation torn](#) between a largely secular old guard centered on Istanbul and the Sea of Marmara, fusing Asia with Europe, and a more pious hinterland centered on the unforgiving Anatolian plateau, fusing Turkey with the Muslim world. Atatürk used the scraps left of the Ottoman Empire after World War I to build a country fueled by nationalism and guided by Western philosophy. In his eyes, the Turkish state would eschew the high maintenance of a sprawling multiethnic empire, instead focusing on the contours of the more moderate but powerful geographic space that straddles the Black and Mediterranean seas. Atatürk had witnessed the death of an empire and spearheaded the birth of a nation-state. For that state to survive, he believed that the military would have to be charged with preserving a strong secular spirit. Only then would Turkey be able to effectively manage its ties with the West while avoiding fatal entanglements in the Islamic lands beyond its borders. At the same time, Atatürk needed a way to bind the nation. Rather than trying to eliminate the role of Islam altogether, he [attempted to institutionalize religion](#), establishing the Presidency of Religious Affairs to manage religion on the state's terms and use it to distinguish Turkish citizens from the empire's non-Muslim remnants. Bosnians, Albanians and Circassians largely signed on to the new Turkish identity, while the country's Kurdish minority — also predominantly Muslim — was stripped of its ethnic distinction and henceforth considered "mountain Turks." Meanwhile, an identity built on Islam quietly endured in Turkey's periphery. This was the Turkey of the 20th century. For decades, secular politics and business empires reigned supreme while the Anatolian periphery was sidelined and minorities were expected to assimilate into the Turkish national identity. But starting in the 1970s, the country's conservative interior began to find ways to gradually build up its influence. The effort was helped in part by the grassroots movement led by [prominent cleric Fethullah Gülen](#), who had inherited Said Nursi's legacy of trying to fuse Islam with Western science and learning. In short, Gülen argued that Turkey should not shun the West in its embrace of Islam, but instead take the best of both worlds.

For Gülen to shape Turkey in this image, he first needed to stack the country's institutions with fellow believers. In his sermons, he called on supporters to "move in the arteries of the system without anyone noticing [their] existence until [they reached] all the power centers." Religious conservatives under the tutelage of Gülen as well as leaders seeking to emulate him did just that. They took advantage of lax background checks in the gendarmerie, which was responsible for securing the country's hinterland, to build up their presence in the security forces. At the same time, impressive networks linking Anatolian businessmen to markets in the Middle East, Central Asia and Africa developed to challenge the dominance of Istanbul's secular giants. Well-funded and influential media companies and schools sprouted up, raising the judges, teachers, politicians, policemen, pilots and army generals of a new era in which Turkey once again embraced its Islamist identity while maintaining its foothold in the West.

Through the end of the 1980s, aided by the chaotic security environment of the Cold War, the military had the institutional power needed to quickly step in and oust any civilian governments that strayed too far from Ataturk's secular model. But in the relative peace of the post-Cold War 1990s, the military had to use subtler means of forcing Turkey's first Islamist government from power — the "post-modern coup." By the turn of the century, the military's ability to snuff out Islamism with a simple and speedy overthrow had weakened considerably.

On the back of an economic boom, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) grew into a formidable force in the 2000s, boasting a support base that stretched from Istanbul to the Anatolian core. As the confidence of the party and its allies swelled, they sought to neuter the force that had pinned them down for so many years. The government launched [the Sledgehammer and Ergenekon trials](#), designed to uproot the alleged "deep state" of the ultranationalist military officers, politicians, judges and businessmen who challenged the new Turkey. By the mid-to-late 2000s, Islamists had deeply penetrated the military, and Gulenist-run media outlets were regularly armed with intelligence that was used to blackmail military personnel. Through a series of trials, many of which were presided over by Gulenist judges, the military was purged and the ranks of the air force, army gendarmerie and navy were refilled with loyalists.

A Rift Forms Among Turkey's Islamists

There is no doubt that Erdogan benefited from the weakening of the military at the hands of the Gulenists. But he also grew wary of just how powerful they had become. From his self-imposed exile in Pennsylvania, Gulen had begun to politically assert himself and publicly voiced [his disapproval of Erdogan's policies](#). Then, in 2013, when Erdogan attempted to boost his credentials with the Arab world by capitalizing on Turkey's confrontation with Israel over the Mavi Marmara flotilla incident, Gulen criticized Erdogan's anti-Israel stance. But the final straw may have come in late 2013, when the Gulen movement tried to leverage its clout within the judiciary and leaked audio recordings [to implicate Erdogan's inner circle](#) — including his son, Bilal — [in a corruption scandal](#).

From that point on, [the gap between the Gulenists and Erdogan's backers became unbreachable](#). In 2014, a Gulenist prosecutor began to target one of Erdogan's key allies, Hakan Fidan, by accusing him of engaging in secret talks with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). (Gulen seemed to resent that Erdogan and Fidan, the head of Turkish intelligence, were managing the government's peace talks with the PKK without involving his movement.) The same year, Gulen blatantly criticized Erdogan's [crackdown on Gezi Park protesters](#), even seeking the help of secular opposition parties that were fundamentally opposed to his own movement's views in an attempt [to undermine the ruling AKP](#). As the conflict deepened, Erdogan decided that he would be better off disarming the Gulenists while he still had the power to do so. Equipped with the same weapons that the Gulenists had used against the

military, Erdogan launched [a domestic and international campaign](#) to decimate his former Islamist allies.

Since 2014, the Turkish government has shut down Gulenist media offices, seized banks and businesses, shuttered schools and sacked judges. But purging the military was a job left unfinished. Erdogan knew that the biggest threat to his rule resided there, but he decided to address it in stages. It appears Fidan may have caught wind of a coup in the making, and he was rumored to be planning to have the perpetrators arrested ahead of the Supreme Military Council meeting on Aug. 1. The putschists, aware their cover was blown, sped up their timetable and launched the coup early, putting their plan into action July 15. Yet the fact that they represented a polarizing minority faction within the military [doomed them from the start](#). They went off the script of a bygone era, taking care to seize state-run media but not thinking to do the same with private broadcasts. Anti-coup sentiments trumped anti-Erdogan ones, as evidenced by the massive crowds in Turkey's streets and the unity statement against the coup made by the country's main political parties. [The coup started to fall apart](#) just two hours after it began, and within less than 24 hours it had collapsed completely.

An Inopportune Time for Distraction

All of this explains how Turkey got to such a violent point, but the road ahead will be equally complex. The most immediate consequence of the failed coup will be another pervasive purge. As of this writing, nearly 3,000 soldiers have been arrested and 2,700 judges have been fired. But to be clear, the Gulenist movement alone was not responsible for the challenge to Erdogan's rule. Though the Gulenist infiltration of the military was a key factor contributing to the coup attempt, the Gulenists were used as a tool by anti-Erdogan dissenters, just as they were used as a tool by the AKP to expand its power. Still, the president will use the "parallel" movement label broadly to net dissenters of all types. That is not to say the coup itself was a false flag operation designed by Erdogan to consolidate power even further, merely that he will exploit the ugly affair to accelerate his plans to reform the constitution in the name of ridding Turkey of its coup-ridden past. This, in turn, will enable him to augment the powers of the presidency and expand his avenues for clamping down on dissent.

As the inevitable crackdown ensues, European lectures on respect for human rights will fall on deaf ears. Turkey's leaders will do what they deem necessary to feel secure, and their European counterparts will bite their tongues as they try to preserve [the Continent's tenuous immigration deal with Ankara](#). Erdogan will similarly use Washington's reliance on Ankara's cooperation in the fight against the Islamic State to demand Gulen's extradition from the United States.

Beyond the short-term scope of the crackdown to come and bartering with the West, Ankara has a bigger problem on its hands. It will take a long time for Turkey to [repair its military](#) after a rebellion of such scale. The Gulenists [purged hundreds of military personnel](#) in their time; now

thousands more, including senior commanders, are being culled from the ranks. Kurdish militants, radical leftist groups and the Islamic State will be able to use Turkey's extreme vulnerability to carry out more attacks and feed the forces polarizing the state. Meanwhile, Turkey's external weaknesses will grow. As Ankara becomes distracted by internal threats, Kurdish separatists and the Syrian, Iranian and Russian governments will have more room to challenge Turkey's ambitions in the Middle East. The United States, unable to reliably count on Turkey to manage pressing threats like the Islamic State, will be forced to shoulder a heavier burden in the fight, while other Sunni powers such as Saudi Arabia will try to carve out a bigger role for themselves in the region.

And that is where Turkey's identity crisis will be laid bare. At [this point in its geopolitical cycle](#), Turkey has started down a neo-Ottoman path that compels a deeper involvement beyond its own borders, both as near as northern Syria and Iraq and as far as Libya, Gaza and Nagorno-Karabakh. At the same time, Turkey's leaders preside over Atatürkian borders and have a duty to protect the republic's national integrity. Policy contradictions will thus become more frequent, and [Turkey's actions may appear almost schizophrenic](#). The Turkish government has already [spearheaded a peace process](#) with the Kurds and referred to [vilayets](#), where minorities can enjoy greater autonomy, only to launch a heavy-handed crackdown, branding any form of Kurdish assertiveness as terrorism against the state a year later.

In the meantime, some factions have argued for [deeper military involvement in Syria and Iraq](#) out of necessity, while others counter that this is the very path Atatürk warned would invite destruction. (It is no coincidence that the first order of the putschists was a withdrawal of Turkish forces from northern Iraq.) The Islamists themselves are divided over the tactics Turkey should be using to recreate its sphere of influence within the Muslim world. The Gulenists advocate wielding soft power through schools, business deals and the media, while Erdoğan — facing an array of constraints as the head of state — is more willing to deploy the armed forces to manage threats abroad and harbors more aggressive ambitions of reshaping the Middle East according to his vision.

Peace Will Elude Turkey

Holding a TRT news anchor at gunpoint on July 15, those who led the coup declared the formation of a "Peace at Home Council" to govern a post-Erdoğan Turkey. The phrase, "yurtta sulh, cihanda sulh," translates to "peace at home, peace in the world" and was first uttered by Atatürk in 1931. It became the official motto for Turkey's foreign policy, reinforcing the idea that a stable republic at home will enable Turkey to respond effectively to problems that arise beyond its borders.

But the problems Turkey faces today are not the same as those it faced in the early 20th century, and interpretations of what kind of balance between pacifism and adventurism is

needed to produce peace in Turkey and abroad have predictably varied. What we can say with certainty, however, is that [Turkey should not expect peace in either place](#) anytime soon. The rise of Turkey's conservative class is a decades-long project that will endure for decades more. Regardless of whether Erdogan is at its helm, Turkey will continue down its expansionist path, a path that was unlikely to be short-circuited by a haphazard coup led by a motley group of Islamists and nationalists. Turkey is on this course, at this stage in history, because geopolitics wills it. But nobody said it would be a smooth ride.

Source: Strafor