

# A Historical Perspective on the July 2016 Coup Attempt in Turkey

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**ABSTRACT** *This paper sets out the historical background to the July 15 coup attempt. It outlines the Turkish armed forces' age-old interventionist tendencies and argues that this is driven by three overlapping impetuses. The first is concerns over its civilian colleagues' policy towards external threats and internal dissent. The second is the military's promotion of its own version of Islamic practice and identity. The third is its determination to protect and, where possible, advance its economic interests.*

**T**he fact that a faction of the Turkish military took up arms against the government on July 15 this year is perhaps not quite as surprising and extraordinary as many have suggested. Despite their rigid hierarchies, militaries are not the unitary, undifferentiated organs that they are often assumed to be – nor do these internal divisions remain permanently subsumed beneath civilian authority. Instead, there are endemic tensions between the forces of state and the force of arms. Some political systems manage these better than others, but all are – given the right set of circumstances – vulnerable to sections of their armed forces taking direct action. As this paper will demonstrate, Turkey is no different, and has been no different for as far back as you might wish to go. In the following pages, I will set out this background of interventionism, before going on to discuss the challenge that the AK Party has presented to both the armed forces' internal unity and their political role. It then presents three key imperatives which explain the coup attempt itself – the resistance of external pressure/internal dissent, the promotion of a certain version of Islam and the promotion of the military's commercial interests. As we shall see, none of these is new and each has been a regular driver of similar interventions in the past.

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**Insight Turkey**  
Vol. 18 / No. 3 /  
2016, pp. 119-138

## Turkey's Long-Divided, Long-Interventionist Military

As soon as the Ottoman state stopped expanding in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the availability of spoils decreased and sections of the military became increasingly unhappy with the scale of the Porte's revenue absorption. Once the empire's frontier became stationary, especially during a century and half of inconclusive warfare with the Habsburgs following the failure to take Vienna in 1529, many of its officers began trading across the border, thereby modifying their allegiance to the state.

Increasingly short on specie following the collapse of its silver-based currency under pressure from Spanish-American imports, the Ottoman state attempted to re-impose control through a new tax farming system and the extension of the standing janissary corps to operate alongside its larger cavalry regiments. Both rebelled regularly. Insubordination forced Sultan Murat III to have his Rumeli governor and treasurer executed in 1589, while military disquiet over the surrender at Karlowitz of 1699 ousted Sultan Mustafa II. Similar ends befell Sultans Ahmed III (1730), Selim III (1807) and Mustafa IV (1808), underlining the praetorian character of the Ottoman military's political oversight.

Indeed, the very origins of the Turkish republic are to be found in the politicization of the empire's armed forces. The revolutionary Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) – or so-called Young Turks – was founded not in factories, cafes or newspapers, but in the Military Medical School. Its moment came as a consequence of the Third Army Corps' mutiny in 1907. In fact, it would have probably been crushed within a year had not the same military units (including a young Mustafa Kemal) not intervened to depose Sultan Abdülhamid in 1909. Several years of in-fighting between different factions of the land-forces (each backing one of the two principal political parties) culminated in a coup in 1913 and more than 30 years of stratocratic rule.

Despite this governing elite almost entirely consisting of serving or recently retired military officers (Talat Paşa was an exception, being previously a postman), internal divisions persisted. Mustafa Kemal, himself, narrowly avoided a court-martial during the First World War and, as Erik Zürcher has often pointed out, the subsequent War of Independence (1919-1922) was as much a conflict between different elements of the Ottoman armed forces as it was a liberation struggle against foreign occupation.<sup>1</sup> Some senior generals (Vehib Paşa, for instance) chose not participate, while others, like Süleyman Şefik Paşa, commanded Ottoman units still loyal to the Sultan and opposed to the nationalists. Irregular militia leaders led by former Ottoman officers such as Ahmet Anzavur and Topal Osman also plagued the nascent republic with on-going campaigns of sedition.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, the military elite remained both divided and highly politicized from the very establishment of the republic onwards. Opposition to Mustafa Kemal's early social reforms centered around some of the empire's most senior officers – key members of the so-called Second Group which left his political party in 1924. These included Ali Fuat Cebesoy (Commander of the Second Army), Kâzım Karabekir (Commander of the First Army) and Rauf Orbay (Chief of Naval Staff). All were dismissed following a plot to assassinate Mustafa Kemal in 1926 and amid suspicions that they might have assisted the Sheikh Said rebellion the previous year. Having prohibited serving members of the armed forces from holding elected office (a measure which usefully prevented the traditionally recalcitrant junior officer corps from extending their influence), Mustafa Kemal thenceforth relied on a carefully selected coterie of western Anatolia elites. Between 1931 and 1943, two-thirds of the entire electoral body was continually returned to office as the proportion of deputies born in their constituency steadily declined.<sup>2</sup>

Following his death in 1938, however, divisions emerged over who should succeed him as president. Eventually, the Prime Minister and former General, İsmet İnönü, secured the support of the First and Third Army Commanders and thus controversially overtook the favorite, Chief of Staff Fevzi Çakmak. Many within the officer corps remained unhappy with this and rumors of coup plots persisted throughout the 1940s – particularly after İnönü first gave in to democratizing pressures and, secondly, rigged the subsequent elections in 1946.

When he eventually lost power in 1950, the new government under Adnan Menderes sought to reduce the military's influence by initially dismissing the entire army command within a month of taking power and then relaxing many of Mustafa Kemal's bureaucratic controls. The officer corps was again highly divided over how to respond. A radical faction led by former Nazi-liaison officer, Colonel Alparslan Türkeş, favored an aggressively rightist intervention followed by a prolonged term of military governance. Its potential threat to the chain of command was certainly an element in Chief-of-Staff Gürsel's decision to remove the government in 1960 and to make Türkeş his new Presidential under-secretary. Ultimately, though, enduring concerns over the politicization of the officer corps led to the expulsion of Türkeş with other leaders of his fac-

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Chief of Staff,  
General Hulusi  
Akar greets  
the crowd on  
August 7, 2016 at  
Yenikapı rally.

AFP PHOTO /  
OZAN KÖSE



tion, as well as the dismissal of 235 generals and more than 5,000 other officers. A failed counter-coup attempt in 1963 prompted Gürsel to order the hanging of two of the conspiring officers and to discharge a further 1,500 officer cadets.<sup>3</sup> The ongoing severity of these divisions helped to persuade the military elite to keep the Presidency in its hands (ultimately for the next 30 years) and to use its control of the newly-formed National Security Council (NSC) to arrange the political make-up of the subsequent coalition governments. The result was an attitude of what Semih Vaner has called ‘benevolence bordering on complicity’ from its civilian counterparts throughout the 1960s.<sup>4</sup>

The March 12 memorandum of 1971 which removed the government was therefore as much about responding to the perennial problem of political dissent within the military as the paralysis of the legislature or the ongoing conflict between right and left on Turkey’s streets. More than 60 generals and 500 colonels lost their jobs for ‘having gone outside the hierarchic mechanism’ as severe limitations on the freedom of the judiciary, the media, universities and the Assembly Houses were imposed.<sup>5</sup> This was enforced through the declaration of martial law and direct military control over a series of non-party governments between 1971 and 1973 in which Türkeş (now the leader of a small political party) and his faction were given the Deputy Prime Ministry and control over two other important Cabinet portfolios.

Nonetheless, the NSC could not prevent the public sector from becoming highly polarized as politically motivated murders rose throughout the decade.

The coup of 1980 was thus not simply about the need to restore public order. As Chief of Staff Evren made clear, it was also ‘to save the army from politics and to cleanse it from political dirt.’<sup>6</sup> However, with only 14 percent of the officially acknowledged arrests between September 1980 and February 1983 being from rightist organizations (compared to 54 percent from the political left), Türkiye’s direct action units were able

to continue their association with sections of the armed forces.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, some were permitted an ongoing role in the deployment against the PKK once the latter extended its campaign to include state targets in 1984 – a development which is also likely to have contributed to the decision to create a Defense Industry Support Fund the following year. ‘Nearly exempt from Turkish accounting and bidding laws,’ it was initially derived from a 5 percent levy on income tax and had reached an estimated value of \$1.5 billion by 1991, despite the fact that the military budget had already long exceeded the combined allocations for Education and Health.<sup>8</sup>

Such substantial increases in its economic power, coupled with ongoing emergency rule and a new Constitution affording the armed forces extraordinary supervisory powers, greatly undermined successive civilian governments thenceforth. Any effort to extend their authority outside fiscal matters was carefully monitored and frequently circumscribed. Such was the Staff Command’s influence that it was able, for instance, to remove Prime Minister Erbakan in 1997 for stepping out of line with his staunchly secular, pro-military coalition colleagues by simply asking him to resign.

## **The Challenge of EU Accession and the AK Party**

The AK Party was elected at an opportune time. The military’s success in pressuring Syria to abandon its support of the PKK in 1999 had already led to the incarceration of the insurgency’s leader. The resultant 5-year ceasefire saw estimated fatalities decrease from 23,695 for the 5-year period 1994-98 to 1,100 for 1999 to 2004 and growing questions over the necessity of the military’s ongoing political role.<sup>9</sup> As the self-proclaimed defenders of democracy and vanguard of westernization, the military elite thus appeared to be rhetorically entrapped by the pro-EU reformism of a government with a rising national mandate (up from 34 percent of the national vote in 2002, to 47 percent in 2007 and then on to 50 percent in 2011).

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As ever, the officer corps was heavily divided. Ultimately, though, its leadership – particularly the General Staff's European Union analysis unit headed by Brigadier General Ali Esener – decisively backed the government's accession plans. Reiterating the 'full membership message' issued by then Chief of Staff, Hüseyin Kıvrıkoğlu in May 2000, Yaşar Büyükanıt (Chief of Staff from 2006 to 2008) stated that membership would represent the 'ultimate condition for the realization of the target of modernization which Mustafa Kemal Atatürk chose for the Turkish nation.'<sup>10</sup> Kıvrıkoğlu had, however, used the same speech to underline that neither the prospect of accession, nor the recent PKK ceasefire, would affect military strategy. As such, his successor, Hilmi Özkök, pressed the incoming AK Party government to see through a legislative program

sufficiently rapid and definite to minimize its impact on the generals' praetorian position. The National Program for the Adoption of the Acquis (announced in March 2001) was thus passed into law with exceptional speed. It also departed from the Accession Partnership (agreed with the EU the preceding November) by adhering to many of the stated preferences of the armed forces' leadership. The result was that, while the reforms doubtlessly limited the generals' power in a wide variety of ways, they 'fell short of curbing the[ir] most critical prerogatives, especially those that allowed the[m]... to pursue the[ir] guardianship role.'<sup>11</sup>

The AK Party government's attempts to address this were initially presented in October 2004 by its Minority and Cultural Rights Working Group. It recommended that the military's constitutional commitment to defending the Turkish nation be replaced with a new notion of origin – *Türkiyeli* in place of *Türk*. This 'provoked such a negative reaction' from the military leadership, though, that the idea was dropped from the final draft and two of its authors (Baskın Oran and İbrahim Kaboğlu) were prosecuted under Articles 216 and 301 of the 2005 Penal Code.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, such was the level of concern within the officer corps in the run-up to the report's publication that a faction, allegedly led by

Generals Şener Eruygur and Hurşit Tolon, prepared a plot to overthrow the government.<sup>13</sup>

Continuing concerns over further constitutional amendments and the party's absorption of more of the executive in early 2007 led Büyükanıt to upload a statement onto the General Staff's website (the infamous "e-memorandum"), underlining the military's intention 'to protect the unchangeable characteristics of the Republic of Turkey' and threatening to 'display its attitude and action openly and clearly whenever it is necessary.' The AK Party responded by winning a landslide general election and then by taking 339 seats out of 448 in the subsequent Presidential election. By the end of 2007, it had also garnered nearly 70 percent of the votes in a constitutional referendum and was reported to be considering subsuming the power of the Chief of Staff beneath that of the Supreme Court.

Having been unable to pressure the Constitutional Court into closing the party the succeeding year (although it was heavily fined for breaching the law on secularism), the military's leadership was then subject to a series of indictments alleging its co-operation with nationalist direct action groups going back to the 1971 coup. The wide-ranging Ergenekon investigation, as it became known, revealed a complex web of anti-government conspiracies within the armed forces. So extensive were the resultant arrests that the entire Staff Command resigned in 2011 amid suggestions that a pro-AK Party faction within the military had assumed control over all key positions. Erdoğan immediately replaced them and the case concluded with 100 of (mostly senior) officers receiving prison terms – including Generals Tolon and Eruygur and former Chief of Staff, İlker Başbuğ.<sup>14</sup>

## Praetor's Prefecture

This *longue durée* of the Turkish military's political involvement history reveals three principal lessons for those seeking to understand the events of July 2016. First, and foremost perhaps, is the generals' desire to secure political influence while maintaining the chain of command and avoiding being drawn into internecine civil conflict. The principal threat to this has always been their civilian colleagues' response to internal dissent and external challenge. As early as 1519, local administrators (*celali*) used not only mercenary forces (*sekbân*), but also disaffected regular cavalrymen (*sipahi*) to demand a greater devolvement of power. Although the Janissaries proved useful in imposing central control over these, they too demanded greater political influence – occasionally declaring their own rule over imperial territory (such as Serbia in 1804) and even reducing the Sultan to being a 'subject to his own slaves' (as Osman II put it following defeat to Poland in 1622).<sup>15</sup>

Tanks, belonging to the Etimesgut Armored Forces School, parade in the town of Sincan to warn the government, on February 04, 1997.

AA PHOTO / HİKMET SAATÇI

These three features – the centrifugal forces of power devolvement (and ultimately succession), internal divisions within the officer corps and the encroachment of the Great Powers – reached an unprecedented proportion during the first quarter of the twentieth century, prompting Mustafa Kemal's revolutionary military intervention. While the latter lived on as the infamous “Sevres Syndrome,” the principal concern of the new military republic was the former two, understood as the threat of domestic irredentism to political order and to the chain of command. In all three regards, *zulum* is, it was said, preferable to *fitne* – as the Kurdish rebels of Ağrı and Dersim found out in 1930 and 1937 respectively.



The decision to permit a greater role for civilian elites following the Second World War (arguably as much a result of international pressure as domestic change) exacerbated ancient internal divisions within the officer corps. Long-standing conflicts (apparent since [and probably before] the *celali* rebellions) between greater centrism and a more flexible relationship between state and subject grew during the 1950s as agricultural mechanization and increased industrial capitalization produced unparalleled levels of east-west migration. The overall population of the country's cities grew from around five to nearly nine million across the decade, becoming “ruralized” centers of minority identity.<sup>16</sup> With unionization growing by 500 percent between 1948 and 1958, ‘social lines came to be drawn along geographical differences... [which] reinforced solidarities in the labor market and political rivalries were inevitably superimposed on such divisions.’<sup>17</sup>

The military's incoherent and divided response to these rapid social changes not only shaped the 1960 coup, but have configured the political shape of its supervisory role ever since. The ghosts of Türkeş' rightists continue to influence sections of the officer corps, as both the Susurluk<sup>18</sup> and Ergenekon investigations have (despite all their procedural and institutional shortcomings) revealed, while the conflict between successive civilian governments and the political left (especially the PKK and DHKP/C) has remained one of Staff Command's principal foci.

Here, the post-1999 reform program is the key backdrop to the 2016 coup attempt. While the military elite continued to regard EU harmonization as necessary for Turkey to reach ‘contemporary civilization,’ as General Nahit Şenoğul put it, it also warned that some of its content would be welcomed by ‘separatist terrorist organizations’ and ‘those who wish to destroy the secular republic.’<sup>19</sup> So, even though the European Commission’s Accession Partnership Document made no reference to the Kurdish minority and generally made ‘every diplomatic effort to avoid offending Turkish sensitivities,’ Büyükanıt continued to caution that ‘the EU target of Turkey cannot be compatible with the archaic and separatist goals of those who have different views on the secular regime and unitary structure of the state.’<sup>20</sup> Clearly directed at the AK Party, this captured many of the fears within the military elite – that there would be a synthesis of interest based on a shared history of censure between Islamic circles and ethnic minorities. As Mustafa Akyol has observed, the former ‘had their religious institutions destroyed, [while] the latter saw their language and identity banned.’<sup>21</sup>

Authors spoke of an ‘unprecedented political space... for political dialogue between Turkey and the Kurds’ and even a ‘palpable “Kurdification” of civil society.’<sup>22</sup> With the head of the EU Commission in Ankara, Hans Jorg Kretschmer, calling on the state ‘to recognize that Kurds are Kurds... not Turks’ and Erdoğan apparently determined to rethink the constitution under the remit of the ethnically Kurdish deputy party president, Dengir Mir Mehmet Fırat (despite the collapse of the PKK’s ceasefire in 2005), the military elite’s consternation reached new levels.<sup>23</sup> Undeterred, the government introduced a ‘national oneness and brotherhood project,’ popularly known as “the Kurdish opening,” permitting public instruction in minority languages (beginning at the university level) and allowing the changing of Turkicized toponyms – initiatives reported to be supported by almost 80 percent of Kurds.<sup>24</sup>

Büyükanıt’s successor, İlker Başbuğ, was appalled. Having warned the government that the ‘constitutional recognition of ethnic identities... may bring the country to polarization and decomposition,’ he issued a reminder that, ‘as stated in the third article of the Constitution, the Turkish State, with its territory and nation, is an indivisible entity. Its language is Turkish.’<sup>25</sup> The result was that Erdoğan back-tracked rapidly. Fırat was replaced with Abdulkadir Aksu who is also ethnically Kurdish, but unlike his predecessor, ‘had good relations with the state security apparatus.’<sup>26</sup> Mass trials of Kurdish leaders began and violence levels escalated badly with more than 700 fatalities leading up to the ceasefire of 2013 – prompting speculation that Erdoğan had ‘struck an informal compromise with the military to drop his reformist agenda in return for being allowed to remain in power.’<sup>27</sup>

If so, this uneasy accord appears to have come under increasing pressure since the resumption of violence in July 2015. It is not simply the fact that nearly

2,000 people have died since then, but that, for the first time in whole history of the conflict, losses amongst the Turkish Armed Forces may be reaching near-parity with those of the PKK. While official casualty figures maintain the kind of disparity (5,000 soldiers versus 23,000 insurgents killed) that made up the 1984 to 2002 period, a recent and widely publicized report from the International Crisis Group suggests that the true numbers since July 2015 may be as close as 676 and 733 respectively.<sup>28</sup> This, coupled with the ongoing high-profile presence of the hitherto repeatedly banned pro-Kurdish political party and rumors of continuing peace negotiations with the PKK itself, has added to frustrations within the officer corps. Evidence is still emerging here, but a document alleged to have been recovered recently from a public prosecutor, Mehmet Sel, suggests that preparations for putting Erdoğan on trial for ‘helping an armed terror organization’ once the military takeover was complete were already in place well beforehand.<sup>29</sup>

## Versions of Islam

The second key backdrop to the coup attempt this year is the Turkish armed forces’ relationship with Islam. Militaries are, despite their relative isolation, not immune from social cleavages. In Turkey, a fundamental tension has long surrounded the public presence of faith. This is, however, not a simple conflict between “Islam” and “secularism” (or the religious and the profane), but a complex patchwork of competing versions of practice and identity. Within such a public marketplace of ideas, projecting a particular “version” of Islam onto the civilian sphere has thus long been a key objective of the military’s leadership. As ever, though, this was also always resisted by not just politicians and clergy, but also factions within the military itself.

As far back as the *celali* rebellions (and probably beyond), Sunni and Alevi identities played an important role in the both the uprisings themselves and the Ottoman military’s response. The Janissaries were generally connected to the latter through the Bektashi sufi order, while other branches of the armed forces tended to be closer to Mevlevi and later Naqshbandi tariqas. Tensions frequently arose over matters of religious practice and, especially during the nineteenth century’s “modernizing” reforms. The Yamak branch of the Janissaries, for instance, temporarily dethroned Sultan Selim III in 1807, following a fatwa from the Sheikh al-Islam, Topal Ataullah, partly due to the Porte’s attempts at introducing European-style uniforms.

Following the First World War, the *Kuvâ-i İnzibâtiyye* forces of Sultan Mehmed VI, which fought against Mustafa Kemal in the War of Independence, were mobilized by another fatwa from the Sheikh al-Islam (this time Dürriyade Abdullah) confirming his legitimacy as Khalifa and castigating the nationalists

as rebels. A counter fatwa from the Mufti of Ankara, Rifat Börekçi, arguing that the Sultan had been captured by the Allies and should be liberated was used as a basis for their own campaign. Ultimately, both the offices of Sultan and Khalifa were replaced with a Religious Affairs Presidency (Diyanet) under Börekçi's leadership in 1924, causing considerable disquiet within the military, which was already stretched by a large-scale Alevi rebellion in Koçgiri and even more extensive Kurdish uprisings in Ağrı and Diyarbakır.

With the arrival of multi-party rule in the 1950s, Turkey followed many of the Muslim-majority countries affiliated to the West and promoted Islam as an antidote to possible pro-Soviet leftism.

The military elite, as the principal liaison mechanism to NATO (from 1952 onwards), played a key role here, but were again faced with the old problem of maintaining centralized, state control over popular religiosity. The *Nurcu* network of Kurdish preacher, Said Nursi, not only promoted Prime Minister Menderes as an 'indispensable leader,' but also helped to establish a worrying (to the generals) division between a religious government and an irreligious opposition (led by İnönü).<sup>30</sup> Rumors that it had also recruited heavily from within the military itself helped to ensure that the rewritten constitution of 1961 (following the coup the year before) permitted a greater public place for Islam. The growing co-operation between sections of the armed and the extreme right during this period might similarly be seen as partly to appease the officers' factionalism, as well as to impose some degree of control over popular religious practice.

The result was a combined sense of national and faith identity – the so-called “Turkish-Islamic synthesis.” As much an attempt to dilute the venom of Türkeş' rightists as to bring coherence to Tugut Özal's *Anavatan* Party of the 1980s, it advocated a dual policy of promoting a pro-western cultural and economic discourse, while attempting to incorporate religious sentiments into the state administration. Özal, a high-ranking member of a Naqshbandi *tariqa* who once stood for election with Necmettin Erbakan, began to attend Friday prayer with his ministers, undertook the Haj, placed other *tariqa* members in charge of the Education and Information Ministries and, in 1990, announced a 237 percent increase in the budget of the Religious Affairs Presidency.<sup>31</sup> Even though military elite invigilation remained (more than 3,000 people were arrested for 'anti-secular' activities in 1987 followed by another 800 in 1990 for 'having ties with fundamentalist organisations'), certain sections of the Islamist movement were, under such state tutelage, able to move from the political



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**The events of July 15 came from a combination of the same three concerns that have always driven (and divided) the Turkish armed forces: the dual threat of external pressure and internal dissent, the tensions both within the armed forces and between the different branches of the state over the practice and promotion of religion, and the economic interest of the Turkish generals**

periphery to the centre.<sup>32</sup> By the 1990s, this had grown to the point of allegedly appointing religiously-inspired direct-action “contra-guerrillas” (the so-called *Hizballah* units) to fight the PKK.<sup>33</sup>

This strategy remained controversial within the armed forces. To many, Erbakan’s recalcitrance demonstrated the risks involved – dangers that the election of the AK Party in 2002 (many of the leaders of which had been in *Refah*) showed had far from dissipated with his removal from government in 1997.<sup>34</sup> Both sides of this conflict viewed EU accession as a means of weakening the political power of the other; membership would strengthen the civilian character of the executive, but was also perceived to be what Tuba Ünlü Bilgiç calls ‘a security guarantee for the country’s unitary and secular characteristics.’<sup>35</sup> The ultimate failure to advance beyond candidate status thus produced the contradictory result of simultaneously weakening the AK Party’s reform momentum while widening the scope of debates over civil liberties.

Fundamental to these was the growing challenge to the ideological apparatus of the Turkish-Islam synthesis and its military sponsors. Having failed to prevent the former deputy chairman of *Refah*, Abdullah Gül, acceding to the presidency, Büyükanıt spoke of ‘centers of evil’ undermining the state. These proved powerful enough to force his successor, İlker Başbuğ, into court, to prompt the resignation of the next Chief of Staff, Işık Koşaner, and for Necdet Özel (Chief of Staff before Hulusi Akar – the current incumbent so humiliated on July 15) to describe his time at the top as ‘traumatic.’<sup>36</sup> The new version of Islam permeating the state is far from the Thatcherite elitism of the 1980s and early 90s. Instead, it is driven by the kind of mass religiosity which has seen enrolment at Iman-Hatip schools rise from 70,000 to more than 500,000 students within the AK Party years and as many as another 1000 Gülen schools teaching perhaps even greater numbers.<sup>37</sup>



To the relief of the generals, the Gezi Park protests of May 2013 (which they viewed as demonstrating that ‘the youth had actually understood and internalized Atatürkism in its own way’), fractured the already troubled relationship between these two elements of Turkey’s emergent state ideology.<sup>38</sup> Unhappy with Erdoğan’s handling of the unrest, the Gülen movement are said to have arranged the arrest of 43 government officials over allegations of corruption later that year. Erdoğan responded to what he called this “judicial coup” attempt with series of mass dismissals of security personnel that were so severe and divisive that it prompted the resignation of the Ministers of Health, the Economy, the Interior and the Environment.<sup>39</sup>

Such opposition to the AK Party was mobilized, radicalized and perhaps unified – temporarily at least – across political divides from 2014 onwards by the growing perception that its latent Islamism has rendered it sympathetic to the more militant elements of the Syrian civil war. Long accused of turning a blind eye to petro-chemicals, weapons and combatants crossing its borders, the military’s leadership were increasingly asked to explain its embarrassingly limited engagement with Islamic State’s forces, which have clearly benefited from Erdoğan’s focus on the YPG. Indeed, parliament’s authorization of a full-scale land invasion of Syria, ostensibly to prevent the concretization of the Rojava enclave in 2014, led to reports that staff commanders were ‘reluctant’ to pursue such a blatant breach of NATO policy.<sup>40</sup> They were apparently able to obstruct the government in the summer of 2015 after the AK Party failed to obtain an absolute majority in the general elections, but by the end of June this year, Erdoğan had obtained the support of Saudi Arabia, resolved its differences with Russia and was preparing to force through Operation Euphrates Shield.<sup>41</sup> This plan now largely appears to have been enacted with some even claiming that a part of the ostensibly anti-Gülenist post-coup ‘purges within the Armed Forces were [actually] in-

The last units of the coup plotters, who blockaded the Bosphorus Bridge in Istanbul, surrender, symbolizing the end of the coup attempt.

IHA PHOTO

tended to get rid of members of the military hierarchy who were opposed to an invasion of Syria.<sup>42</sup>

## The Military-Industrial Complex

The third element to the July 2016 coup attempt is the Turkish armed forces' complex web of commercial interests. In general, military elites tend to pursue three fundamental economic policy objectives: (1) avoiding periods of decline or stagnation which may be a destabilizing influence on the masses, (2) developing the industrial sector as a source of foreign currency with which to purchase sophisticated weaponry abroad and support the domestic manufacture of military hardware (3) maintaining their own financial security.<sup>43</sup> Each of these has been a key feature of Turkey's political development.

The costs of suppressing the *celali* rebellions, combined with the 1578-90 war with the Safavid Empire, for instance, led to delays in military salary payments resulting in mutinies so severe that Sultan Murad III was virtually a prisoner in his own palace. Osman II's attempts to restrict the economic power of the Janissaries (in the form of closing their coffee-shop network) prompted his assassination in 1622. Currency devaluations during the Cretan War of 1645-1669 provoked an army rebellion which saw numerous Ottoman administrators hanged – the so-called Çınar Incident of 1656. Thenceforth, the Porte was regularly challenged by groups of soldiers attempting to resist the state's extractive economic policies (such as in Edirne in 1703 or Aydın in 1829) or to force an improvement in pay and conditions (as in the Atmeydanı Incident of 1648 or the Patrona Halil uprising of 1730). Indeed, the unrest which brought the CUP to power in 1907 was largely driven by the immiseration caused by a world-wide economic downturn.

During the early years of the Republic, the military bureaucracy initially focused on increasing agricultural output (in keeping with the free trade stipulations of the Lausanne Treaty), but, following the 1929 crash, it adopted an etatist policy of 'direct state participation, ownership and planning of the economy.'<sup>44</sup> Influenced by the Soviet model of central planning and an \$18 million loan from Moscow in 1933, this was facilitated by the growing tendency for senior military officials to accept executive positions within large corporations upon retirement. A 'seamless coalition' of officer and bureaucrat (as Çağlar Keyder put it) succeeded in doubling industrial output during the 1930s, partly through the vigorous suppression of workers' organizations via legislation modeled on Italian fascism.<sup>45</sup>

A key objective of the Menderes government during the 1950s was to dismantle this supervisory structure. It stepped back from heavy industry – preferring

instead to leave investment in this sector to foreign capital (the United States' contribution here rose from \$16 million to \$33 million between 1950 and 1954).<sup>46</sup> It also borrowed heavily to support its agricultural power base (receiving \$56 million dollars in loans from the IBRD between 1950 and 1957 and a further \$100 million from the IMF and OEEC in 1958), thereby pushing up Turkey's national debt from 775 million lira in 1950 to over 5 billion lira in 1960.<sup>47</sup> Worsened by the governmental policy of printing ever more money, this led to currency devaluations, high domestic inflation and acute increases in the cost of living. Fatally for Menderes, he failed to protect the public sector (including the armed forces) and allowed its salary levels to drop precipitously.<sup>48</sup>



## The very origins of the Turkish republic are to be found in the politicization of the empire's armed forces

It is no surprise, then, that a key focus for the 1960 coup was to restore the military's role at the center of the Turkish industrial economy. A mutual assistance scheme (*Ordu Yardımlaşma Kurumu* – OYAK) was established the following year which, by 1975, had subsidized 19,000 homes, advanced 35,000 personal loans and amassed assets in excess of two billion Turkish liras.<sup>49</sup> Since this was managed by the generals themselves, it positioned the armed forces at the heart of middle-class consumption, import-substituting industrialization and foreign capital exchange, leading to a significant 'bourgeoisification' of the military elite. Indeed, a key trigger factor for the 1980 coup appears to have been concerns that ongoing civil unrest would cause the IMF to withhold an unprecedented investment package of \$1.5 billion – a decision that would have greatly affected OYAK's by-then annual profitability of over \$15 million per year.<sup>50</sup> The subsequent marketization of Turkey's industrial sector brought even greater riches for OYAK, which, by 2001, had increased these returns to almost \$100 million.<sup>51</sup> Today, according to its latest report, it now has more than 300,000 members, controls 73 subsidiary companies and maintains consolidated assets worth over \$17 billion – making it one of the country's largest conglomerations.

Recently, though, the government has raised a series of concerns over its influence and lack of accountability. Obligated by EU harmonization requirements to bring international standards to government accounting, parliament amended the Constitution in 2005 to permit public scrutiny of armed forces budgets. Although diluted and delayed until 2010, an audit of all military assets and procurements was carried out – with the exception of OYAK. This was despite widespread question-marks over the opacity with which its steel subsidiary Erdemir was sold to Arcelor in 2006 and its banking arm to ING the following year – both for around \$2.7 billion.<sup>52</sup> The government responded with further legislation in 2011, provoking reports that 'all of OYAK's special privileges are being done away with.'<sup>53</sup>

In May this year, its CEO of 16 years, Coşkun Ulusoy (described by Fortune Magazine as ‘the Warren Buffet of Turkey’), unexpectedly stepped down. He was replaced by Süleyman Savaş Erdem who comes from a regulatory background and was previously deputy head of the Prime Ministry Inspection Board. ‘Known to be close to President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan,’ he is reported to be appointing ‘new managers loyal to the AK Party’ and ultimately ‘wants to first shrink it [OYAK] through privatization and eventually eliminate it.’<sup>54</sup> This would threaten the large pay-offs (already significantly devalued by a collapse in the value of the Lira from 1.8 to nearly 3 to the dollar from early 2013 to mid-2016) long-serving officers receive – from \$250,000 for generals to \$90,000 for NCOs depending on the years of service. Given that the AK Party has presided over a broader reduction in military expenditure from near to 4 to just over 2 percent of GDP (according to the World Bank), has imposed greater supervisory controls over the Defense Industry Support Fund to the detriment of the Chief of Staff (with new legislation in 2011) and has decreased the Ministry of Defense’s share of the overall state budget from 11.4 percent in 2002 to 5.3 percent in 2014, it would be no surprise if economic concerns not dissimilar to those marking previous interventions contributed to the coup attempt in July this year.<sup>55</sup>

## Conclusion

The events of July 15 are perhaps not the great shock many have presented them to be. They came from a combination of the same three concerns that have always driven (and divided) the Turkish armed forces. The first is the dual threat of external pressure and internal dissent. These have taken many forms over the centuries, ultimately causing the collapse of the Ottoman system and, in response, the birth of the republic. The military’s role at the very epicenter of the new state has given it a lasting (permanent perhaps) political role that it connects directly to the indivisibility of the state. While considerable disagreement exists within the officer corps over how this should be best applied and which threats require remedial action, the defense of the center from the centrifugal forces of the periphery has been a principal preoccupation. In recent years and in the build-up to this year’s coup attempt, the Kurdish insurgency – with all its international dimensions – has been a significant driver of interventionist pressure on the generals. There is little doubt that the AK Party’s previous attempts to effect some sort of resolution to the conflict, along with an upsurge in violence over the preceding year, combined to create a sense of crisis within sections of the military.

The second key lesson from the past is that tensions have always existed both within the armed forces and between the different branches of the state over the practice and promotion of religion. Frequently overlapping with the irre-

dentism of the periphery (notably in the cases of the Alevi rebellions against the Porte or the Kurdish uprisings of the 1920s and 30s), the military elite has, firstly, sought to protect its chain of command and, secondly, tried to maintain supervisory control over popular faith identities. Within the republican era, this has tended to connect Islamic practice to notions of Turkish nationalism, producing strongly statist and socially conservative faith identities that continue to be a highly effective counter to the political left (including the PKK). Recently, though, such top-down tutelage has come under sustained pressure from popular religious networks operating at very grass-roots levels. The most politically dynamic of these has been the AK Party and the Gülen movement – both of which have succeeded in penetrating the officer corps and destabilizing its leadership's commitment to the Turkish-Islamic synthesis. Each became increasingly mobilized by, firstly, the Gezi Park protests (and subsequent internecine conflicts) and, secondly, by the government's highly controversial response to the Syrian conflagration.

Finally, the Turkish generals – like military sectors the world over – have always been particularly keen to protect their economic interests. From the days of Janissary coffee-houses onwards, this has been a source of tension within the armed forces and with civilian elites. The republic extended the tradition of the officer-merchant in mufti, as senior commanders took on more and more managerial roles in industry, placing the armed services at the heart of Turkey's emerging bourgeoisie.<sup>56</sup> OYAK is the largest of many such examples here and thus remains a key area of sensitivity both for serving soldiers and their seniors. Threats to its highly privileged status – much of which relies on advantageous links to the state – are therefore always likely to mobilize opposition to incumbent governments, especially if other economic indicators (investment levels, currency exchange rates and so on) are unfavorable. ■

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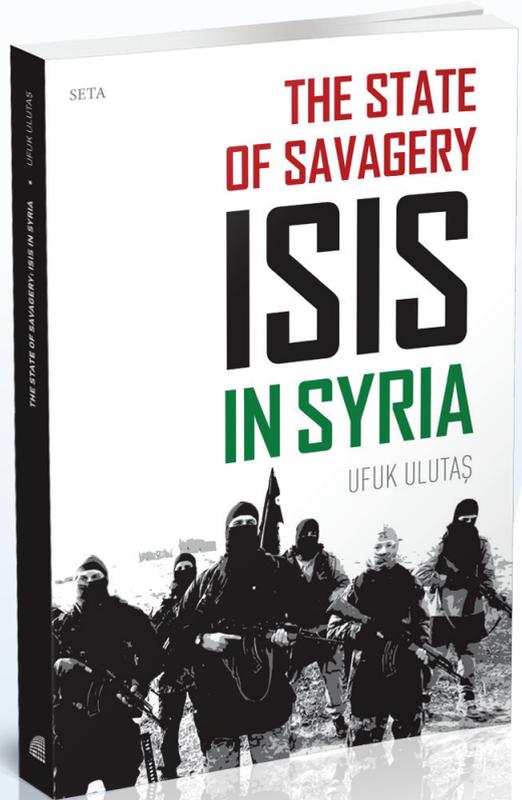
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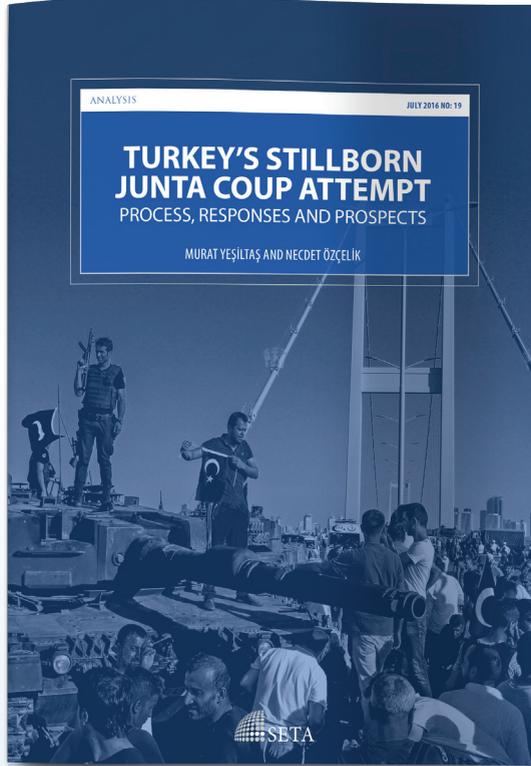
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## The State of Savagery: ISIS In Syria

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*This book discusses ISIS within the context of violent non-state actors. It analyzes historical, ideological and operational roots and features of the group in Syria; and positions ISIS within the matrix of the conflicting parties in Syria.*





## Turkey's Stillborn Junta Coup Attempt: Process, Responses and Prospects

Murat Yeşiltaş, Necdet Özçelik

After the dramatic turn of events in the confusing hours of that thrilling and fateful night in July when an attempted coup in Turkey was thwarted, we know one thing much better than before: the power of the people using the Internet communication tools and platforms can be greater than the power of the military. In this paper we analyze Turkey's stillborn military coup attempt by focusing on the internal process (personnel configuration, tactics and operational areas) of the military coup attempt and reactions of different political, military and civilian actors against the putschists. In addition to this, the paper focuses on the consequences and influences of the 15th July military coup attempt in the context of Turkey's near political future.