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Strategic Insights: The Great Purge and the Future of the Turkish Military

August 30, 2016 | Dr. W. Andrew Terrill

The full story of the July 15-16, 2016, Turkish coup attempt may not be known for some time, but it is clear that a limited number of officers attempted to overthrow the government and either capture or kill elected President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The government has accused these officers of belonging to the Fethullah Gulen movement (*Hizmet*), which is certainly possible since many of Turkey's most secular military leaders were removed in earlier purges when Erdogan and Gulen were allies. These secular senior officers were often replaced by individuals associated with either the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) or the Gulenist movement, which the government did not view as a threat prior to 2013.¹ Since then, Erdogan has viewed Gulen as an enemy, and the clerical leader has remained in voluntary exile in Saylorsburg, Pennsylvania.² Erdogan is now seeking Gulen's extradition to Turkey on charges of masterminding the coup, but his government has produced no clear evidence to back up that request.

Despite the rebels' grandiose plans, it remains deeply unclear that the coup came within a "hairsbreadth of succeeding" as reported by *TIME* and affirmed by various other Western media outlets.³ Any revolt that results in 290 dead and captures no military installations is off to a bad start. Under such circumstances, a coup is not moving forward, and somebody is fighting back. Even if the centerpiece of the plotter's strategy had worked and Erdogan was captured or killed, it is doubtful that the uprising would have succeeded. Prime Minister Binali Yildirim and other government leaders would probably have been able to rally opponents to a military takeover, which seems increasingly at odds with the changes in Turkish political culture. The coup effort also failed quickly because it had relatively little support from within the military, and its authors attempted to organize the uprising outside of the chain of command.⁴ Some

analysis suggests that it was further bungled because the officers involved were afraid of being purged from the military for previous subversive activities and moved forward with limited resources and support out of desperation.⁵

Yet, if the coup itself was poorly planned and organized, the countermeasures have been expansive and brutal.⁶ In response to the attempt, the Turkish president stated that, “This uprising is a gift from God to us because this will be a reason to cleanse our army.”⁷ He also declared a three-month renewable state of emergency thereby vastly increasing his power to move forward against suspected supporters of the coup and any other domestic enemies.⁸ The clear consequence of such activities is that the Erdogan government has moved to purge the Turkish military using the failed coup as an excuse to completely remake the Turkish national security establishment. Devlet Bahçeli, the leader of the opposition Republican People’s Party (CHP), refused to support the coup effort, but has also opposed the scope and comprehensiveness of the purge, warning that Turkey could be left with a hollowed out and politicized military such as those of Saddam Hussein and Muammar Qadhafi.⁹ An early analysis of the purge seems to indicate that this statement may not be much of an exaggeration.

In the near-term aftermath of the coup attempt, over 6,000 military personnel were taken into custody. Many intelligence and police officials were also placed under arrest.¹⁰ By early August, 10,012 military service members were reported to have been detained.¹¹ Those arrested included the commander of Turkey’s second army which is deployed along the Syrian and Iraqi borders.¹² Many officers have also been reported to have been dismissed through forced resignations, and at least 1,700 military personnel have been dishonorably discharged for their supposed sympathies with the coup. Turkey’s military command structure is therefore in shambles with many key commanders removed from their posts, despite an absence of evidence that they were involved with the coup.¹³ Before the coup attempt, Turkey had roughly 360 active duty general grade and flag officers, of which about 40 percent have been removed from their positions following the coup attempt. To address the corresponding shortage of general grade officers, large numbers of colonels were promoted to general, and have been required to assume the duties of the purged military leadership. In one quick series of moves, 99 officers were promoted to general or admiral from lower ranks, primarily on the basis of loyalty to Erdogan.¹⁴ Additionally critical military personnel such as combat aircraft pilots have also been extensively purged. Defense Minister Fikri Isik has promised to address the resulting shortage of pilots, but has given no indication of how this will be done.¹⁵

The government has further moved to shut down existing Turkish military academies and stated that it will replace them with a “National Defense University,” which has not been well defined. Erdogan also closed all four military high schools, the most important of which is Istanbul’s Kuleli Military High School.¹⁶ This school was established in 1845

to provide a modern secular curriculum and help Westernize the Ottoman military, with the others being created later in the same spirit. The government claims that these high schools had been deeply infiltrated by the Gulenist movement and were beyond rehabilitation. Research by Turkish-American scholar and journalist Pinar Tremblay has confirmed some of these allegations noting that many non-Gulenist students were pressured and harassed into leaving these schools for failing to support this movement.¹⁷ Closing the schools nevertheless seems to be a drastic solution. A more reasonable approach would be to replace any Gulenist faculty in these institutions.

Turkey's Supreme Military Council has also been redesigned. The civilian defense minister seems to have taken over many of the duties of the Chief of the General Staff, General Hulusi Akar, although he remains on active duty as do the chiefs of the army, navy, and air force. The army maintains that Akar proved his loyalty by refusing at gunpoint to sign a document in support of the attempted overthrow of the government, which the plotters wanted him to read on television.¹⁸ The generals who remain in power nevertheless are clearly in danger of being fired or imprisoned at a later date and have only a very limited ability to articulate military priorities and interests. Right now their safest course is to worry about their own futures and not the efficiency of the military. Moreover, morale throughout the military, but especially at the senior leadership level, is at rock bottom. Even before the 2016 coup attempt, the Turkish military suffered from a series of purges, arrests, and forced resignations. In a 2014 book, Turkish scholar Soner Cagaptay characterized the officer corps as demoralized and with its prestige in "free fall."¹⁹ In the aftermath of the 2016 coup attempt, it is difficult to imagine the military having much more *esprit de corps* than the inmates of a prison.

The turmoil within the Turkish military comes at a particularly important time for the United States and its European allies. Turkey is a key state in the anti-ISIS coalition, although it initially was slow to move against ISIS for a variety of reasons including: a fear of further empowering the Kurdish militias fighting ISIS, a deep hatred of Syria's Assad government, and a concern about provoking ISIS revenge strikes. Turkey is also a key player in addressing the problem of Syrian refugees. Unfortunately for any future efforts to address these problems, U.S.-Turkish relations have deteriorated sharply after Ankara's suggestions that the United States was involved in the coup effort. The U.S. leadership has treated these claims as false and offensive, but the increasingly rigid press censorship in Turkey ensures that they are well publicized domestically. July 2016 would also seem to be a particularly strange time for the United States to support a coup since Erdogan had finally emerged as a tough and committed enemy of ISIS following a series of ISIS terrorist actions against Turkey culminating in the Ataturk Airport bombing in Istanbul in late June. Likewise, the United States leadership was pleased that Turkey had moved to normalize relations with Israel. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it is particularly unlikely that many U.S. policymakers would view Gulen so favorably that they would take serious risks to support a power bid by him.

U.S. advice to Turkey about internal matters is clearly unwelcome at this time, and the Erdogan government has been infuriated by U.S. and European complaints about the scope of the purges. Erdogan's own brush with capture and potential execution has probably not done much to help him put the situation in perspective. He may also have been influenced by the fact that some of his own military aides were part of the conspiracy. The United States and NATO may therefore have to adjust to a situation in which Turkey and the Turkish military are exceptionally consumed with domestic problems. Turkish complaints that the United States was involved in the coup do not help matters. Moreover, there remains the strong possibility that Gulen will not be extradited because of the Constitutional protections provided to him as a U.S. permanent resident. As noted by U.S. Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy, the political branches of the U.S. Government do not have the power to "switch the Constitution on or off at will."²⁰ President Obama and his successor do not have the power to circumvent due process on this issue, even if they wished to do so, regardless of how they feel about the request.

The United States will therefore have to navigate the extremely difficult waters of U.S.-Turkish relations, with the expectation that serious setbacks will occur and that military-to-military relations may become maddeningly difficult. Turkish military leaders may well be more concerned with staying out of jail rather than fighting ISIS. Newly promoted generals may or may not be competent, and it is doubtful that they will be as effective or decisive as previous leaders who have worked with the anti-ISIS coalition. Nevertheless, at the present time, Turkey is insisting that it will meet its military obligations and continue to play an important role in fighting ISIS. The U.S. military leadership will have to proceed on the basis of this promised cooperation so long as it is possible to do so. U.S. leaders also have to understand that under the current situation, Turkey still has a tremendous vested interest in cooperating with the United States on security matters where possible. The current waves of uncertainty about Turkey's future resulting from the purge threaten to undermine foreign investment in the economy and further damage the already ailing tourist industry. Eventually, the Turkish leadership is going to have to stop worrying about revenge against the military and start addressing the national security problems of the country including ISIS terrorism within their borders. Otherwise, CHP leader Bahceli's warning may prove prophetic, and Turkey will emerge with a military with poor leaders, low professionalism, and a limited capacity to engage in serious military operations.

ENDNOTES

1. Mustafa Akyol, "Who Plotted Turkey's Coup Attempt?" *New York Times*, July 22, 2016, p. A-27.
2. Gulen first established residency in the United States in 1999, claiming that he made the move to better treat his diabetes.

3. Jared Malsin, "Turkey's long night of the soul," *TIME*, August 1, 2016, p. 8.
4. "Turkish plotters came close to killing Erdogan," *Daily Star* (Beirut), July 18, 2016.
5. Ishaan Tharoor, "Turkey's purge marks endgame in Islamist Civil War," *Washington Post*, August 5, 2016.
6. The purge has gone far beyond the military and security forces and has included a number of government bureaucracies and educational institutions. Around 60,000 people have been arrested or fired from their positions in a purge that some compare to the U.S. and Iraqi policy of de-Ba'athification in post-Saddam Iraq. See "Erdogan's Revenge: The Failed Coup in Turkey," *Economist*, July 23, 2016, p. 9.
7. "After the coup, the counter-coup; Turmoil in Turkey," *Economist*, July 23, 2016, p. 16.
8. Agence France Presse, "Turkey detains 42 journalist in crackdown as Europe sounds alarm," *Daily Star*, July 25, 2016.
9. Reuters, "Erdogan insists script for coup attempt was written abroad," *Daily Star*, August 3, 2016.
10. Reuters, "Turkish Deputy PM says restructuring of intelligence units 'on the agenda,'" *Daily Star*, August 1, 2016.
11. Josh Keller; Iaryna Mykhyalyshn, Safak Timur, "The Scale of Turkey's Purge is Nearly Unprecedented," *New York Times*, August 4, 2016.
12. The military and especially Turkish Special Forces has played an important role in securing Turkish borders, along with Interior Ministry forces (which have also been purged). See "Turkey's Erdogan says new appointments to be carried out within gendarmerie," *Daily Star*, August 3, 2016.
13. Agence France Presse, "Turkey admits some crackdown dismissals may be 'unfair'," *Daily Star*, August 1, 2016.
14. Reuters, "Turkish military promotes 99 colonels in shake-up, top brass little changed," *Daily Star*, July 29, 2016.
15. Reuters, "Turkey working on new decree to hire air force pilots: Defense Minister," *Daily Star*, August 12, 2016.
16. Pinar Tremblay, "Gulen movement's youngest victims speak out in Turkey," *Al-Monitor*, August 3, 2016.
17. *Ibid.*
18. Agence France Presse, "Vast majority of Turkey military had no links to coup bid: army," *Daily Star*, July 19, 2016.
19. Soner Cagaptay, *The Rise of Turkey: The Twenty-First Century's First Muslim Power*, Washington DC: Potomac Books, 2014, p. 51.
20. Jean Edward Smith, *Bush*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016, p. 509.

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