



Deep State of Crisis: Re-Assessing Risks to the Turkish State

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Executive Summary

The accelerating erosion of Turkish democracy over the past decade has often been described in terms of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's authoritarian ambitions and growing accumulation of personal power. Yet what this undeniably accurate narrative sometimes fails to convey is the extent to which Erdoğan's authoritarianism has weakened the Turkish state itself.

In previous decades, the term *deep state* was used to describe the secret, usually sinister forces that were operating in conjunction with the Turkish military and bureaucracy to control the country beyond the reach of the elected government. While the deep state was often blamed for acts such as bombings and assassinations that spread chaos, it was always seen to be acting with an intended purpose, such as laying the groundwork for a military coup. In recent years, some observers argued that Erdoğan had at long last vanquished the deep state, while others argued he had simply created a new one under his own control. The reality appears far messier and more dangerous than either of those two alternatives. Beneath the swirling conspiracies that mark political rhetoric in Turkey today there is a profound insecurity about who truly governs the country. A growing number of armed and potentially independent actors, both within the state and outside of it, are competing for control of Turkey's present and future across a shattered political landscape.

As a result, the gravest threats to the Turkish state today are sitting in plain sight, not hidden in the shadows. After more than a decade and a half of electoral victories, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) still struggles with how to manage the bureaucracy, the military, and other elements of the national security establishment. Since coming to power, Erdoğan—driven by his own belief in the deep state and fear that conspiracies were being hatched to oust him—has cycled through a variety of potential allies whom he has used to target enemies, real and perceived, within the state apparatus and Turkish society more broadly: Gülenists, Kurdish nationalists, liberal reformers, and Turkish ultra-nationalists. Almost all of these erstwhile partners have now become Erdoğan's enemies. It would seem Erdoğan's greatest fear remains that his rivals for power will unite to overthrow him and his party. What this insecurity seems to betray is his lack of faith in the state's loyalty, or perhaps his ability to govern it cooperatively.

Turkey's July 15 coup attempt offered an indication that perhaps Erdoğan's position was not as secure as it first seemed, and his fears not unfounded. An ensuing wave of purges may have strengthened Erdoğan's control of the state, but it also left the country's governing apparatus more fragile and fragmented than ever before. The combination of Erdoğan's distrust of the state, and his further weakening of it in the wake of the coup attempt, has now left him increasingly dependent on a diverse array of sometimes-competing factions and institutions within the state itself. This process may in turn further fuel Erdoğan's perception of threats emanating from within the state itself, including those on which he has come to depend. This vicious cycle has deprived the Turkish state of the ability to coherently respond to the multiple challenges that it faces and represents an alarming—but often overlooked—threat to Turkey's stability.

Political Actors in Turkey Today: An Index and Overview

Non-State

The PKK: The Kurdistan Worker's Party has waged a guerilla war against the Turkish state and carried out numerous terrorist attacks for over three decades.

Following the breakdown of peace negotiations with the Turkish government in 2015, the PKK continues to be one of the main threats to stability in Turkey while its Syrian affiliate, the Democratic Union Party, continues to expand its territory and influence as an American partner in the war against ISIS.

ISIS: While the Turkish government turned a blind eye toward ISIS when the group first emerged in Syria, the two are now locked in an increasingly violent confrontation. Over the past two years, ISIS has carried out a series of deadly attacks in Turkey targeting Kurdish political rallies and popular tourist destinations while Turkish forces are now fighting ISIS directly in northern Syria.

Fetullah Gülen: The Turkish government has insisted that followers of the Pennsylvania-based cleric Fetullah Gülen were responsible for the country's July 15th coup attempt. While the events of that night remain shrouded in mystery, the movement's past activities, before and after its alliance with the AKP came to a dramatic end, continue to raise questions about its role in Turkey's complex political landscape.

Other Islamist Groups: From minor political movements such as the Saadet Party to long-standing Islamic brotherhoods and more radical actors like Turkey's

Kurdish Hezbollah, a range of religiously-inspired political actors continue to both bolster and challenge the government's power.

State-Affiliated

Turkish Armed Forces: For almost a decade, many observers believed that the risk of a military coup in Turkey was negligible. Now, following the events of July 15th, the role of the military, as well as potential divisions within it, have become increasingly pertinent.

MIT: The Turkish intelligence services have been an important if elusive force in Turkish politics and been central to both real and exaggerated fears of the deep state. On the night of Turkey's coup, members of MIT came into conflict with members of the Turkish military, while the role of the organization's head, Hakan Fidan, remains debated.

Paramilitary Groups: Over the past several years a number of incidents have highlighted the danger now posed by violence committed by organized groups whose relationship to the state remains uncertain. From the role of the "Essadullah Team" in Turkey's war against the PKK to that of the Ottoman Hearths society in carrying out attacks against an opposition newspaper, delegated or freelance.

Introduction

A steady stream of calamities has left the Republic of Turkey in a state of crisis. Regardless of where one lives, the threat of violence casts a long shadow over day-to-day life. Terrorist attacks, counter-insurgency operations and intercommunal fighting have claimed an unknown number of lives over the last half decade. The bloody incidents surrounding the attempted coup of July 2016 has undoubtedly rendered the deepest wounds upon the nation's psyche. Televised images of soldiers opening fire on civilians, tanks bulldozing city streets, and military aircraft opening fire on government buildings left few doubts that the state, as a whole, has been equally at war with itself.

The suppression of the coup has provided the public with little reprieve from challenging circumstances. An abundance of evidence points to a sharp downturn in the Turkish economy amid high unemployment, plummeting foreign investment, and declining currency rates. Despite a flurry of strong demonstrations of national unity during the weeks after the attempted coup, the nation appears more politically polarized than ever. The general fear that the situation may in fact grow worse often seems like the only rousing point of consensus.

In the face of these and other challenges, President Erdoğan has remained visibly undaunted and defiant. With the full backing of his Justice and Development Party (known as the AKP), he has strengthened his hold over the Turkish bureaucracy and military through a series of dramatic measures. In the days that immediately followed the coup attempt, his ministers announced a general purge of suspected co-conspirators from government service. As of January 2017, over 115,000 individuals have lost their jobs (as well as perhaps health insurance, housing, and child care) as a result of this state-wide crackdown. Nearly an equal number have been placed under arrest or have been detained on charges of aiding the coup plot, or of supporting terrorism.

Journalists and news agencies have been among the most visible victims of this government-led offensive. Courts have ordered the closure of scores of media outlets and issued arrest warrants for well over 100 journalists. Billions of dollars in assets have been seized and liquidated by the government under the auspices of fighting terrorism. Numerous academics, civic leaders, and parliamentarians have been detained or imprisoned since July 2016, leaving the impression that all those politically opposed to Erdoğan and the AKP are potential targets for retribution.¹

Meanwhile, the Turkish Grand National Assembly stands poised to change the country's constitution in an effort to grant the office of the president even greater executive authority. Advocates for a new "presidential system" pose that stronger executive leadership would lead to greater democratic accountability, stability, and rational government, particularly in times of crisis. Although many supporters of this institutional revolution have sworn that the reforms are unrelated to any personal ambition, few deny that the "chief," as Erdoğan is most affectionately known, is "one of the most powerful presidents Turkey has ever seen, an actor who makes final decisions on any issue, at any level."² Yet Erdoğan's growing power belies a deeper dynamic which puts the stability of the Turkish state at risk.

The Myths and Realities of Turkey's Deep State

In speaking specifically about the dangers and tragedies that have beset Turkey in recent years, Erdoğan and his most ardent supporters have insisted that their country is the victim of a conspiracy defined by almost limitless depth and malevolence. The bulk of these conspirators, advocates agree, are traitorous Turks living in plain sight among the majority of peaceable citizens. They further agree that, as the chief architects of the July coup attempt, followers of Fethullah Gülen, the exiled preacher and leader of the Hizmet movement, are at the vanguard of this subversive campaign. Their failure to overthrow Erdoğan, it is further argued, has forced the Gülenists to work more closely with terrorists loyal to the Islamic State, as well as the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), Marxist organizations fighting for Kurdish national recognition in Turkey and Syria.

Despite the ideological differences that divide these conspirators, each member of this plot is believed to take orders from “masterminds” living abroad. Although most Turks would agree that Gülen, who resides in the United States, represents the most obvious ringleader in this foreign plot, some have posed that he too takes orders from an even higher authority. His possible paymasters are actually to be found in Washington, London, Brussels, Tehran, or elsewhere. The goal of the conspiracy, to destroy the Turkish Republic and divvy up its territory, is in fact timeless in its origins. Although the names of the international actors may have changed, this perceived current campaign against the Turkish nation represents the very same plot that brought about the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and creation of the modern Middle East.

By no means is this view of Turkey's current predicament isolated to the country's political fringe. A host of influential ministers, advisors and journalists have reiterated key aspects of this conspiratorial thesis. Arguably the most outspoken champion of these views is İbrahim Karagül, the editor of the daily *Yeni Şafak*. His regular editorials constitute the most thorough and biting set of indictments against those believed to be secretly seeking Turkey's undoing. Behind each assault targeting Turkish civilians or soldiers, according to Karagül, lies an unholy alliance linking Fethullah Gülen, the PKK, ISIS, the United States and other Western states. A shared desire to undermine Turkey, deny it its rightful place as a powerful state, undergirds this coalition.³ Erdoğan himself has reiterated elements of Karagül's worldview. On more than one occasion he has asserted that there is a powerful “mastermind” seeking to destroy the country.⁴ Who this mastermind is, he cannot or will not say, although he has hinted that Fethullah Gülen represents a mere minion of agents or agencies based in the United States. Should Turkey give into this campaign of terror, the narrative goes, the country would be subject to a new Treaty of Sevres, the 1920 international agreement that formalized the Ottoman Empire's partition among World War I's victorious powers.⁵ “Today,” he tweeted, “Turkey is in the midst of a new Independence Struggle,” reprising the same fight Atatürk led to establish the Turkish Republic in 1923.⁶

For all their self-evident absurdity, these fantasies, like many conspiracy theories elsewhere, are a refracted product of Turkey's political history. On the one hand, many conspiratorial suspicions found in Turkey reflect commonly held perceptions about the nature of factionalism and elite politics in the country. Secret plots and dubious conspiracies can indeed be found in the annals of recent Turkish history. However, the line between fact and fiction often blurs in the retelling of these historical episodes. Officially endorsed conspiracy theories have increasingly been used to placate public opinion, or hide government wrongdoing.

Appeals to popular suspicions about domestic and foreign plots have also proven highly effective in galvanizing support for Turkish nationalism and a unitary Turkish state. Partisanship and factional politics, be they ideological or personal, have long been seen as providing the seeds for treasonous plots or foreign subversion.

On the other hand, Erdoğan's caustic warnings represent his own recognition of the profundity of the danger to Turkey's long-term stability. There is no doubt that Turkey is a country besieged by multiple forces based inside and outside of its borders. The potential for the "Syrianization" of Turkish politics is a concern shared by many inside and outside pro-AKP circles.⁷ In evaluating all the factors that threaten to destabilize Turkey, one must take a hard look at both the declared enemies and allies of Erdoğan's government. Terrorist groups such as the PKK and the Islamic State threaten the integrity of the Turkish state and society at large. Yet there are factions within and close to the government that also may threaten to do harm to the efficacy of the state. As the country hurtles closer toward unadulterated one-man rule, and attempts to recover from the deep purges of its official ministries, one should be wary of the ultimate loyalties and effectiveness of Turkey's military, security services, as well as the ruling party itself.

As will be seen, the AKP's not-unfounded fears of a deep state conspiring against it has created a vicious cycle, in which the party has sought out and empowered partners within the state to help it battle real and perceived foes. Yet when these allies turn against it, as in the case of the Gülenists, it leads to renewed fears over deep state elements and a renewed search for allies to counter them. As the government seeks out new allies while creating new enemies, it leaves behind an increasingly fractured political landscape. This has the advantage, it seems, of preventing the AKP's various rivals from effectively cooperating against it, and yet at the same time has fueled a conspiratorial certainty within the AKP that such cooperation must be taking place.

Similarly, as the AKP cycles through allies inside and outside of the state, it has only amplified the suspicion with which its erstwhile partners now view it. Today, for example, the AKP's new nationalist allies still view the party with suspicion because of its previous efforts to make peace with the PKK, while the PKK is now even more suspicious of the AKP following the breakdown of the peace talks. Going forward, the suspicion and fragmentation caused by the history of the deep state, as well as the AKP's self-perpetuating attempts to purge it, represent a profound risk to the country.

A Universal History of Infamy: The 20th Century in Turkish Imagination

To fully grasp how Turkey's most dominant personalities view contemporary politics, one must appreciate the degree to which they see themselves as reliving the past. Erdoğan and his most committed supporters have repeatedly insisted that the country's current troubles are not simply rooted in history. Turkey's bitter past instead is repeating itself, with many of the nation's historic adversaries again threatening to destroy the Turkish nation. At the heart of this elliptical notion of contemporary politics are events and personalities instrumental to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire after World War I. While many of the historical events and figures from this period remain largely obscure for non-Turks, their place within the imagination of contemporary Turkish commentators is central. Understanding why this era resonates so strongly today in Turkey contributes immensely to why so many Turks see the world in such sinister and conspiratorial terms.

According to the government's more favorable reading of the past, the Ottoman Empire did not die as the "sick man of Europe." To the contrary, the Ottoman Empire is increasingly depicted in contemporary Turkey as a modernizing, thriving state that represented the will and aspirations of Muslims in and beyond its borders. It was an empire that was otherwise bound for greater things, especially during the rule of one of its last powerful sultans, Abdülhamid II (a figure particularly favored today by the AKP faithful). The hardships and defeats the country ultimately endured were not the result of internal failings, but rather the direct product of foreign subversion and native sedition. The Great Powers of Europe, particularly Britain, France and Russia, long sought to incorporate the sultanate into their respective colonial empires. European imperialism gained further traction as a result of the support of Christian and Jewish citizens. Large numbers of Turks, in and beyond the AKP's base, would agree with the contention that it was as a result of the connivance of non-Muslims (especially Orthodox and Armenian Christians) that the Ottoman Empire came apart.

Whatever its basis in fact, this view of the past colors popular perceptions of present-day Turkey. The country's most dangerous adversaries, it would seem, come both from within and without. Exemplifying the historical and contemporary significance of this view of the past is the case of Armenians. Avowed Turkish nationalists insist that Armenians, as a collective whole, betrayed the empire in order to establish their own state. Such aspirations not only fulfilled their own nationalist designs but helped further Russian, British, and French schemes to partition the empire amongst themselves. In this narrative, a romanticized history of centuries of Armenian and Muslim coexistence and Ottoman tolerance toward non-Muslims only serves to make Armenians' supposed willingness to betray the empire and their Muslim neighbors appears all the more treacherous.

It remains both Turkey's official policy, and a nationalist article of faith, that Istanbul's decision in 1915 to internally exile the empire's entire Armenian population was warranted. Evidence pointing to the Ottoman state's genocidal intent is often countered with examples of anti-Muslim attacks by Armenian militants. While the Erdoğan government has been willing to acknowledge the suffering (but not deliberate extermination) of Ottoman Armenian civilians, Ankara remains steadfast in alleging a mass Armenian conspiracy during World War I. In prosecuting the state's fight against the PKK, allusions to the history of Armenian sedition and anti-Turkish violence remain commonplace among officials and everyday citizens in Turkey.

Whether in the comparisons drawn between PKK attacks and those of Armenian militants a century ago, or accusations that the Kurdish guerrillas are actually vengeful Armenians, the legacies of the World War I loom large within the contemporary imagination.⁸

There are still other conspiracies that are often seen as defining aspects of the Turkish past. The late Ottoman government, it is commonly believed, was replete with secret cabals and hidden sources of power and authority. This is especially the case of the regime of the Committee of Union and Progress, the political party which ruled the empire during the last decade of its existence. The Young Turks, as they are more commonly known, seized power after clandestinely organizing revolutionary cells of followers within the ranks of the army and bureaucracy. Once in power, cell members regularly bypassed civil laws and the military's chain of command when it suited them. They used violence, including murder, to silence opponents while denying any responsibility. While it is indisputable that aspects of the Young Turk regime did create "states within a state," some commentators in Turkey, both past and present, have alleged that even deeper conspiracies defined the late Ottoman government. Both then and now, dissident voices have raised suspicions that Free Masons and crypto-Jews utilized the Young Turk movement to seize control of the country and sully the Turkish nation.⁹

Although a minority of people believe that Turkey began as a masonic or Zionist conspiracy, there are few who would doubt the Young Turk regime's lasting influence over the country's development. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who began his military career as a Young Turk loyalist, utilized his connections within the Committee of Union and Progress to take power and mobilize popular support. Without such support, it is genuinely doubtful that he would have secured Turkey's independence from foreign occupation after World War I. In becoming the country's first president, Atatürk created a political system in which he and his closest allies ruled over and through a one-party parliament.

It is during the rule of the Kemalists, many commentators assert, that the "deep state" of the Turkish Republic was born. The cliquishness, paranoia, and oppressiveness of the Young Turk and Kemalist governments was carried forward through the twentieth century within the ranks of the military. As the country entered the Cold War, formal cabals took root within Turkey's various security services. Like the Young Turks, the architects of Turkey's deep state utilized violence, in the form of murders, massacres, or coups, to maintain their authority and the security of the state. Although initially associated with proponents of the Kemalist Republican Peoples' Party (or CHP), the ranks of Turkey's deep state, many assume, came to comprise partisans and fanatics drawn from multiple political factions. Individuals with leftist, rightist, nationalist, and Islamist sympathies have been accused of being operatives of this deep state. Foreign governments, particularly the United States and Turkey's other NATO allies, have also stood accused of fostering the secret cabals that have defined the country's passage through and out of the Cold War.

Ergenekon and Gülen: The Changing Deep State

Yet the extent to which a Turkish deep state exists, let alone what it has actually constituted, remains a matter of fierce debate and controversy. There are several historical episodes that certainly point to the existence of powerful factions that have secretly attempted to dominate and undermine the Turkish government. Successive military coups in 1960, 1971, and 1980 mark clear cases of surreptitious, powerful cabals seizing power at the expense of the elected government.

More than any other incident, Turkey's war against the PKK produced troubling signs of what Turkey's deep state might consist. As a result of cases such as the so-called Susurluk incident of 1996, the Turkish public was confronted with clear evidence that civilian and military officials had secretly recruited gangsters and right-wing activists to carry out assassinations of suspected Kurdish nationalists and militants at both home and abroad. Official inquiries, as well as investigative reports in the press, led to further suspicions that military and civilian agents (either with or without the knowledge of their superiors in the government) ordered or helped organize the killing of leftists, religious minorities and other peaceable civilians during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. Worse still, a select number of domestic and international court cases offered evidence of state involvement in money laundering, drug trafficking, and other underworld trades. These and other revelations have left the Turkish public with a disturbingly muddled impression of who truly governs the Turkish Republic.

While the military had explicitly served as "guardians of the state," lessons drawn from the Susurluk incident and other cases seem to point to an uglier, more complicated truth. By the turn of the 21st century, the Turkish state appeared to be a den of hidden cabals made up of generals, bureaucrats, businessmen, nationalist agitators, and mafia hitmen. Who among these factions actually pulled the levers of power appeared to be anyone's guess.

The bitterness inspired by this uncertainty led to the rank disillusionment that helped propel the AKP to power in 2002. In promising greater accountability and economic growth, Erdoğan pledged a cleaner, less corrupt government. In 2007 he boasted that he had "put the stick" to those who had formed death squads and acted outside of the law during the war against the PKK.¹⁰ Visible economic gains, as well as a tangible sense that the country's political culture was growing stronger and healthier, were widely seen by large numbers of voters that the AKP could sustain such an assertion. Yet through this early period, suspicions that the deep state would seek retribution against Erdoğan continued to percolate. The constitutional court's near closure of the AKP in 2008, followed by the first indictments in the so-called Ergenekon coup plot, appeared to point to a final battle between the AKP and the deep state.

Between 2008 and 2014, Turkish prosecutors arraigned hundreds of officials, officers, and private citizens as conspirators in a great host of secret plots to undermine the government. With each case, both the government and the Turkish press helped to foment a new grand narrative on the origins and evolution of Turkey's deep state. In this formulation, one organization, Ergenekon (named after the mythic homeland of the Turks), singularly represented and controlled the deep state. The group, whose tentacles spanned the military, the bureaucracy, academia, and organized crime, committed an immense series of violent crimes over the course of decades in the name of suppressing the emergence of true democracy. Erdoğan declared in

2009 that “Administrations before us had protected” Ergenekon and he voiced his full confidence that the national police and court system would bring them to justice.¹¹ As 2013 came to a close, many surmised that Erdoğan and the AKP had won this fight.

Events since the winter of 2014 have radically changed how Erdoğan and the AKP administration reckons with conspiracies both past and present. With the filing of corruption and smuggling charges against the sons of senior government officials in December 2013, Erdoğan and his allies slowly came to insist that Ergenekon was a ruse to promote the interest of an even greater conspiracy headed by Fethullah Gülen. Gülenists, many inside and outside the government agreed, populated much of the police and judiciary. Although the Hizmet movement had long offered support to the AKP administration, Erdoğan alleged that the December corruption investigation was tantamount to an attempted coup by the party’s erstwhile allies. This new narrative augmented Erdoğan’s burning contention that the Gezi Park demonstrations of the summer of 2013 was a conspiracy orchestrated by foreign intelligence services, international bankers and traitorous Turks. Long before Gülen was accused of ordering the July 15 coup attempt, the Turkish government had formally labelled the Hizmet movement a de facto terrorist organization (FETÖ) bent on overthrowing the government.

Since the coup attempt, a wider variety of commentators, including some with a history of opposing the AKP, have come to see the Hizmet movement as representing a part or the whole of Turkey’s deep state.¹² Journalist Ahmet Şık, whose work on the Gülen movement landed him in prison during the course of the Ergenekon investigation, contended back in 2013 that the true head of the country’s deep state would be decided in a war between the AKP and the Gülenists.¹³ Hizmet, he argued, possessed a veritable army of loyal supporters within the Turkish government, as well as within Turkish society and the world at large. Each member took orders through a clandestine system of cells and “big brothers,” making the Gülenists a powerful, but deceptive, force. Despite partially affirming Erdoğan’s accusations that the Hizmet movement was at the core of the July 15 coup attempt, Şık finds himself today behind bars on charges of distributing propaganda on the behalf of the PKK and FETÖ.¹⁴

The sordid nature of these recent events suggests that however coherent the deep state once was, we would be well served to recognize that Turkey is now confronted with a diverse array of political actors operating both inside and outside the regular arms of the state. In the past, a variety of groups, be they in the military, the bureaucracy, radical parties, business leaders and even gangsters, have engaged in a heated, and often violent, struggle over the security of the state. Following the July coup attempt, this competition has only become more intense and dangerous. Even more dangerously, this process is only accelerated by the exaggerated myth of the deep state which lives on inside the minds of Erdoğan, his supporters, and his opponents.

A Shattered Political Landscape: Turkish Stability and the Contest of Factions

The AKP government does not see an immediate end to its struggle against hidden and overt threats to the security of the state. To the contrary, both words and deeds point to the continuation of the purges and mass arrests witnessed in the country over the last two years. Similarly, there are no signs suggesting a de-escalation in the use of armed force in combating the PKK, ISIS, or other militant groups active inside and outside of Turkey's borders. For good reason, many analysts have viewed these trends as evidence of Erdoğan's growing power and the enduring strength of the Turkish state. The AKP's strong majority in the Grand National Assembly appears sufficient enough to guarantee passage of all legislation demanded by the president. Police and military units active in the southeast appear to have successfully quelled, or at least quieted, the blatant urban uprisings that plagued the region in the last year. Despite a flagging economy and the lack of public accountability for the security failures that helped precipitate the recent string of terror attacks, Turkey's established opposition parties have been consistently feckless in their response. One may go as far as to say it is hard to now imagine a Turkey without Erdoğan or the AKP.

Still other trends in the Middle East and beyond provide reason not to be overly optimistic about Turkey's long-term prognosis. Virtually no one anticipated an Arab Spring, and the toppling of "strong" governments in Egypt and Tunisia, ahead of 2011. Attempts at coup proofing are not guaranteed to succeed and arguably do not lead to effective militaries or civil bureaucracies. The combination of a faltering economy, political polarization, and foreign wars has proven its toxicity elsewhere in the last several decades.

One specifically may add that suspicions and accusations regarding the existence of deep state actors and foreign masterminds reflect continued uncertainty about who truly governs the Republic of Turkey. Turkish fears of conspiratorial plots are by no means historically baseless. Clandestine factions, especially within the military, have successfully overridden the legal prerogatives of the Turkish state and its elected officials in the past. Yet the fear of conspiracy has also been subject to gross exaggeration. The charge of treason has been superimposed over whole segments of the country's population, resulting in terrible amounts of bloodshed and instability. Both in the distant past and now, many in Turkey readily believe that traitorous citizens constitute the greatest threat to the country's future. This tendency alone continues to push Turkey toward polarization, intolerance and upheaval.

In looking at Turkey's current predicament, one should not be content to look at any single political faction. Beyond the economy and decisions made about foreign affairs, it is clear that there are many political groups that will define Turkey's present and future. One may debate the extent to which these groups are overt, definite, or impactful. When taken together collectively, including political factions now allied to Erdoğan, there is cause for worry about the internal integrity of the AKP government and Turkey as a whole.

The PKK

Terrorism has been an outstanding feature of Turkish politics since the 1970s. While the nature of terrorism in Turkey has changed dramatically over time, the extent to which terror groups have influenced strategic thinking and security policy in Ankara cannot be overstated. To be more specific, terrorism's prevalence has had an indelible impact upon state and popular suspicions regarding the lurking threat of treason among demographic minorities and political dissidents. Of all the groups that encapsulate Ankara's fears and perceptions, the PKK still ranks as the most notorious and consequential.

Although the PKK continues to demonstrate its resilience and destructiveness, there is much about the group's goals and organization that remains unclear. After long demanding the independence and the unification of Kurdish lands, the PKK has come to modify its political demands. Cemil Bayık, who commands the group's main base in Iraq's Kandil Mountains, asserts that "democratic autonomy within the framework of Turkey's democratization" now constitutes the PKK's central objective.¹⁵ While repudiating calls for the revision of Turkey's borders, how this goal squares with the PKK's interests and presence in Iraq, Syria, or Iran remains to be seen. Equally unclear is the extent to which the PKK coordinates with groups such as TAK (which has claimed responsibility for numerous bombings in the last year), the Patriotic Revolutionary Youth Movement (or YDG-H, an armed youth wing active in urban fighting in late 2015), Syria's Democratic Union Party (PYD) and Iran's Kursistan Free Life Party (PJAK). Ample reports suggest that volunteers have often comingled and transferred their allegiances between the PKK and PYD (a phenomenon most visible during the fighting around Kobane in 2014).¹⁶

Although the membership of these groups may sometimes blur, one should not readily assume that the leaders of these Kurdish militant organizations form a united front. Abdullah Öcalan, who is recognized by the PKK, TAK, PYD and PJAK as their ideological and political leader, remains incommunicado on the island prison of Imrali. In the absence of his guidance (let alone physical presence in the field), it is difficult to confirm the extent to which the de facto operational commanders of these respective groups plan and harmonize their activities. Despite popular speculation to the contrary, there is no definitive evidence that suggests that TAK operates at the behest of the PKK.¹⁷ In the long term, particularly in the wake of Öcalan's eventual passing, it may well be the case that relations between the groups could become more competitive and contentious.

Among the few things one may believe with confidence is the continued success with which these groups have recruited active supporters in Turkey. Numerous sources have emphasized the galvanizing effect recent events have had on young Kurdish nationalists (particularly in the aftermath of the PYD's victory at Kobane and the Turkish army's recent campaign in cities such as Cizre and Diyarbakir). Whether that enthusiasm and drive endures, despite the government's counter-insurgency efforts, is anyone's guess. In the meantime, Erdoğan's avowed rejection of peace talks (as well as his insistence that Turkey's "Kurdish question" has already been solved) will ensure the continuation of armed struggle in Anatolia's southeast and beyond.¹⁸

ISIS

Although some radical leftist groups have demonstrated an ability to stage small terror attacks, only ISIS has been able to match the PKK's effectiveness and fearsomeness as a militant group operating within Turkey. The attack on the Reina nightclub serves as only the most recent reminder of ISIS's capacity for high profile violence and cruelty. Ankara's ability to defeat ISIS at home cannot be decoupled from the success of coalition forces in Syria and Iraq. Independent of that, there are signs that ISIS

may have left a strong impression upon Turkish society. It is estimated that the number of Turks who have volunteered to fight on the Islamic State's behalf runs in the thousands. Authorities have attributed a number of deadly bombings in 2014 and 2015 to indigenously recruited ISIS accomplices (a group made up largely of ethnic Kurds from the region of Adiyaman).¹⁹ It is more difficult to evaluate the extent to which the ISIS attacks have weakened public trust in Turkish security forces or heightened tensions within Turkish society. The New Years' attack on the Reina nightclub stirred more than a few commentators, especially on Turkey's left, into holding the AKP government responsible for the tragedy (both because of negligence and the Islamist tenor of the government's policies). ISIS is undoubtedly cognizant of such potential cleavages and hopes to exploit them to Turkey's detriment.

Fethullah Gülen and the Hizmet Movement

Understanding the true nature of the Hizmet Movement has been difficult because of the movement's complex and mysterious nature. There is some agreement that the number of individuals who follow or are influenced by the teachings of Fethullah Gülen is very large. Perspectives have long varied on the question of the movement's true intentions. Gülen's advocacy for interfaith dialogue, as well as his emphasis upon Islam's reconciliation with contemporary science and learning, won him numerous advocates (especially among Western commentators and officials after the September 11 attacks). Hizmet's hierarchical cellular-like structure has left others more puzzled and suspicious. Both scholars and critics voiced concern over what they saw as the movement's overt influence over the Ergenekon investigations (be it in the press or in the legal prosecution of the case). There were suspicions well before July 2016 that Hizmet had become a "deep state" capable of contesting the AKP's rule.²⁰

Successive waves of purges and arrests, as well as Gülen's now universal vilification, make it difficult to gauge the actual state of the Hizmet movement as a political force. With Ankara sounding the hunt for "FETÖcü" conspirators (be they in government service or not), virtually all overt domestic displays of support for Gülen or organizations linked to his movement have been criminalized. The ferocity of this crackdown makes it difficult to imagine scenarios that could lead to a revival of Gülenist influence within the AKP government, let alone the development of new Hizmet networks or cliques with political influence.

Believing that Fethullah Gülen still is attempting to subvert the authority of the Turkish state remains predicated on the assumption that he retains full control of his movement. There are precedents that suggest such a supposition may be flawed. As a global movement run by a reclusive man living in an isolated compound (staffed by an unknown number of assistants and advisors), it is reasonable to assume that the Hizmet movement, even in its heyday, may struggle to maintain its organizational integrity. No matter how revered Gülen and his beliefs may be among his followers, personality conflicts, indifference, and incompetence undoubtedly plague the group's ranks. If the Hizmet movement survives the current crackdown, it will have defied long odds.

Other Islamist Movements

A variety of Islamist organizations and fraternal orders have increased their visibility and political significance since the moment the AKP assumed power. While empowered by Erdoğan's emphasis upon Muslim nationalism and Islamic piety, one

should not dismiss the rise of Islamist political activism as a natural outcome of AKP rule. Domestic and international conditions, factors which include the support of pre-AKP governments and foreign sponsorship, have contributed mightily to the proliferation and growth of groups inspired by Islamist precepts. In terms of actual parties, they range from organizations such as Hizb ut-Tahrir (which demands the restoration of an Islamic caliphate) and Saadet (a spin-off remnant of the party Erdoğan split from in 2001).

Although often very vocal (and at times dissenting in their posture toward the government), most Islamist groups remain relatively marginal on the national stage. Among the oddest, and most impactful, Islamist groups to affect Turkey in recent years has been Huda Par, a predominately Kurdish, pro-government party based mostly in border districts in the southeast of the country. Huda Par's predecessor, Hezbollah (no relationship to Lebanon's Hezbollah), was a notorious ally in Ankara's fight against the PKK in the 1990s. In October of 2014, Huda Par attracted increased attention after party members engaged in street fights and mob attacks against more secular nationalist Kurdish supporters of the People's Democratic Party (HDP). With the HDP's influence on the wane (largely as a result of the arrest and imprisonment of its representatives), there is increased speculation that Huda Par and other Islamically based Kurdish groups will act as future partners in AKP peace and reconstruction initiatives in the southeast.²¹

Long-established Sufi fraternal orders, such as the Naqshibandi and Suleymanci lodges, possess greater, albeit informal, influence over the politics of the Turkish state. It is believed that Naqshibandi followers make up an inordinate number of influential positions in the AKP (despite the fact that Erdoğan himself is not a member of the lodge).²² On the night of the coup, data analysis by Akin Ünver suggests that "Several religious brotherhoods (or tariqas) in Istanbul—concentrated in the historic Fatih and Üsküdar districts—were also among the first groups to organize" in coming out on the streets and resisting the military.²³ Some commentators have subsequently speculated that adherents of the Suleymanci order may replace the Gülenists as a new "deep state" faction within the government or pointed out the growing role of particular orders in particular ministries, such as the Menzil order in the Ministry of Health.²⁴ Regardless of the doctrinal differences that separate these and other groups, it is difficult to chart the future of independent Islamist organizations in Turkey.

Although intra-Islamist tensions have emerged over issues ranging from Erdoğan's rapprochement with Israel to his executive presidency, the AKP has had a successful track record in co-opting voters with differing Islamist tendencies. Avowedly Islamist newspapers, such as Yeni Şafak and Yeni Akit, have demonstrated an ability to pivot in contradictory directions in coordination with shifts in the government's policies (such as in foreign relations with Israel and Russia). Such good will, however, may prove finite depending on the evolution of the AKP and Erdoğan's place as president and head of the party.

Turkish Armed Forces and Security Forces

The state of the Turkish Armed Forces has never been more uncertain. Amid the violence of the July 15 attempted coup, the purging of thousands of officers, and the initiation of Operation Euphrates Shield, the contemporary morale and effectiveness of the army has become an open question. A widely reported shortage in the number of air force pilots stands as only one indication of the consequences the purges have had on the ability of the armed forces to perform basic functions.²⁵

Gauging the state of other branches of Turkey's security apparatus poses further challenges. The gutting of the National Police Department, which began in 2014, purportedly forced recruiters to forgo maintaining certain qualifying standards in order to fill needed posts.²⁶ Nevertheless, the Interior Ministry's various security agencies (be it the police, gendarme, or border patrol) have become the symbols of the AKP's physical hold on power. Images of lightly armed policemen battling rebellious troops on the night of July 15 have come to symbolize this relationship. The extent to which the government has come to depend upon the Interior Ministry's policing powers is at its most vivid in the recent operations of the Bureau of Smuggling and Organized Crime (or KOM) division. Although its bylaws exclusively task the bureau with combating smuggling and other illicit industries (problems that have grown worse since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war), KOM is now most known for leading the fight against FETÖ sympathizers and suspected terrorists found (among other places) in industry, the press, and academia.²⁷

MIT

It is even more difficult to evaluate how the purges have shaped Turkey's intelligence service (MIT). MIT's internal politics and loyalties have long been subject to conjecture. Through the 1980s and 1990s, self-proclaimed "insiders" offered chilling, and often radically conflicting, accounts of the service's activities (be it sponsoring clandestine death squads or even establishing the PKK).²⁸ Reports circulated even before the coup that Hakan Fidan, MIT's long serving chief, had met with Fethullah Gülen at his home in Pennsylvania (for unclear, and speculatively dubious, reasons).²⁹ While MIT has been far from immune from the waves of expulsions that have swept other ministries, other signs suggest that the AKP government remains confident in the bureau's management.

Erdoğan, to the surprise of many, has not relieved Fidan of his duties, despite his failure to warn the president in advance of the coup. What Fidan's retention says about MIT's role within Turkey's security structure is unclear. Although recent reforms have afforded Erdoğan greater control over the clandestine service, Fidan and MIT have acquired greater amounts of authority beyond the collection of intelligence (including the creation of special operations forces).³⁰

Restaffing the Army and Security Services: New Fifth Columns?

As the Turkish armed forces and security services continue to reconstitute themselves, two noticeable recruitment trends have emerged. To some degree, these trends predate the July coup attempt. First, it is clear that political loyalties appear to be informing at least some element of the recruitment and restaffing process. This has been most notable in the recall of retired senior officers into military service. Many are reported to have been the victims of the Ergenekon/Sledgehammer cases (a trait that seems to assure their unaffiliation with the Hizmet movement). Personal allegiances to Turkey's ultra-nationalist right have become an even more common qualification for state employment.³¹ This phenomenon appears to mirror the growing alliance (or perhaps integration) of the AKP and the Nationalist Action Party (MHP). News reports suggesting that followers of Doğu Perinçek, a radical nationalist and ardent Kemalist, have specifically been sought as sources for recruitment makes this trend particularly puzzling.

Although both of these steps are in line with the government's more generalized policy of "coup proofing" the AKP's hold on power, prioritizing political sympathies may not necessarily ensure the competency or loyalty of new recruits. Enlisting the services of individuals on the basis on their political partisanship (be they Kemalists or MHP supporters) will perpetuate fears that secret cabals reside within the ranks of the military or other security branches. One can only imagine this would be the case with respect to Perinçek and his supporters. Perinçek possesses a long-documented history of opposing the AKP and was imprisoned as a suspected ringleader in the Ergenekon investigations. Whatever the case, Erdoğan's enlistment of such erstwhile adversaries increases the likelihood of either more purges or another coup.

Nationalists Restored

Sedat Peker

A convicted organized crime figure and well-known figure within Turkey's ultra-nationalist right. Despite admitting his role in the Ergenekon conspiracy, he has been released from prison and has attracted increased amounts of media tension for his support for the AKP and his threats against political dissidents.

İlker Başbuğ

Former General Chief of Staff, his life sentence in the Ergenekon Scandal was rescinded in 2014. Although

historically critical of Erdoğan and AKP, he has lent the government some support in its persecution of the Gulenist movement.

Doğu Perinçek

Long time leftist and Kemalist activist, he was convicted as co-conspirator in the Ergenekon investigation. Since his release in 2014, he has become a vocal support of the Turkish government's hardline approach towards the PKK and Kurdish nationalism.

The Resurgence of Paramilitarism

A second, and arguably more disturbing, trend witnessed within the past year or more is the renewed deployment of paramilitary forces within Turkey's borders. The use of private militias (and even death squads) as a tool to maintain order in times of crisis is by no means a recent feature of Turkish security planning. Drawing heavily upon Ottoman precedents, military authorities relied heavily upon armed bands of civilians in eastern Turkey during the worst of Ankara's war against the PKK in the 1980s and 1990s. These state-backed "village guards," as well as hitmen and gangsters associated with the Susurluk scandal of 1996, represented the most notorious forces associated with this period of conflict (much of the violence associated with these paramilitaries has yet to be officially investigated or acknowledged). With the AKP's bid to resolve the so-called Kurdish question, some lawmakers called for the abolition of the village guard system. The breakdown of talks between the government and the PKK, and the return to intense fighting in the southeast, has all but ended such discussions. As recently as November 2016, state ministers announced plans to recruit an additional 25,000 village guards (further reinforcing the 47,000-person village guard force already in place).³²

Other steps taken since the July coup attempt raise the specter of greater paramilitary violence in Turkey. With the escalation of the Turkish Armed Forces campaign against the PKK, there have been widespread reports of mysterious armed groups serving alongside the regular armed forces in predominately Kurdish areas. Such reports have gained credibility with the circulation of images showing graffiti from a group calling itself the "Esedullah Team." The purpose of this group, let alone its membership, is unclear.

One Kurdish parliamentarian accused the government of using the Esedullah Team, a group he claimed was made up of ISIS volunteers, to serve as shock troops for the Turkish army.³³ A more haunting set of accusations has been leveled against the AKP and its supposed relationship with the Ottoman Hearth society. Although the association claims to be a cultural organization established in appreciation of Ottoman history and "civilization," members of the Ottoman Hearths played a visible role in attacks on Kurdish political offices and media outlets perpetrated in late 2015.³⁴ Changes in government policy since the July coup attempt have raised the specter of more overt acts of paramilitarism by groups like the Ottoman Hearths. In October, the Interior Ministry announced that it would ease restrictions on gun ownership permits (ostensibly for local politicians seeking to protect themselves from assassination attempts). In the days that followed, the hashtag "#AKsilahlandirma ("AKP, take up arms") trended on Twitter. Among those promoting this call was the head of a splinter group related to the Ottoman Hearths, who called upon his members to be ready to "die for Erdoğan and kill for Erdoğan."³⁵ Although he and others have faced prosecution for incitement, noted commentators, as well as one of Erdoğan's own spokespersons, have spoken favorably of civilians taking up arms to defend against future coups.³⁶

The AKP and Its Allies

The potential for paramilitary bands comprising would-be AKP supporters should, in and of itself, raise questions about the future stability of Turkey's ruling party. Even if the party's faithful do not choose to take up arms, there is reason to question the AKP's ability to maintain unanimity and order within its ranks. Most of the men credited with building the AKP into the most transformative political movement in Turkey's history have left politics or kept a low profile. Ahmet Davutoğlu, the once powerful head of the foreign ministry, resigned from his post as prime minister, leaving many to suspect that he had fallen

out of favor with Erdoğan. In leaving office in May 2016, he joined a weighty list of shunned individuals who were once counted as the intellectual and moral leaders of the party (a group which include founders Abdullah Gül and Bülent Arınç). Taking the place of these former party luminaries have been men generally distinguished by subservient loyalty to the president (such as Binali Yıldırım and Berat Albayrak, Erdoğan's son-in-law). One may best describe the likes of Yıldırım and Albayrak as apparatchiks; neither possesses any great following among the party faithful or within the state. Beyond these changes at the top, it is difficult to divine what the future holds for the party leadership. Despite the radical changes contemplated for Turkey's executive branch, there are no apparent indications that the party has planned for Erdoğan's succession.

Taking this lack of contemplation as undivided support for the “Reis” (or “chief” in Turkish) may be overstating the case. In waving their secret ballots for the president's desired constitutional reforms before the cameras, parliamentarians signaled both their fealty to Erdoğan as well as their fear of being suspected of infidelity.³⁷ The effort to maintain the façade of a united front is a challenge that AKP's main political ally, the Nationalist Action Party, also faces. The MHP continues to suffer from an identity crisis in the wake of recent intra-party attempts to remove its longtime leader, Devlet Bahçeli. Despite a long history of opposing AKP policies, Bahçeli has become a chief proponent of Erdoğan's push for new executive powers. His reversal on the issue of Erdoğan's expanded authority, which many see as compensation for the president's personal support for Bahçeli's leadership over the MHP, has led to signs of renewed discontent within his party.³⁸

There are even greater signs of uncertainty with respect to members of Turkey's business elite. After years of mutual support and recognition, TÜSAİD, a leading industrialist and commercial interest group, has indicated a growing discomfort toward AKP policy. In December, the group publicly pleaded with the government to lift the current state of emergency for fear that it would do further damage to the nation's economy.³⁹ Just recently, it elected a new head whose avowed Kemalist leanings some see as a subtle indication of further dissent within TÜSAİD's ranks.⁴⁰

The implications of these fissures, however big or small, exceed the question of whether or not the government will retain the support of the electorate (be it with respect to the forthcoming constitutional referendum or in future elections). At the very least, these indicators caution observers who would otherwise see the AKP's base as made of granite. The AKP's current strength and stability appear to rest almost entirely upon the shoulders of Erdoğan. The fact that Turkish politics revolves around his whims makes it virtually impossible to gauge his party's ability to manage itself.

The sycophantic nature of much of the Turkish press makes it even more difficult to discern who among the party's secondary leaders represent the future. If one takes into account the vague signs of strain one sees today in the AKP coalition, it is reasonable to assume that the AKP will not always command the sort of backing it currently enjoys. At the very worst, if one also allows for the possibility that its supporters will be armed and willing to kill for “the chief” or his successors, the outcome of any future political or electoral struggle may be bloody.

Conclusion: The Potential Instability in Turkey and America's Response

It is hard to escape the conclusion that the tensions in Turkey are rising toward a critical mass. How the country arrived at this point of crisis cannot be easily summarized or explained. It is tempting to rely upon the notion of the deep state as a useful device to explain the overt and hidden pressures exerted upon the Turkish state. Yet in straining to find obscure causes for Turkey's current instability, one risks overlooking more fundamental factors at play in the current crisis. There is more than enough evidence to suggest that the gravest threats to the Turkish state are in plain sight, not hidden in the shadows.

After more than a decade and a half of electoral victories, the AKP still struggles with how to manage the bureaucracy, the military, and other elements of the national security establishment. It was not long ago that many were convinced the opposite was true: the army had "returned to its barracks," the courts were pacified, the commitment to structural reforms made European Union ascension more likely, Turkey's economy was growing, trust in the government was high, and civil society looked stronger than ever before.

Few would now dispute that the AKP's faith in society and the state have been gravely shaken. Erdoğan's method of governance promises to perpetuate this distrust. Since coming to power he has cycled through a variety of potential allies and discarded almost all of them: Gülenists, Kurdish nationalists, liberal reformers, and Turkish ultra-nationalists. It would seem Erdoğan's greatest fear remains that his rivals for power will unite to overthrow him and his party. What this insecurity seems to betray is his lack of faith in the state's loyalty, or perhaps his ability to govern it cooperatively. More purges and investigations, and the further concentration of power into the hands of the president, will probably not resolve this lingering sense of paranoia. The plethora of factions that populate the country's political spectrum seem to assure this.

Whatever rifts existed within the military and bureaucracy before July 15 have now most certainly been replaced by the deep structural wounds brought on by the purges. The attempted coup was most certainly real—the conspirators fired bullets, killed people, and threatened the state's solvency. The mass arrests, acts of torture, and political hysteria that followed makes the extent of this plot, let alone its true intentions, virtually unknowable. What is certain is that the purges have caused more structural harm than all the crimes committed by the plotters on the night of July 15.

In shunting aside almost an entire generation of officers, teachers, bankers, police officers, judges, lawyers, and other civil servants, the Turkish state has lost an irreparable amount of expertise and institutional knowledge. One can only assume that balancing budgets, educating children, caring for the sick, policing the streets, upholding the rule of law, and leading men into battle has become significantly more difficult in Turkey (and will remain so for the foreseeable future). It is hard to know how quickly the state can recover from its handicapped condition. Meanwhile, as the AKP attempts to restore vacancies with loyal cadres, society grows all the more polarized. This intentional result of the post-July 15 coup attempt will only aggravate the country's worsening political climate, making violence and civil strife more likely.

Indeed, American policymakers should certainly be under no illusions about the perils ahead for its NATO ally and erstwhile partner. If the July coup attempt has taught any lessons, it is that Turkey's long-term stability cannot be taken for granted. Insisting upon the legitimacy and integrity of Turkey's elected government, as the Obama administration did on the night of July 15, should remain a non-negotiable element of American foreign policy. Expressions of American support for Turkey's institutions should not come at the expense of other principles at the root of American foreign policy. Washington should remain vocal, and unequivocal, in its contention that the rule of law and the freedom of expression and the press are critical to Turkey's political health and survival. Maintaining these principles should not simply be seen as a matter of decorum for American policymakers.

Whether policymakers in Ankara will continue to accept such declarations of support warmly and openly remains to be seen. It may indeed be futile for either Ankara or Washington to rekindle the notion that the two countries possess a relationship based on shared values or ideals.⁴¹ One can only hope that the Turkish state and the Turkish nation will be able to surmount the deep divisions that currently plague them.

Endnotes

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