



Turkey after the coup attempt

by Lars Haugom

This IFS Insight examines the 15 July 2016 coup attempt in Turkey and its implications for relations between the Turkish military, government and society.

Take aways

- **It is still unclear who the coup plotters actually were, what motivated them to take action, and why the attempt seemed so badly prepared and executed.**
- **It seems likely that a mixed group of officers with different motivations took part.**
- **The coup attempt has led to a major restructuring of the Turkish Armed Forces and a 'civilianisation' of civil-military relations as the Armed Forces are now subject to civilian control and oversight. However, this reshaping of relations will not necessarily push forward increased democratic control of the Armed Forces in Turkey.**

Military coups in Turkey were supposed to be a thing of the past, a bad memory from the darkest days of the country's modern history. Nevertheless, in the late evening hours of 15 July 2016, units from the Turkish Armed Forces (Türk Silahlı Kuvvetleri – TSK) attempted to take control of the government, state institutions, national media and key points of communication in the country. Operating under the name The Peace at Home Council (Yurtta Sulh Konseyi), the coup's organisers declared on national television that the TSK had seized control, and was now governing Turkey in order to reinstate the constitutional order, human rights and freedoms, the rule of law and general security.

However, within hours it became clear that the Chief of Defence and other top commanders did not support the coup attempt, and that the civilian government was not actually deposed. Both President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım from the ruling Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi – AKP) managed to access national media to denounce the coup and assure

the population that it was about to fail. Erdoğan, who was out of Ankara on holiday at the time, encouraged people to take to the streets and resist the coup-makers – which they soon did in great numbers. At this point, it seemed clear to observers following the events the coup was destined to fail. Crowds of civilians managed to force soldiers from the streets, the police and security forces went into action and started rounding up military officers suspected of participating in the coup, and president Erdoğan was able to return safely to Ankara the next day.

Even if the coup attempt was brief, it was more violent than any other military takeover in Turkish history. In previous military coups, there were few confrontations between military personnel and ordinary citizens. This time, clashes between soldiers and civilians left almost 250 dead and many more injured. Moreover, the coup faction used fighter jets and helicopters to attack such key institutions as the National Assembly, the police headquarters, and the National Intelligence Service (MIT) headquarters in Ankara. Rather than acting in defence of the Turkish state and nation, the coup plotters actually appeared to attack the state and national institutions. The psychological impact on Turkey and its people of such conduct on the part of their own military forces can hardly be exaggerated.

An interesting aspect of the failed coup is the important role of social media, both in its organisation and in the mobilisation of civilians against it. The first indications of an imminent coup came on Twitter with users reporting unusual military activity in different parts of the country. Rebel officers used the chat application WhatsApp to communicate with each other during the coup when their ability to use military communication systems was removed. In addition, president Erdoğan made use of Apple's FaceTime to get on air via the private broadcaster CNN Türk.

Another important element in the mobilisation of the civilian population were local mosques across the country where

prayers were read continuously during the night of 15 and 16 July. This type of popular mobilisation by the mosques has never been seen in conjunction with previous military interventions in Turkey.

WHO DID IT?

The events of 15 July are shrouded in obscurity. Almost five months after the coup attempt, it is still unclear who the coup plotters actually were, what motivated them to take action, and why the attempt appeared to be so badly prepared and executed.

One reason for this obscurity is the fundamentally different perspectives of commentators inside and outside Turkey on the coup. In Turkey, the attempt is widely perceived as a serious assault on the country's system of government and against its citizens by rebel officers. Supporters and opponents of president Erdoğan therefore rallied to defend the civilian government in its fight against treacherous forces seeking to undermine it. In Europe and the United States, on the other hand, the tendency has been to underplay the seriousness of the attempt, and instead focus on how the events of 15 July were utilised by president Erdoğan to strike a blow against his political adversaries. This version of events has not gone down well in Turkey where it has been variously portrayed as a sign of ignorance or betrayal by old friends and allies in the West. It has even been claimed that the United States, by means of the CIA, was the ultimate instigator of the failed coup.

Another and more immediate reason for the obscurity is widespread self-censorship in the Turkish media and among academics. Self-censorship has been especially visible in Turkey after 15 July since the government is targeting journalists and academics in its hunt for people with links to 'terrorist organisations'.

The net result of these developments is that few people in Turkey are willing to openly ask critical questions about the 15 July coup attempt.

What seems clear is that the coup plotters acted outside the chain of command, and



that the top military leadership both resisted the coup and remained loyal to president Erdoğan and the civilian government throughout the course of events. Turkey's Chief of Defence, General Hulusi Akar, was in fact held hostage along with several other top commanders by the coup plotters while their plan was put into action.

Judging from arrests and detentions in the wake of the coup attempt, the leaders were high-ranking officers at levels immediately under the top commanders – i.e. in the ranks of generals and colonels. Units from all branches of the military were involved, although the paramilitary Gendarmerie, the Air Force and some of Turkey's Special Forces seem to have been more heavily involved than other branches and units.

Turkey has not experienced a coup attempt of this nature since the 1960s when junior officers initiated one successful (1960) and two failed coup attempts (1962 and 1963). Dissatisfied with the results of the 1960 coup and the early return of government power to civilians in 1961, radical officers, under the leadership of colonel Talat Aydemir, twice attempted – and failed – to seize government power in the following years. Since then, the top military leadership has kept tight control on the officer corps precisely to avoid such unauthorised action from within its own ranks. However, the 15 July coup attempt revealed deep divisions within the officers corps, and demonstrated that the Chief of Defence and other top commanders lacked crucial internal control over their subordinates.

President Erdoğan, the AKP government, the political opposition and military leadership have all blamed the coup on Hizmet, the movement of preacher Fetullah Gülen who has lived in exile in the United States since 1999. Whether such accusations are credible is hard to determine. The evidence of a Gülenist coup presented by Turkish commentators so far seems to amount to the following: President Erdoğan has said it was the Gülenists; the political opposition and the top military leadership

agrees with him; some of the arrested officers have confessed to being part of a Gülenist plot; and finally the Turkish people believe the story. We will have to wait until the many cases against suspected coup plotters go to court to see what kind of evidence the prosecutors will actually present.

Based on information from numerous sources, it seems certain that there were Gülen- supporters among Turkish military officers before the coup attempt. However, we do not know for certain how many officers belonged to the Gülen fraternity, nor how many of these officers actually participated in the coup attempt. Apart from the testimonies of officers who have later appeared battered and bruised on social media, there is little concrete evidence to support allegations that this was indeed a 'Gülenist' coup attempt. The testimony of Turkey's Chief of Defence, General Hulusi Akar, that one of his hostage takers, Brigadier General Hakan Evrim, offered to put him in touch with Fetullah Gülen, during the coup attempt also seems dubious in this context. The military leadership in Turkey was already alerted to the presence of Gülenists in the officer corps, and was even preparing to discharge many of them from the TSK. It is therefore difficult to understand why General Evrim would offer to put General Akar in touch with Gülen. Under the circumstances one would expect such an offer merely to strengthen General Akar's resolve to resist the coup plotters.

President Erdoğan had previously demanded the removal of hundreds of Gülenist officers from their posts, but the military leadership had resisted such a drastic move, fearing the effects on cohesion and morale in the officer corps. Nevertheless, a major reshuffle, including the discharge of Gülenist officers, was expected in early August 2016. If officers connected to the Gülen movement were indeed a driving force behind the coup attempt, the fear of being discharged (at best) or sentenced to life in jail (at worst) could have motivated a preponement of the coup, and explain why



the coup's plan seemed so ill prepared and badly executed.

Even if Gülenist officers were a driving force behind the coup attempt, it would likely have had a broader base in the officer corps. The name of the council set up by the coup plotters, and the language used in their public declaration, were both reminiscent of Kemalism – the traditional state ideology of the Turkish republic – and of the language used in connection with previous military takeovers. The number of military assets (bases, aircrafts and vehicles) used in the coup attempt also indicates that a significant number of military personnel were involved, defying the idea that it was the work of a faction within the officer corps. Moreover, the high number of officers who had to leave the TSK after the coup attempt underlines the same point. Almost half the generals and admirals, and a significant number of other senior officers, have been discharged in four rounds of purges following the coup attempt. That there were high-ranking Gülenist officers in the Turkish military seems beyond doubt, but the idea that over 40 per cent of its generals and admirals were affiliated with Hizmet seems far-fetched indeed.

What we do know is that there was widespread anger and resentment in the officer corps following the Ergenekon and 'Sledgehammer' trials (2010–2013) – the large-scale legal processes that implicated scores of high-ranking military officers in alleged coup plans against the AKP government. These legal cases were later dismissed as fabrications, but many officers disapproved of the military leadership's perceived passivity during the trials, and of the Erdoğan government for allowing the processes to take place. If we assume that the recent coup attempt involved more than a group of 'Gülenist' officers, such unrest in the military organisation forms a possible backdrop to the attempted takeover, and could help explain why it happened outside the chain of command.

Perhaps the most likely explanation is that the coup organisers were a mixed group of Gülenists and other officers, who, for some

reason or the other, wanted to get rid of Erdoğan and the AKP government, or were opportunistically looking for promotion in the military system.

Regardless of the ideological persuasion and motivation of the coup plotters, their actions can be seen as an expression of a mentality with deep roots in the Turkish military. According to this 'traditionalist' mentality, military officers have a right and duty to intervene when the interests of the Turkish state and nation come under threat – even if this means unseating democratically elected governments.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE COUP ATTEMPT

For the TSK, the 15 July 2016 coup attempt was a humiliation from which it will take a long time to recover. Not only did the coup attempt demonstrate a fateful lack of internal control on part of the military leadership, but also – if the official story is to be believed – that the military organisation had been colonised by a religious fraternity determined to seize state power.

Almost 4,500 officers have been dismissed from the TSK since the coup attempt. These dismissals are likely to have a negative impact on the combat effectiveness and battle preparedness of the TSK – at least in the short term. In particular, it will be difficult to replace the air force pilots, army helicopter pilots and commanders in the Special Forces who have been discharged. This type of personnel has central roles in ongoing operations against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan – PKK), and against the Islamic State and Kurdish rebel groups in Syria. The impact on other branches and units is more uncertain. Most of the dismissed generals and admirals have been replaced through promotions from lower ranks, and there seem to be no real shortages at present. On the other hand, fast-tracking officers in this way inevitably raise questions of experience and competence – in particular because the previous rounds of dismissals and fast-track promotions, following the Ergenekon and 'Sledgehammer' trials, are just a few years in the past.



RESTRUCTURING THE ARMED FORCES

At the time of writing, the TSK is undergoing a comprehensive post-coup restructuring process. Judging from a number of decrees passed under emergency law, the most important changes will be as follows:

- The Chief of Staff will now be appointed directly by the President. Direct government control will also be strengthened by levelling the number of cabinet ministers and four-star generals in the Supreme Military Council (Yüksek Askeri Şura – YAŞ), the body that decides senior promotions and other overarching issues in the armed forces.
- The chain of command at the top will also be changed. The Chief of Staff and the General Staff will now be attached to the Presidency instead of the Prime Minister's office. The commanders of Turkey's land, air and sea forces, on the other hand, will answer to the Ministry of National Defence. Moreover, the President and the Prime Minister will be able to give orders directly to these commanders without going through the Chief of Staff. Ultimately, this could reduce the Chief of Staff to a coordinator of military affairs rather than the top commander of the armed forces. In his new and enhanced role, the Minister of National Defence will be able to choose ministry staff rather than making do with what the TSK has provided. Traditionally, the defence ministry has been staffed by military officers on secondment from the General Staff, directed by three-star generals.
- In addition, the military education system will undergo major changes. Military high schools have already been closed, and within two years the existing military academies will become part of a new National University for Defence under the Ministry for National Defence and headed by a civilian rector.

- Finally, the TSK will be stripped of many of its former units and functions. The paramilitary Gendarmerie and the Coast Guard will now be fully subject to the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Military industrial facilities, shipyards and hospitals will be transferred to the Ministry of National Defence and the Ministry of Health respectively.

The more long-term consequences for the TSK of such a comprehensive restructuring are not easy to assess at this early stage. Some of these reforms were already on the cards, for example the subjection of the Gendarmerie and the Coast Guard to the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Industrial facilities, shipyards and hospitals are also, strictly speaking, outside the core activities of a modern military, and even if these units have constituted an integral part of the TSK's activities, it is not inconceivable that a gradual transfer to civilian management would have taken place even without the coup attempt. Neither does it come as a surprise that Erdoğan wants to have the Chief of Staff and the General Staff answer to the President rather than the Prime Minister's Office, given his determination to create a strong presidency. Even before the coup attempt, Erdoğan hinted that he wanted to take a more active role as commander-in-chief.

Other measures seem more radical and potentially disruptive for the TSK. Political appointments go against a long and honoured tradition of meritocracy in the armed forces, and the direct appointment of the Chief of Staff by the President is likely to stir up controversy in the officer corps. The same goes for an increased presence of cabinet ministers in the YAŞ.

The new chain of command at the top is also a novelty in the Turkish military system in breaking with the time-honoured practice of having one unconditional Commander-in-Chief. Moreover, the establishment of a new national university for defence will



discontinue the Turkish military academies – institutions with traditions that go back over a century.

There is also a lack of expertise on military and defence questions in the civilian bureaucracy, and this knowledge gap is not so easily filled – even if the Ministry of Defence is now given a formally stronger position vis-à-vis the armed forces. It will take years to educate sufficient civilian officials in this field, and in the meantime the government will have few alternatives but to rely on the knowledge of military officers. The government will face similar challenges in the establishment of a National Defence University to replace the current military academies. It seems likely that the civilian government's need for military know-how could give a prominent role to military officers dismissed as a result of the Ergenekon and 'Sledgehammer' trials, who for this reason are not tainted by any links to the recent coup attempt. Many of these officers are secularists, but at the same time 'Eurasianist' in outlook: sceptical to Turkey's reliance on the West for its security needs and supportive a closer relationship between Turkey and Russia. For this reason, the turnover of military personnel could also mean more challenging relations between Turkey and its NATO allies.

RESHAPING CIVIL–MILITARY RELATIONS

It is not difficult to understand the rationale behind the increase in civilian government control of the Armed Forces after the 15 July coup attempt. Neither are the ongoing changes in Turkey without parallel in other NATO countries. Germany had a similar system from the 1950s with strong civilian control and oversight of its Armed Forces, accompanied by institutional mechanisms consciously aimed at preventing the Chief of Staff from becoming too strong in his relationship with the civilian government.

With the current changes, the Turkish government no doubt aims to transform the TSK into a better-managed and more efficient defence force that is capable of

handling Turkey's current and future security challenges, but without becoming a threat to the civilian government. However, in a less optimistic scenario, the TSK could also become a more politicised and dysfunctional organisation, with greater internal rivalry between the branches and an even more restive officer corps. Such a development would impact negatively on the long-term efficiency and battle preparedness of the Armed Forces, and could provide fertile ground for renewed political factionalism among the officers.

As for civil–military relations, it seems that the process of civilianisation that started in the early 2000s will now reach a provisional final stage. Institutional reforms after 2001 displaced the military from the government decision-making process, and ended its role as a veto power in Turkey. Furthermore, the Ergenekon and 'Sledgehammer' cases served to pacify the military as a significant factor in Turkish politics. The 15 July coup attempt, finally, has paved the way to subject the Armed Forces to civilian control and oversight.

What seems clear, though, is that the AKP government is now seeking to increase political civilian control and oversight of the Armed Forces, not democratic civilian control as we usually understand this concept. Unlike the German system, for example, where the Bundestag has a strong role in exercising civilian control and oversight, a greater role for the Turkish Grand National Assembly in military and security affairs does not seem to be part of the government's restructuring efforts. Military and security matters in Turkey are still likely to be handled in the National Security Council (Milli Güvenlik Kurumu – MGK) behind closed doors. In addition, democratic control and oversight would require increased transparency, and a real public debate on defence and security issues. Without such measures, it is difficult to see how the TSK can become truly accountable to the Turkish citizenry and their elected representatives.

In their book *Islamism, Democracy and Liberalism in Turkey*, William Hale



and Ergun Özbudun write that achieving meaningful oversight of the Armed Forces by the legislature in Turkey would require a fundamental shift in outlook by parliamentarians, and ultimately

the electorate (2010, 97). Perhaps a strengthening civilian government control of the TSK can lead to such a 'fundamental shift' sometime in the future, but Turkey does not appear to be at this point yet.



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