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From the Editors

Dear Friends,

The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies is proud to present the February 2018 issue of our monthly publication, *Turkeyscope*. In this issue, *Turkeyscope* co-editor Ceng Sagnic analyzes the relationship between the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) practice of forging alliances with both Islamist and ultranationalist groups, and the party's efforts to build heavily-armed forces against the probability of renewed coup attempts.

Best wishes,

The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies
Tel Aviv University

Erdoğan and His Allies: A Populist Legitimacy

Ceng Sagnic

Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party's (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi - AKP) history has been marked with shifting alliances and constant efforts to build armed forces that could counterbalance the Turkish military's unchallenged power. Hence, the party's daily political discourse underwent major changes over the past sixteen years of its rule, mostly in accordance with its changing alliances. What continues to remain constant are the AKP's ongoing efforts to retain heavily-armed forces against the estimated probability of renewed coup attempts, and its reliance on alliances that can contribute to the party's standing both in the realm of public opinion and at the ballot box.

Prior to the failed coup of July 15, 2016, the AKP had long refuted the claims that the Islamist Gülen movement occupied the majority of governmental and military positions.¹ Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, then prime minister of Turkey, repeatedly went on record refuting the opposition's accusation that at minimum a non-governmental organization was in charge of the country's security apparatus, and that there were grave suspicions about the same movement's well-established hegemony over other state institutions.²

The regime's continuous assertions that Fethullah Gülen's secretive organization has not been granted any control over any of the governmental powers were proved false in 2013 by the AKP itself, but only after an allegedly Gülen-linked clique had published recordings of top AKP officials' phone conversations. These revealed the existence of deals between government ministers and businessmen that allegedly violated sanctions against Iran. The aftermath of the failed coup attempt of July 2016, - also attributed to the Gülen movement - marked the official declaration of the movement as a terrorist organization, while over a hundred thousand people were either arrested or stripped of their positions in the government bureaucracy, the military, higher education, and the police.³

The post-July 2016 era has also been marked with speculation about several other Islamic movements' ostensibly growing control over the same institutions that had once been controlled by the Gülen movement. Süleymancılar, Menzil and İsmailağa are the *tariqahs* that have allegedly filled the vacuum left in the government by the purge of members of the Gülen movement, and have come to develop hegemonic authority over several ministries. As per serious claims made by the Republican People's Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi - CHP), which is Turkey's primary opposition party, the Adıyaman-based Menzil assumed control of the health, justice and interior ministries after the failed 2016 coup attempt.⁴ The accusation was bolstered by interesting, if circumstantial, photographic evidence depicting all four Ministry of Health jets carrying registration numbers beginning with "GVS." GVS are the initials of the Arabic term "gavs," which is used as a congregational title by the leader of Menzil, Abdulbaki Erol. Media outlets aligned with the secularist opposition

later revealed that many senior followers of Menzil, including Erol, had registered their vehicles' license plates with the same three letters.⁵

However, changes within the government structure in the aftermath of the failed July 2016 coup attempt were not limited to the above. Since the failed coup, the ranks of the Police Special Operations Department (Polis Özel Harekat - PÖH) tactical units have been significantly expanded. While there is no data confirming the strength of the PÖH, it is said to consist of between 45,000 – 50,000 well trained officers, and continues to regularly advertise for new recruits. What is certain, however, is the fact that the PÖH has now been equipped with heavy weaponry and has been given some of the bases in major cities and towns that had been evacuated by the Turkish armed forces, based on the fear that the military might attempt another coup.⁶

The supply of heavy weaponry to the PÖH can be considered a part of a larger defensive strategy that the AKP has been pursuing against the probability of renewed coup attempts by the military. Nevertheless, the question of whether a police force should possess such equipment dates back to the late 1990s, and had been the subject of dispute between the military and several civilian governments. The AKP's predecessor, Refah, which was the party of former Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan, was accused by the military and the local media of trying to form a police force with heavy weapons that could serve as an alternative to the army. Heavy weaponry of the PÖH were seized by the military in 1997 as the Turkish Armed Forces (Türk Silahlı Kuvvetleri - TSK) intervened in politics with a memorandum known in Turkish political terminology as the 28 February incident. The memorandum led to the collapse of Refah's coalition government with Tansu Çiller's True Path Party (*Doğru Yol Partisi - DYP*), and the PÖH remained a relatively small and ineffective department until the mid-2000's, when the AKP succeeded in reviving it.⁷

The PÖH was the most effective force in combating the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan - PKK) so-called trench wars in city and town centers during 2014-2016, in repulsing the coup attempt of July 2016, and finally in the Turkish ground incursion into northern Syria two months thereafter. The force is seen to represent the backbone of the regime's defenses against internal threats emanating from the military, secularists and the Kurdish movement. The government announced that over 200 bases are currently in construction across the country to accommodate the PÖH, whose arms are still short of counterbalancing the TSK's well-established military capacity but will nevertheless be effective in preventing the military from undertaking an unchallenged coup in the future.

The two major changes within the Turkish governing system, namely the expanding influence of Islamic movements that replaced the Gülen movement's cadres in the government and the creation of a heavily-armed paramilitary police force, are actually two intertwined phenomena; there have been serious allegations that the vast majority of PÖH officers have been selected upon references given by Menzil.

Ever since its foundation in 2001, the AKP relied on unseen coalitions. The party's first undeclared coalition was with Turkish liberals; it arguably lasted through the days of the 2013 Gezi protests. The Gülen Movement remained the longest-lasting ally of the AKP, while the shortest was with the Kurds during the 2010-2015 peace process, which had been called the 'Democratic Opening' or 'Democratic Initiative.' Following the failed coup attempt of 2016, the ruling party aligned with ultranationalists and neo-unionists, who essentially changed the rhetoric of AKP from neo-Ottomanism to pan-Turkish sentiments. Hence, the party continued to capitalize on the strength of large Islamic communities, which led to a situation wherein secularist Turkish nationalism was combined with right-wing nationalism and Islamism. Prominent Turkish journalist Cengiz Çandar named the newest alliance as "a political marriage, symbolized by the alliance between the devotees of [the Ottoman sultan] Abdülhamid II and the modern day disciples of those, the ultranationalist unionists, who removed the sultan from power."⁸

The AKP's multi-faceted and simultaneous alliances with Islamist congregations, ultranationalists, right-wing nationalists and secularist nationalists continue to supply the ruling party with much-needed rhetorical legitimacy and an electoral advantage. Moreover, these alliances are also used to generate the cadres needed in the government and security apparatuses, as evident in the cases of the PÖH and the alleged hegemonic authority of the Islamic group Menzil over the Ministry of Interior.

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Notes

¹ "Bekir Bozdağ'dan 'Fethullah Gülen'e övgü' açıklaması", *Cumhuriyet*, September 12, 2016

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² "Başbakan'dan Fethullah Gülen'e "dön" çağrısı", *Vatan*, June 15, 2012

<http://www.gazetevatan.com/basbakan-dan-fethullah-gulen-e--don--cagrisi-457944-gundem/>

³ "Turkey fires 3,900 in second post-referendum purge", *Reuters*, April 29, 2017

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-security-expulsions/turkey-fires-3900-in-second-post-referendum-purge-idUSKBN17V0MH>

⁴ "CHP'li Tanal: Bu üç bakanlık Menzil tarikatının elinde!", *Birgün*, July 25, 2017

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⁵ “Bakanlık neden GVS plaka kullanıyor”, *Oda TV*, September 3, 2017
<https://odatv.com/bakanlik-neden-gvs-plaka-kullaniyor-0309171200.html>

⁶ “Darbesavar PÖH’e ağır silah takviyesi”, *Akit*, July 29, 2017
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⁷ “Polis Özel Harekât yeniden dağlara çıkıyor”, *Posta*, June 23, 2017
<http://www.posta.com.tr/polis-ozel-harekt-yeniden-daglara-cikiyor-haberi-34258>

⁸ Cengiz Çandar, “New Turkey: Neo-nationalist or the reincarnation of the "Old"?", *The Turkey Analyst*, December 20, 2017
<https://www.turkeyanalyst.org/publications/turkey-analyst-articles/item/592-new-turkey-neo-nationalist-or-the-reincarnation-of-the-old?.html>