



The Moshe Dayan Center  
for Middle Eastern and African Studies



TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY

# TURKEYSCOPE

## INSIGHTS ON TURKISH AFFAIRS

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**Vol. 3, No. 10, July 2019**

### **What future for 15 July putsch attempt remembrance?**

**Emre Gönen**

Mausoleums, statues of national leaders, monuments, battlefields, graveyards, schools, stadiums and town squares garnished with national flags are considered to be the most significant manifestation of citizens' collective memory, which shapes the national civil religion. Since Turkey's foundation, the nucleus of the Turkish identity was formed through a personality cult surrounding the founder of the Republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, and by the memorialization of historically significant events as national holidays. Now, the Erdoğan administration seeks to turn July 15<sup>th</sup>, the anniversary of the failed 2016 coup, as a new cornerstone of the cultural memory of his “new Turkey.” Yet, the question remains: will this step be embraced by all Turkish people, or will July 15<sup>th</sup> remain significant for only a certain segment of society?

#### **Atatürk's Civil Religion**

The cult of Atatürk is deeply rooted in Turkish society. His memory is cherished at every occasion, and his name has been given to a myriad of public landmarks - roads, bridges, airports, and other places. The anniversary of his death is commemorated every 10<sup>th</sup> of November, at five past nine o'clock in the morning. His tomb, the Anıtkabir, is located atop a hill in Ankara, the city he recreated and made the capital of “his” republic. It is a site of veneration, if not a shrine for secular pilgrimage,<sup>1</sup> going well beyond official hagiography and rituals. In fact, the only comparable figure to Atatürk is Charles de Gaulle of France. Due to historic developments, both men have come to personify the collective honor of their respective nations.

Like in the case of de Gaulle, Atatürk's critics and detractors are numerous. In contrast with de Gaulle, who was a fervent Catholic, monogamous, and thus an ideal *pater familias*, Kemal Atatürk is seen by the religious and conservative segments of Turkish society as being amoral and anti-Islamic. The proponents of a political Islam have always resented the deep-seated Westernization of Turkish society. The current government has reacted to the personality cult devoted to Mustafa Kemal in various ways, such as building new mosques. For example, the new Kocatepe Mosque – a rather imposing monument – was erected on an Ankara hilltop and thus rivals Atatürk's mausoleum without doing so too explicitly. New imposing mosques

have been built in Istanbul in symbolic places, such as the top of Çamlıca Hill, visible from everywhere alongside the Bosphorus, and in Taksim Square, a fiercely meaningful location.

However, first and foremost mosques are places of sacred worship; they do not constitute a full-fledged, totally dominant institution within Turkish society. Mainstream Turks do not have a problem with Islam, *per se*, but they do when it becomes political. Meanwhile, the Kemalist bloc has elevated the personality cult of Atatürk to the level of a secular religion. The “Turkish laicism” has turned into a bitter rivalry between Kemalist tradition and political Islam. Both sides attempt to undercut one another, sometimes openly, but mostly through proxies.

This dichotomy is likely to go on for a while yet. Where the Kemalist tradition and historiography bests Islamic rituals is in its veneration of the military deeds and successes of Atatürk and his companions. One cannot really put forward any valid argument to counter the immense role played by the Ottoman officers to create the Turkish Republic. Even the huge number of military interventions in political and public life did not really undermine the Armed Forces’ reputation among the population<sup>2</sup>.

### **Putsch attempt of 15 July**

Nevertheless, the coup attempt of 15 July 2016 certainly has upset this balance, to the detriment of the Armed Forces. On a silent and hot July evening, Istanbul inhabitants were returning to their homes when quite suddenly soldiers and armored vehicles appeared on the streets. The sight of armed soldiers wandering the sidewalks was an unusual one, and while most soldiers did not communicate with the curious bystanders, one young captain warned a family that this was not a military exercise and that they should return to their homes.

By 8pm, two or three tanks took up positions on the Bosphorus Bridge, blocking traffic from Asia to Europe. Slowly but surely it became clear that something was wrong, but the media was unable to provide answers and no representative of the government was immediately available. Two hours later, the then-premier Binali Yıldırım issued a declaration that a small-scale insurgency was underway within the military ranks, but would soon be suppressed. President Erdoğan, then vacationing on the Mediterranean coast of Turkey, could not be reached at that time. Once people understood what was happening, more tanks had been deployed in the streets. More importantly, fighter jets started to fly over Istanbul and Ankara, trying to create panic by diving over residential areas creating “sonic booms” hardly distinguishable from a bomb explosion.

At this moment, a gifted young television reporter had the idea to reach President Erdoğan by using the video-chat application FaceTime. As she displayed her mobile phone screen to the cameras, President Erdoğan was able to address the Turkish public directly. In his statement, he urged every Turkish citizen to go into the streets in order to stop the insurgency. Significant numbers of people followed his imperative. Unarmed, they confronted soldiers in Istanbul and Ankara, while fighter jets continued to scream overhead. The involvement of the civilian population in stopping a military coup was a first in Turkish history, and came at a cost. Within only a few hours, almost two hundred and fifty people lost their lives; hundreds more were injured. Rebel airstrikes hit the Grand National Assembly compound in Ankara and police stations guarding the Presidential Palace, turning the police forces loyal to the Government into victims.

High-ranking military officers were absent from the public sphere, leading to rumors spreading that the entire General Staff had been held captive in Ankara by insurgents. After a while, the Commander-in-chief of all military units belonging to the First Army<sup>3</sup>, located in Istanbul, ordered all units to return to their barracks and bases with immediate effect. A few units disobeyed this order, and opened fire on the crowd of protesters.

At 2am, the TRT national television channel studios were stormed by military units. A trembling and terrorized young presenter read a text given by the military, which declared that a so-called “Yurtta Sulh Komitesi” (Peace at Home Committee) had seized power in Turkey, in order to stop and punish the corruption. The rhetoric was in the pure style of old military takeovers and sounded displaced and anachronistic. Other news channel studios were also stormed. This created a curious scene; people who returned home from street protests once the shooting had begun could watch journalists being arrested in their studios on live television.

By the early morning, most of the military units had departed the streets. Those that remained were attacked by angry crowds that had been fired upon hours before. Upon the President’s return to Istanbul, he directed the legal authorities to take all necessary measures against the insurgents, and a significant number of commissioned and non-commissioned officers are arrested. The Chief of General Staff resumed his duties; it appeared that he had effectively been held prisoner for a time in an Air Force base. President Erdoğan and his entourage narrowly escaped an assassination attempt by a team of commando officers, in Marmaris.

While the coup was completely unsuccessful, it is worth recalling a number of unexpected issues that arose.

First of all, the putsch attempt was ill-prepared and only a very limited number of military units participated. Less than eighty tanks and armored vehicles left their barracks, whereas in a city as large as Istanbul, a military coup would need at least ten times more tanks to effectively deter the population and to secure critical sites.

Secondly, almost all of Turkey’s historic coup attempts were either prepared or fomented within the Land Forces, with the other two branches and the Gendarmerie usually following. The 2016 attempt was the first time that a faction within the Turkish Air Force had spearheaded a putsch attempt, and it was followed in this by a limited number of infantry and armored divisions.

Thirdly, the Turkish government has argued that the coup was organized, not by military members themselves, but by a civilian organization, led by cleric Fethullah Gülen, who is self-exiled in the United States. It has been argued that his representative, a high-ranking leader of this underground organization Adil Öksüz, was present at the center of the putsch in Akıncılar Air Force Base, conducted the whole operation and was obeyed by all the military insurgents. If true, it will be the first time that a civilian organization fomented a coup d’état in Turkey; such intricate relations with such a wide web of conspirators within the Armed Forces has never been seen before.

Fourth, this putsch attempt has shown a major development, which no one predicted to be possible: a coherent, strong, and widespread response to the coup emerged from across the breadth of Turkish society. The civilian population went into the streets *en masse* to stop the military, the majority of Army units refused to participate, and all political parties from across the spectrum opposed the overthrow attempt.

Fifth, most political parties and analysts seemed to have grossly underestimated the potential infiltration of the armed forces, police and the judiciary by people and militants loyal to Fethullah Gülen. The security forces apprehended the alleged mastermind of the coup, Adil Öksüz, while he was attempting to leave the Akıncılar Air Base. Brought before a tribunal, Öksüz denied all responsibility and stated that he had been there merely to negotiate the purchase of a parcel of nearby land. When questioned about the details of this purchase, he declared that he did not remember. A spurious defense such as this seemingly should have been followed by Öksüz's immediate arrest and imprisonment, but he was set free by the presiding judge. Öksüz immediately disappeared without a trace and is likely to have fled the country. Since that time, the judge who authorized his release has been charged with colluding with a terror organization.<sup>4</sup>

### **The saga of the resistance**

The government has been adamant to showcase the popular support it enjoyed during the putsch attempt. Apart from the huge July 15 statue located at the opposite side of the presidential palace in Ankara, a monument has been erected at the entrance to the Bosphorus Bridge- the location where many protesters had been killed by machine gun fire. The bridge itself has been renamed the "July 15 Martyrs Bridge." The whole area has been organized to allow people to comfortably visit, and a Museum is being built there, which will likely depict the events of that awful evening.

For the bus lines crossing the Bridge at this point, an automated voice reminds the passengers that those wishing to visit the martyrs' monument should get off at that particular stop. Campaigns of remembrance are organized each year on the anniversary of the 15 July coup attempt. Universities are strongly encouraged to organize panels, seminars or conferences about the aborted putsch.

It is worth remembering that Tayyip Erdoğan's call to resistance against putschists strongly resembled the call made by Général de Gaulle in April 1961, when he called on the population of France to stop the Algeria-based colonial army then threatening to invade metropolitan France<sup>5</sup>. In that sense, without a doubt this represents a historic and decisive moment in a country's history.

Could this be turned into a resistance saga? Could this become another victory celebration day? Nothing is less obvious, and the reason for this is simple. The events of 15 July were a civil struggle between Turkey's democratically elected government, parliament and the official military hierarchy on one side, and a malevolent faction that had infiltrated the Armed Forces, the Security Forces and the Judiciary on the other. The circumstances are too murky and resist easy comprehension. While there have been significant purges of the military, police forces, and judiciary, the Parliament has to date refused to initiate investigations by the Grand National Assembly. Too many obscure points remain, and too many people are on the run. Turkey's allies refuse to extradite disloyal officers (as in the case of Greece), or alleged coup organizers; Gülen himself has been given protection in the US.

Finally, 15 July was a failed putsch attempt. No one, anywhere in the world, likes to remember this type of internal scandal, even if they were successfully concluded as had been the case in Turkey. It is evident that the failed putsch attempt will be remembered in a positive light as an example of an entire population refusing to use non-democratic measures

to effect political change. But this type of memory will likely be confined to the history books; people and politicians will likely prefer not to remember the terrible scenes that took place during this scandalous uprising attempt. For this reason, it is very unlikely that the failed putsch attempt will be memorialized as a glorious anniversary in the future.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup>An authoritative article on this subject belongs to Güllalp Haldun, "Enlightenment by Fiat: Secularization and Democracy in Turkey" in Middle Eastern Studies, Vol.41, No:3, 351-372, May 2005

<sup>2</sup> According to an opinion poll carried out by Kuantum İletişim in March 2018, the Armed Forces remain the most reliable state institution yet, with almost 70 % of the population trusting the Army.

<sup>3</sup> Turkish Land Forces are divided into four armies, the best-equipped and trained Army remains in the West, guarding Thrace and Istanbul region, the Second Army in the Central Anatolia, the Third Army in the East and a fourth Army, the Aegean Army has been established after the military expedition in Cyprus, to guard the Aegean region.

<sup>4</sup>FETÖ, meaning Fethullah Gülen's Terror Organisation, the acronym has been created in the aftermath of the putsch attempt and since this has become the official appellation.

<sup>5</sup> « *Au nom de la France, j'ordonne que tous les moyens, je dis bien tous les moyens, soient employés pour barrer la route à ces hommes là, en attendant de les réduire. J'interdis à tout Français, et d'abord à tout soldat, d'exécuter un seul de leurs ordres.* » (In the name of France, I order that all means, and I say all means are to be used to block these people's way, while ultimately doing away with them. I forbid all the French, especially all soldiers, to execute any of their instructions), in [http://www.irenees.net/bdf\\_fiche-experience-537\\_fr.html](http://www.irenees.net/bdf_fiche-experience-537_fr.html)