

Turkey after the Failed Coup Attempt: Inward Focus and External Assertiveness

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The failed coup attempt in Turkey on July 15, 2016 has emerged as a watershed in internal Turkish affairs, and in turn has affected Ankara's foreign policy on both regional and international levels. Already in the early weeks following the successful suppression by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his supporters of the attempted coup, changes were evident in Turkish policy on issues that were on Turkey's agenda before the episode: Syria, the Kurdish question, and Turkey's relations with Russia and Iran. Emerging tensions likewise required a revisiting of Ankara's relations with the European Union (EU), the United States, and NATO. It appears that all these developments have created a new context for the normalization agreement signed by Israel and Turkey in June 2016 – both a positive development in the bilateral relations themselves and of general regional importance. It is possible, however, that the events in Turkey not long after the reconciliation agreement was signed have reduced its potential effect on the region.

Changes in Turkey's Foreign Relations

Even though the authorities in Turkey have found it difficult to produce clear evidence that Fethullah Gulen, a Muslim religious preacher living in voluntary exile in the US, was the ideological inspiration and the “mastermind” behind the military coup, there is evidence that many supporters of the Gulen movement were involved in the unsuccessful coup.¹ Following the events,

the Turkish authorities launched a purge of the movement's supporters, detaining and arresting more than 40,000 people and dismissing more than 100,000 from their public positions.² Clearly the opportunity was taken in the framework of this large scale purge to act against groups unrelated to the Gulen movement, but that are perceived as critical of Erdogan and the Justice and Development Party. Even before the attempted coup, pro-government elements referred to the movement as the "Fethullahist Terror Organization (FETO)," and following the unsuccessful coup this name has gained traction among additional parts of the Turkish public. Particularly for the younger generation, which did not personally experience the military coup of 1980, the death of about 290 people during the coup attempt and the bombing of the Turkish parliament by its perpetrators are regarded as events that are barely imaginable as possible in today's Turkey. All the political parties in the Turkish parliament condemned the coup attempt, and support for Erdogan skyrocketed from 47 percent in June 2016 to 68 percent the following month.³

Gulen's presence in the United States and his status as an American citizen have sparked tension between the United States and Turkey, and this tension, not confined to decision makers, has also spread to the Turkish public. In tandem, criticism was sounded in the United States regarding a number of Turkish statements asserting that the United States aided the plotters. The US administration regards such statements as not only groundless accusations, but also potentially damaging to relations between the two countries. The Turks, however, are demanding the extradition of Gulen, and regard American claims that extradition is a legal issue that will take a long time to settle as evasion and assistance to Gulen, even if only indirect. Turkey-United States relations have known other crises, but the demonization of Gulen in Turkey has exacerbated the destructive potential of this crisis. At the same time, the United States has not succeeded in allaying Turkish fears that the support given to the Syrian Kurds by the United States will lead the Kurds to conquer more territory, thereby creating territorial contiguity along the Turkish-Syrian border. For Turkey, this is a red line, and its fears regarding the matter prompted the decision to launch Euphrates Shield, a military operation in northern Syria, in late August 2016. The Turkish military

intervention has further exacerbated the US-Turkey tensions concerning the role the Syrian Kurds should play in the struggle against the Islamic State.

Since the attempted coup, criticism of the West's ostensible lack of empathy for the trauma suffered by Turkish citizens has been a recurring theme in articles by Turkish commentators and opinion makers on the subject of Turkey's relations with Western countries.⁴ The argument was that instead of focusing on condemnation of the coup organizers, particularly the Gulen movement, Western pundits have focused on condemnation of the large scale purge in Turkey following the coup's failure, with reiteration of past criticism of Erdogan's autocratic tendencies. Presidential palace spokesman Ibrahim Kalin wrote on his Twitter account that those leading the critical discourse against Erdogan's ostensible dictatorial tendencies over the past year or two in effect set the stage for the attempted coup.⁵ In addition, the West is criticized for not paying enough attention to what is described in Turkey as a positive trend toward increased unity among the Turkish public following the attempted coup.

While the tension between the United States and Turkey centers on the issue of Gulen's extradition, which is directly linked to the coup episode itself, the tension between Turkey and the EU is an ongoing dynamic related to the faltering process of Turkey's accession to the EU and the implementation of the agreement signed by Turkey and the EU in March 2016, whereby Turkey is to receive significant aid and other benefits in exchange for increased monitoring of efforts to smuggle refugees into Greece from Turkish territory. Following the failed coup, demands were made in Turkey for the restoration of capital punishment, which was canceled in 2004 as part of Turkey's efforts to join the EU. In response, senior EU officials made it clear that the restoration of capital punishment would remove Turkish candidacy for membership from the agenda. While it is doubtful whether the Turkish parliament will indeed restore capital punishment, this issue has become an incendiary one in Turkish public opinion.⁶ Austrian Chancellor Christian Kern stated in early August that the negotiations between Brussels and Ankara were nothing more than a diplomatic fiction, and Austrian Foreign Minister Sebastian Kurz said that his country would veto the introduction of new topics for discussion with respect to Turkey's accession to the EU. Following these remarks, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu called Austria the "capital of radical

racism.”⁷ Although these exchanges can be attributed to internal factors in the two countries and the need to let off steam, they appear to be typical of the hostility between Ankara and many European capitals. The EU has also been criticized in Turkey for failing to keep its promise to go ahead with the lifting of the visa requirement for Turkish citizens traveling to European countries. For its part, the EU asserts that the main problem lies in Turkish laws against terrorism, which do not meet the European standards on this matter.⁸ The Turkish government’s classification of the Gulen movement as a terrorist organization, and the renewal of the violent confrontation with the Kurds in Turkey are to a large extent eroding Turkey’s willingness to be flexible in this regard.

In contrast to its criticism of the West, Turkey is clearly satisfied with the responses of Russia and Iran to the attempted coup and the strong condemnation in those countries of the anti-Erdogan conspirators. The Turkish President’s first foreign visit following the attempted coup was to Russia, and Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif was the most senior foreign diplomat to visit Turkey following the events. The thaw in relations between Turkey and Russia began earlier, and it appears that the tension created between the two countries following the downing of a Russian airplane in Turkish airspace in November 2015 is dissipating. On June 27, 2016, Erdogan wrote to President Vladimir Putin, promising to “do everything to rebuild relations.”

Both Russia and Iran believe that there has been some change in Turkish policy on the issue of Syria – in other words, Turkey is less opposed to the continued rule of the Bashar al-Assad regime, at least in the interim period – and they want Turkey to continue in this direction. In an interview during his visit to St. Petersburg, Erdogan said that Russia was the central actor for bringing about peace in Syria.⁹ At a joint press conference at the end of Zarif’s visit to Turkey, he and Cavusoglu declared that they intended to tighten the connection between their countries concerning the preservation of “Syria’s territorial integrity.”¹⁰ Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim also made remarks to this effect in his meeting with foreign reporters on August 20, 2016, and said that Turkey was planning on assuming an active role in events in Syria over the coming months in order to prevent Syria’s division along ethnic lines.¹¹

These statements *inter alia* reflect Turkish concern about the strengthening of the Syrian Kurdish forces and the possibility that they will expand their control further in northern Syria. It is against this backdrop that Operation Euphrates Shield can be understood. Turkey would not have begun this operation without some sort of tacit consent of Russia, and Russia would not have agreed to Turkish actions without assurance that Ankara's policy vis-à-vis Assad has changed somewhat. Turkey's persistence in this policy means that the Kurdish question is the most important issue in the Turkish order of priorities, while issues such as the future of Assad and the fighting against the Islamic State are of lesser importance. Such a policy is likely to cause some contention between Turkey and Saudi Arabia, which hoped for the long term to keep Turkey in the Sunni axis it is trying to lead. Turkey's initial successes in Euphrates Shield have also led it to present a more assertive stance regarding developments in Iraq, and this has put a strain on relations between Baghdad and Ankara.

Following Erdoğan's visit to St. Petersburg, a NATO spokesman stated on August 10, 2016 that Turkey's membership in the organization was not in doubt. The need to deliver such a message, which took many by surprise, reflected the confusion and tension that have emerged in relations between Turkey and NATO following the failed coup. Particularly upsetting were the incidents at Incirlik Air Base, where dozens of NATO tactical nuclear weapons are stored, and from which warplanes take off in the framework of the campaign by the international coalition against the Islamic State. The activity at the base, including that of American warplanes, was temporarily suspended when the base commander and other officers were arrested for involvement in the attempted coup. Although there is a tendency to regard Turkey-NATO relations and Turkey-Russia relations as a zero sum game, the harsh dispute between Turkey and Russia following the shooting down of the Russian plane was also inconvenient for NATO, as it gave rise to concern that Turkey would demand the implementation of Article 5 (Collective Defense) of the NATO charter. The improvement in relations between Turkey and Russia therefore also had a positive aspect from a Western perspective. Nevertheless, this positive aspect was of minor importance, compared with the tension created between Turkey and other NATO members following the attempted coup.

The Attempted Coup and Israel-Turkey Relations

The signing of the normalization agreement between Turkey and Israel on June 28, 2016 constituted a landmark in the bilateral relations, although its prominence was relatively eclipsed by the mass terrorist attack at Ataturk Airport that same day and the subsequent coup attempt. In contrast to a number of previous cases, in which accusations were leveled in Turkey of Israeli involvement in negative developments in the country (such as the terrorist attack by the PKK in May 2010 and the accusation that Israel was part of “the interest rate lobby” allegedly behind the Gezi Park events in 2013),¹² almost no accusations of this nature were leveled with respect to the failed coup. This was particularly remarkable given that one of the first signs of an estrangement between Erdogan and Gulen was the latter’s condemnation in June 2010 of the *Mavi Marmara*’s attempt to reach the Gaza Strip without Israel’s consent. The fact that Israel was not blamed regarding the coup can be attributed to the normalization agreement.¹³ The attempted coup delayed the vote in the Turkish parliament on ratification of the agreement and the passage of a law canceling all legal claims against IDF soldiers and officers involved in the events relating to the Gaza Strip flotilla, but representatives of the two countries expressed hope that the agreement would be implemented as decided, and the vote indeed took place successfully on August 19, 2016.¹⁴

The Turkish-Russian crisis played a major role in pushing Turkey toward the normalization agreement with Israel. Turkish anxiety about a military confrontation with Russia and possible disruption of the supply of Russian gas to Turkey spurred a rethinking of Turkish foreign policy in general, and relations with Israel in particular. The thaw in relations between Ankara and Moscow took place simultaneously with progress on the normalization agreement with Israel, and as a reflection of a more pragmatic line in Turkish foreign policy. Turkey’s rapprochement with Russia is therefore not expected to come at the expense of continued normalization with Israel, except perhaps for the possibility of natural gas imports from Israel. In any case, however, Turkey has an interest in diversifying its sources of energy, and it remains to be seen whether the signing of the agreement between Ankara and Moscow about the Turkish Stream project (the planned gas pipeline between Russia

and Turkey, which could possibly also be used for exports to Europe) will indeed result in the materialization of the this project.

In the framework of the understandings related to the normalization agreement, Israel undertook to allow Turkey greater freedom of action in sending humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip and the development of projects there, including the construction of a power station (in cooperation with Germany) and desalinization plants. Yet in view of the increased contacts between Israel and Turkey on the Gaza Strip, a possible Turkish contribution to efforts at reconstruction in the Gaza Strip also involves potential for friction between the two countries. There were concerns about a delay in unloading the first shipment of Turkish aid at Ashdod Port since the reconciliation agreement, both because of wildcat sanctions by the port workers and problems in transferring the money from the Turkish Red Crescent to banks in Israel, which claimed that the funds were illegal.¹⁵ Turkish aid to the Gaza Strip is not a new phenomenon; nevertheless, with the increase in the scale of assistance, the question arises how the relations between the countries will be affected if buildings and facilities constructed with Turkish aid are damaged, or Turkish citizens involved in construction are unintentionally injured during a future violent clash between Israel and Hamas.¹⁶

A Look Ahead

The attempted coup has led Turkey to concentrate mainly on internal affairs, although Ankara has also presented a more assertive foreign policy, as manifested mainly in its military action in Syria. Still, it is highly doubtful whether dramatic changes in Turkish foreign policy, such as a withdrawal from NATO or discontinuation of the talks on Turkey's accession to the EU, will take place in the near future. At the same time, the question arises concerning the proper functioning of the public systems in Turkey, especially the army, following the extensive purges carried out in these systems, which some have compared to the Cultural Revolution in China and the destructive de-Baathification process conducted by the Americans in Iraq.¹⁷ The purging of more than 100 people of the Turkish military staff that is responsible for the coordination with NATO, has been received in the West with concern.¹⁸ Very worrisome in the NATO context is also the growing impatience with

Turkey in many Western circles, and the doubts concerning the continuation of relations with it in the current format.¹⁹

Questions arise also about the future of the conflict between Turkey and the PKK and Turkish policy toward the Syrian branch of that organization. The Gulen movement was among the opponents of the peace process between Ankara and the PKK (which collapsed in 2015), and tried to sabotage it. The People's Democratic Party (HDP), the pro-Kurdish party in Turkey, condemned the attempted coup, and contended that the Gulen movement was behind the conspirators. In contrast to Erdogan's outstretched hand toward the other opposition parties following the failed coup, there was no similar policy toward the pro-Kurdish party. In this context, HDP's Co-chairman Selahattin Demirtas accused Erdogan of stirring up Turkish national chauvinistic feelings, and noted that he saw no positive signs of restarting the lapsed dialogue with the Kurds.²⁰ Moreover, in November 2016 several HDP elected members of parliament were detained and arrested including the party's co-chairs, an act which likely sealed the lid on the resumption of the peace process anytime soon. In view of these developments, the thaw in relations with Russia and the warming of relations with Iran can be regarded in part as an attempt to stem the further strengthening of the Syrian Kurds, whose leading force is the Syrian branch of the PKK.

Turkey's estrangement from the West is not beneficial for Israel, especially if it means a rapprochement with Iran. At the same time, previous Turkish attempts at a turn to the East have shown that Turkish relations with both Russia and Iran are far from tension-free. Ankara has not reversed its intention of going ahead with its normalization agreement with Israel. On the contrary – the Turkish Foreign Minister even stated that Israel had (so far) fulfilled its obligations, and the Turkish parliament approved the agreement between the two countries. In October 2016, the first ministerial visit since the *Mavi Marmara* affair took place, when Israel's Energy Minister, Yuval Steinitz, attended the World Energy Congress in Istanbul and met with his Turkish counterpart.²¹ Nevertheless, it is likely that the weak state of the Turkish army following the attempted coup will complicate the development of any significant military cooperation between Turkey and Israel – a sensitive undertaking in any event following the years of crisis between them. From the Turkish side at least, it appeared before the coup that there was an interest

in renewing defense procurement from Israel, yet it is now nearly certain that any development of this kind will take much longer.²²

Notes

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- 3 According to a MetroPOLL survey conducted on July 28-August 1, 2016, Orhan Coskun and Ece Toksabay, "Military Attaches, Diplomats Flee Turkey's Post-Coup Inquiry," *Reuters*, August 11, 2016.
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- 7 "Turkish Foreign Minister says Austria is 'Capital of Radical Racism,'" *Reuters*, August 5, 2016.
- 8 Robin Emmot, "Turkey Defies EU over Anti-Terrorism Laws after Istanbul Attack," *Reuters*, June 30, 2016.
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- 10 "Iran and Turkey Agree to Cooperate over Syria," *al-Jazeera*, August 13, 2016.
- 11 Ayse Wieting, "Turkey: Assad Can Be Part of Transition in Syria," *Washington Post*, August 20, 2016.
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- 16 Martin Sherman, "Utterly Unconscionable," *Algemeiner*, June 30, 2016.
- 17 Ben Hubbard, Tim Arango, and Ceylan Yeginsu, "Failed Turkish Coup Accelerated a Purge Years in the Making," *New York Times*, July 22, 2016; "Erdogan's Revenge," *Economist*, July 23, 2016.
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