Tales vs. the Truth: Is the United States Really Behind Turkey's July 15 Coup Attempt?

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The notion that the United States (U.S.) was behind some of the coups carried out in the Middle East during the cold war still persists in the region. The most recent attempt in this regard was seen in Turkey. Although more than five years have elapsed since the highly controversial July 15, 2016, coup attempt in Turkey, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan continues to use it as a political turnkey in accordance with the unfolding of the political conjuncture. Erdogan's latest attempt to peddle his conspiracy theory came not from the president himself but from his Minister of Interior Suleyman Soylu- once a vigorous opponent of Erdogan. During a television program on February 2, 2021, Soylu repeatedly stated that the July 15 coup attempt was not perpetrated by "FETO" (a state-defined name for the Gulen Movement to associate the group with terrorism). Soylu then explained his words to the printed press, saying:

> "There is something I said very clearly there [at the T.V. program], I told this many times. Right after the July 15 [coup attempt], even before 24 hours had elapsed . . . I had said that there was America behind this coup. We learned that America was behind the 1960 coup many years later, from the British documents. We understood that America was behind the 1980 coup when they said, "our guys succeeded." Who was behind the February 28 [forced resign] is obvious [implying the U.S.]. I just wanted to leave a note to the history lest we wait 20-30 years to learn."

This is an interesting scold, as the government has been blaming the Gulen movement for the coup attempt from the beginning, and anyone who casts doubt on this scenario is summarily imprisoned. Once the bizarre coup attempt was quelled only a few hours after it started, police teams raided the houses of judges and prosecutors who allegedly were linked to the group. Thousands of Turkish citizens—including school teachers, businessmen, academicians, and journalists—were subjected to the same treatment by the government.

Today, more than 150,000 public officials have been dismissed from public service with decree-laws, and more than 200,000 citizens have been subjected to criminal prosecution on spurious terrorism charges. Although the Turkish government's terrorism reports include thousands of terrorist incidents, international databases have recorded only around 100 terrorist attacks in the country, mostly attributed to the left-wing terrorist organizations. For example, the Global Terrorism Database included 94 terrorist incidents in Turkey in 2018.

Around 60,000, including 20,000 women, more than 2,400 institutions including schools, universities, hospitals and associations that were allegedly linked to the group have been closed down, and all assets of these institutions were confiscated. Moreover, 48.5 billion Turkish lira (around $7 billion) worth of private assets belonging to businessmen that were allegedly affiliated to the movement were confiscated by the government. This unprecedented witch hunt against the members of the Gulen movement has continued unabated.

The pro-government Turkish media, on the other hand, claimed that the United States was behind the coup attempt. The reports implicated Henri Barkey, a former U.S. State Department employee and then director of the Middle East Program at the Wilson Center in Washington, D.C., accusing him of being a former CIA officer after Barkey organized a workshop in Istanbul that was held on July 15 and 16. After the coup attempt, Turkish businessman Dogan Kasadoglu publicly denounced the workshop participants for supporting the military uprising. A criminal investigation launched about

Barkey regarding his alleged ties to the failed coup attempt, but it was not until 2020 that Barkey was indicted together with Turkish businessman Osman Kavala, the prime suspect in the case against the Gezi Park protesters from 2013. In the indictment, the counter-case filed against the police officers, prosecutors, and judges who had conducted the graft probe against Erdogan on December 17 and 25, 2013 was also merged with the Gezi and Barkey cases. The main reason behind bringing together the names of Barkey and Kavala in the same indictment is interesting because the indictment was prepared in a rush to bypass the European Court of Human Rights' (ECtHR) decision demanding immediate release of Osman Kavala. Turkish regime merged the Gezi case with Barkey's July 15 case in order to open a new investigation against Kavala and keep him in jail after the ECtHR decision.

The evidence presented in the Barkey indictment was superficial and totally based on the prosecutor's strained interpretations of Barkey's actions after the December 17-25 operations and during the coup attempt. For example, the prosecutor alleged—without providing any concrete evidence—that the workshop Barkey organized was a cover for coordinating the coup attempt. Moreover, the prosecutor stated in the indictment that "several coordinated violent incidents and terrorist attacks occurred in Turkey after the December 17/25, 2013 operations and Henri Barkey was in Turkey in that period." The indictment also referred to certain statements Barkey made to the international media after some terrorist attacks in Turkey, alleging that these statements were evidence of Barkey's involvement in the attacks. The allegations in the Barkey indictment are typical of types of statements found in other indictments that prosecutors working for the Erdogan regime issued after the coup attempt.

As a matter of fact, Soylu's boastful statement on his "revelation" of the U.S. participation in the July 15 coup attempt at the very beginning of the coup is based solely on the aforementioned workshop and the conspiracy theory associated with it. This being the case, Soylu's move pointing to the U.S. as the real culprit of the coup attempt draws attention and entails elaboration with respect to the near future of Turkish-American relations. This article therefore is an attempt to explain why the Turkish minister of Interior, Suleyman Soylu, opened up a new front against the United States five years after the coup attempt. The first question to answer in this regard is: was the United States really behind the July 15 coup attempt in Turkey?

What Happened on July 15, 2016?

Before answering this question, we should first put forward whether the July 15 uprising was a real coup attempt, as the Turkish government has claimed. Turkish political history recorded three decennial coups between 1960 and 1980 and a forced resignation in 1998, not to mention several failed coups during the same period. Each of these successful coups were committed in accordance with the hierarchical structure of the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF). The TAF dominated Turkish politics until the early 2010s when Erdogan politically defeated the secular Kemalist and ultranationalist groups with an amendment to the Turkish constitution. Afterward, the consensus among Turkey experts was that the era of coups had ended for Turkey. Alas, the country would experience the most bizarre coup attempt in its history on July 15, 2016. This coup attempt was bizarre for several reasons; however, only the featuring discrepancies are included and discussed here:

- Erdogan acted as if he was totally unaware of the coup incident until it started, but that proved to be untrue. In a statement on Al Jazeera TV, Erdogan said that he first learned about the coup from his brother-in-law around 8 p.m. on the day of the coup and that not being informed of it earlier was a clear intelligence gap. Kemal Kilicdaroglu, the main opposition party leader, contradicted Erdogan, saying that an informant had given Erdogan a list of all the coup plotters three months before the coup attempt was launched.
- The General Staff of the Turkish Armed Forces issued a written statement on July 19, 2016, stating that intelligence about the coup had been given to the General Staff at 4 p.m. on July 15, and that a meeting was held at the General Staff headquarters upon that intelligence. All commanders of the armed forces participated in the meeting and, after it ended, the

commanders ordered all brigades to stay in their barracks and prohibited fighter jets and tanks from taking any action. The army commanders, however, did not apply the restictions to themselves and instead attended a wedding ceramony in Istanbul that same evening. Worse still, commander of the air force, in his first testimony to investigators about the intelligence information, said that he had learned about plans for a coup from his wife on July 15 at 9:30 p.m.; however, duing his second round of testimony, he said that he had learned about the possibility of a coup at around 7 p.m. when the flight restrictions were issued. Likewise, commander of the navy made contradictory statements about when he learned about the coup attempt. It is obvious that the written statement from the General Staff contradicts both Erdogan's claims that he had learned about the coup in the evening on July 15 from his brother-in-law and the commanders of the air force and navy. Despite the contradictory statements from the two military commanders and the intelligence failure, Erdogan sacked neither the air force nor the navy commander, nor the chief of intelligence. Instead, they either remained in their positions or were promoted after the coup attempt.

- Around 8,000 soldiers were involved in the coup attempt, but the government detained half of the generals and more than 30,000 military officials who were not involved in the coup attempt. Although some of the detainees were on vacation during the coup attempt, they were arrested and treated as coup plotters.
- The parliament set up an investigation board to determine how the coup plot was allowed to happen, but the board could not take statements from officials most likely to have information about the coup attempt, such as Erdogan's chief of staff, Hulusi Akar, and the chief of intelligence, Hakan Fidan, because Erdogan had ordered them not to attend the hearings.
- Erdogan said that he had a close call after an abduction team had been dispatched to his hotel in Marmaris to capture him; however, it was revealed later that Erdogan had left the hotel hours before the arrival of the abduction team and had sent an ambush team of his security detail to confront would-be abductors. The confrontation between the abduction team and Erdogan's security detail led to clashes. In one incident, the room of a British tourist's family was also accidentally targeted. This family went through an orderal to escape from the hotel, and the members of the family needed psychotherapy to help them overcome the impact of this bad experience. However, when this British family attempted to report the incident to the police, the police refused to record their complaints. The family then sent a letter to then minister of the British Home Office, Boris Johnson, and asked for his support about the situation. Unfortunately, it was not possible to prove that Erdogan was never in danger and that the family had been victimized because the hotel's CCTV records showing Erdogan's departure from the hotel and the melees between Erdogan's security detail and the coup plotters were deleted, and no one dared to ask who was responsible for doing so.
- Although all 248 causalities of the coup were declared to have been killed by the uprisers, authospsy reports showed that some of them were killed with nonmilitary arsenal; moreover, video footage shows civilians opening fire on other citizens. Although these facts were put forward by the defense during the coup-investigation hearings, the courts did not take them into consideration.
- The government focused its investigation on the coup plotters at the Akincilar Air Base on the night of July 15, saying it was the center of the coup attempt. However, the prosecutor visited the base 40 hours after the coup attempt and did not ask any forensic investigation or take fingerprints of the alleged coup plotters. By the same token, Akin Ozturk, former commander of the air force and the person declared to be the leader of the coup attempt, actually had been dispatched to the Akincilar Air Base, allegedly the headquarters of the coup attempt, by Erdogan's chief of staff.
- Adil Oksuz, an academician who was well-known by Turkish intelligence officials as the Gulen Movement's coordinator of the air force personnel affiliated with the group and

therefore possibly the strongest link between the Gulen Movement and the coup attempt, was captured nearby the Akincilar Air Base on the day of the coup but then was released by the court and disappeared a couple of days later. Gulenists believe that Oksuz was compromised by Turkish intelligence officials to have certain members of the Gulen Movement participate in the coup attempt. Fethullah Gulen firmly rejected his or his movement's involvement in the coup attemp and asked for an independent international team to investigate the coup comprehensively. Gulen also said that he would respect any decision to be made by such an international body and would return to Turkey if any link pointing to his participation in the coup were found.

- While the coup attempt was still ongoing, Serdar Coskun, public prosecutor of the Crimes against the Constitutional Order Bureau, signed a report dated July 16, 2016, at 1 a.m. and delivered it to all respective departments to start legal proceedings against the coup plotters. The report, however, features certain incidents that never happened, such as the raid of the MIT headquarters and the bombing of the police intelligence unit by the coup plotters. Furthermore, some of the incidents that took place hours *after* the report was prepared were mentioned in the document as having occurred *before* the report was prepared.

Many other suspicious events and circumstances related to the July 15 coup attempt could be addressed, but those presented here cast enough doubt on the official discourse of the Erdogan government. These discrepancies have been put forward by politicians and journalists. For example, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, leader of Turkey's chief opposition party, the People's Republican Party (CHP), referred to the July 15 coup attempt as a "controlled military coup." Likewise, Joe Biden, who was the Vice President of the United States during July 15 coup attempt, said that it seemed like he was watching a video game when he saw video footage of the coup. The leader of the People's Democratic Party (HDP), Selahattin Demirtaş, said immediately after the July 15 coup that Erdoğan was well-prepared for the coup attempt and positioned himself to benefit from its results. Demirtaş was imprisoned shortly after this speech and remains in jail, despite a ruling by the European Court of Human Rights that Demirtaş should be released and finding that his detention violates "the very core of the concept of a democratic society." Likewise, journalists Muyesser Yildiz and Ece Temelkuran, both of whom questioned the government's account on the July 15 coup attempt and shed light on the dark points they had uncovered, shared the same fate as Demirtas.

Despite the Erdogan government's efforts to persuade people to believe its theory, there is only one reality: the July 15 military uprising in the form of an attempted coup was a turning point in Turkey's history and resulted in the creation of a totalitarian regime. Erdogan used this coup attempt as leverage to transform the entire state body into a Baath-type totalitarian system, dismissing hundreds of thousands well-educated public officials based on the blacklists that had been prepared in the past. The most significant transformation has been experienced by the police and the judiciary, where one third of the former and one half of the latter were replaced by people loyal to Erdogan. The law-enforcement system has been weaponized and used ruthlessly against all dissidents in the country, in defiance of universal human rights and civil liberties. Thus, it is needless to ask whether it really was the United States that plotted the July 15 coup. Based on the course of events over the five years since the sinister event, it is obvious that the coup truly was "a gift from God"—for Erdogan to complete the construction of his authoritarian regime.

Why did Soylu make that move?

The next question, then, is why did Soylu have such a need to accuse the United States of being behind the attempted coup five years after the incident took place? The answer to this question is rather obvious for the followers of Turkish politics. First, it was very risky for Soylu, the hawkish minister of Interior, to make such a claim by himself. At this point, the reaction of Erdogan reveals Soylu's real motivation for criticizing the United States. Erdogan never hesitates to publicly mortify even his closest henchmen if they do or say anything without his permission or knowledge. In Soylu's

case, Erdogan did not react as would be expected, which clearly shows that Erdogan was using Soylu as a proxy. The next question is: Why did Erdogan make that move?

Unlike what is thought by many of his followers, Erdogan appears to prioritize protecting himself and his family against the risk of losing his position and being investigated because of his corruption network and dark relations with salafi-jihadist terrorist groups in the Middle East. Erdogan is well aware of the fact that he has to remain on power in order to secure his freedom. In this framework, Erdogan wanted to act preemptively in the face of an upcoming conviction verdict from the ongoing Halkbank case tried in New York. The Halkbank case can be seen as a resurrection of the December 17, 2013 corruption investigation, which was covered up in Turkey by the judiciary—a judiciary that Erdogan gradually transformed and then ultimately controlled.

The main suspect in the investigation was an Iranian-Turkish businessman, Reza Zarrab, who mediated the illegal oil-for-gold scheme between Turkey and Iran by bribing Turkish ministers, general managers of some public banks, and several other bureaucrats. One of the largest public banks in Turkey, Halkbank, was at the center of this trading scheme. Hundreds of thousands of U.S. dollars in cash were found hidden in shoe boxes when the police raided the home of Suleyman Arslan, who at the time was Halkbank's general manager, on December 17. The oil-for-gold scheme enabled Iran to flout the U.S. embargo on the country, while the Turkish government was able to narrow its foreign trade deficit. It proved to be a lucrative arrangement, as millions of dollars of bribery money flew into the pockets of corrupt politicians and bureaucrats. Erdogan was slick enough to avoid and then reverse the shock wave of the December 17 and 25, 2013, corruption investigations by demonizing the Gulen Movement and starting a comprehensive purge campaign against members of the group. Erdogan's machinations, however, did not end there. Erdogan soon began to replace critical positions in the police and judiciary with individuals who would be loyal to him at any cost, while making several legal and administrative regulations to parry the situation. With the help of other power circles, such as the ultranationalists and leftists who hate Erdogan but at the same time view the Gulen Movement as their primary enemy, Erdogan was able to reverse the situation and cover up the investigations in Turkey by releasing Zarrab and all other suspects of the investigation a few months after their arrest. Nonetheless, two of the key suspects in the December 17 investigation, Zarrab and Hakan Atilla, the former deputy director general of Halkbank, were arrested in the United States in March 2016 and March 2017, respectively. Zarrab has cooperated with U.S. authorities and explained the details of his bribery network. Der Spiegel has recently elaborated on the casefile and noted that a $20 billion punishment is on the way for Halkbank.

As far as the ongoing Halkbank case is concerned, it is quite obvious that there are several "unknown knowns" that would be sobering thoughts for Erdogan. Erdogan succeeded in having the Trump administration slow down the trial proceedings but, after Biden won the election, Erdogan's nightmare has resumed. With Biden as president, Erdogan may find it more difficult to influence the trial now than when Donald Trump was president. According to John Bolton, former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations in the Trump administration, Trump and Erdogan enjoyed a close friendship. Erdogan exploited that friendship, using every opportunity to ask his friend to end the court case. Erdogan, however, was not concerned about what might happen to the defendants; instead, he was concerned that his own name would be mentioned in the verdict. Thus, Erdogan's strategy of blaming the United States for the July 15 coup attempt can be interpreted as a preemptive strike before a verdict—possibly a verdict of guilty—was announced in the U.S. court case about a bribery network that implicated Erdogan at least in part by Zarrab's testimony. If the trial were to result in a guilty verdict, Erdogan and his entourage would start a campaign to trivialize the impact of the verdict by saying that the jury's decision is a continuation of the July 15 coup and that the United States wants to achieve its goal of overturning Erdogan. Despite all the bluster, though, Erdogan and his entourage must be straining every nerve to communicate with the Biden administration and come to terms regarding the case. The unfolding of U.S.-Turkey relations in the months to come will show whether

Erdogan was able to convince the Biden campaign—just as he had done with the Trump administration.

Conclusion

Given the authoritarian government that Erdogan created in Turkey and a judicial system controlled entirely by him, it will not be possible to conduct an unbiased investigation that could definitively determine the real mastermind of the failed coup on July 15. The Turkish government has presented no solid evidence that links the United States to the coup attempt. The best it has had to offer are the coincidental visits of Henry Barkey to Turkey at the time of the uprising and indictments filled with the statements of military officials who have been tortured and forced to sign documents prepared by the government's intelligence officials. While the absurdity of the Turkish government's position that the United States was involved in the coup through the visit of a former State Department employee is beyond doubt, experts continue to debate the issue of Russian and Iranian involvement before and during the coup attempt to protect Erdogan from being ousted as Turkey's ruler. That being said, we will have to wait until the farewell of Erdogan in order for the July 15 coup attempt to be investigated thoroughly.

Although five years have elapsed since the failed coup, an ominous darkness lingers as Erdogan continues in subtle ways to use his "gift from God" to further his political ambitions. On the one hand, several unanswered questions and irrationalities about the coup attempt show that the coup was designed to fail. On the other hand, the ultimate regime change—and the transformation of the political and bureaucratic system of the country into totalitarian nightmare—show that the only winner in the coup attempt was Erdogan. Therefore, asking whether it was the United States that plotted the coup is nothing but flogging a dead horse. The proper question to ask, based on the official statement of the Turkish General Staff, would be: Why did Erdogan feign ignorance about the coup despite the intelligence information he had received earlier that day and pushed millions of unarmed and vulnerable civilians before the coup plotters on that night?

Erdogan is quite adept at skirting domestic and international crises by using his massive entourage of henchmen to manage public perception—but with success only at home and not abroad. Erdogan likely will continue to make such maneuvers as he seeks to influence the Biden administration. After the Trump administration demonstrated its reluctance to support the Halkbank investigation, which pleased Erdogan, Erdogan will not believe that the judiciary system in the United States is independent and that the administration cannot interfere with investigations. Erdogan's efforts have worked so far, and the bank trial has delayed. However, the Biden administration may be a much tougher sell.