



The Military Coup in Turkey – Initial Observations

Yossef Bodansky

July 2016

Executive Summary

The military coup was a desperate attempt to reverse the history of Turkey and revive the legacy and spirit of Atatürk. By now, the Westernized modern Turkey Atatürk established ninety years ago is no more. The military's failure in the face of Erdoğan's Islamicized grassroots mob heralds a new era of audacious Turkish sponsorship of all pan-Turkic neo-Ottoman insurrections and Jihadism from the Balkans in the west to the heart of China in the east.

About ISPSW

The Institute for Strategic, Political, Security and Economic Consultancy (ISPSW) is a private institute for research and consultancy. The ISPSW is objective and task oriented, and impartial to party politics.

In an ever more complex international environment of globalized economic processes and worldwide political, ecological, social and cultural change, that bring major opportunities but also risks, decision makers in enterprises and politics depend more than ever before on the advice of highly qualified experts.

ISPSW offers a range of services, including strategic analyses, security consultancy, executive coaching and intercultural competency. ISPSW publications examine a wide range of topics relating to politics, economy, international relations, and security/defence. ISPSW network experts have operated in executive positions, in some cases for decades, and command wide-ranging experience in their respective areas of specialization.



Analysis

With Erdoğan returning triumphantly to Istanbul – the military coup seemed to be doomed. It was a desperate attempt to reverse the history of Turkey and revive the legacy and spirit of Atatürk. It lasted about five hours. Yet, the crisis is far from over.

At the core of the coup were elements of Turkey's Third Corps of the First Army that is based in the greater Istanbul area. This is Kemal Atatürk's home unit and the most loyal guardian of his legacy. Also participating were elements of the Fourth Corps of the Second Army in Ankara. The extent of their involvement is not clear even though they participated in the street fighting in Ankara. This is also an old guard unit that is loyal to the Atatürk legacy and traditions.

The coup leaders made a desperate attempt to stop the sliding of Turkey into the fold of Islamist neo-Ottoman authoritarianism. In their initial communiques, the unidentified coup leaders explained that the military launched the coup in order to restore "democratic order" and "human rights." Their terminology was taken out of the Atatürk book. A couple of hours later, the military issued a communique explaining that the coup was necessary to stop and reverse the erosion of "the governance of the secular and democratic law/legal system by the current government." They promised a new constitution very soon, and that the new constitution would restore the traditional values and legacy of Atatürkist Turkey. The military intends to hand over power to a predominantly civilian "Peace Council," the coup leaders vowed.

European senior defense officials understood the deep meaning of the coup. "It's significant. Not just a bunch of Colonels," they observed. The coup was fairly well organized but not perfectly executed.

To defeat the coup attempt – Erdoğan and his coterie knew they could not trust the rest of the Turkish military even if they stayed out of the coup. Instead, Erdoğan decided to pit the Islamicized grassroots against the military. The essence of the confrontation was between the Turkish military with Westernized-nationalist traditions against the Islamicized population (blue collar working class and slums dwellers, mainly migrants from rural areas). Erdoğan gambled when he urged the people to pour to the streets and confront the military. It was, to a great extent, a repeat of the tragedy of Iran in 1979. Then as now, the soldiers would not shoot at unarmed civilians even though the radicalized civilians struck out because they were ready for martyrdom. And, then as now, the Islamicized radicalized grassroots won the war by their audacity.

The main confrontation was in Taksim Square – the heart of urbane European Istanbul. At first, a few hundred clean-shaven nationalist demonstrated at the Atatürk monument. The soldiers stood by and did not interfere. But the coup planning fell short. Although the military blocked the two bridges on the Bosphorus – they did not prevent the Islamicized mob, originating from the Asian part of Istanbul, from crossing the Bosphorus by a flotilla of ferry boats and fishing boats. The mob – led by bearded neo-Salafi Islamists – attacked both the troops and the nationalists with immense violence. They stood no chance. Subsequently, on the Bosphorus Bridge, an Imam sentenced to death a soldier who had tried to fire on the mob. He was summarily beheaded.

Significantly, Erdoğan himself was in great doubt about the chances of his call to arms. He flew first to the Izmir area. However, his fears grew once the commanders of the Izmir area joined the coup. Erdoğan then tried first to land in Istanbul in order to lead a counter-coup – but his plane was turned away by the military authorities that blocked the runway and closed down the airport. Erdoğan regained confidence once he realized that the coup leaders did not attempt to shoot his aircraft down and kill him. Nevertheless, Erdoğan continued flying



toward Germany – seeking political asylum. Refused asylum by Berlin, Erdoğan considered flying on to the UK and seeking asylum there. In London, representatives of Erdoğan approached the Foreign Office with a message that Erdoğan was seeking asylum in the UK. By now, however, Erdoğan was convinced to return on account of the initial successes of the Islamicized mob in Taksim Square and elsewhere in Istanbul. Significantly, Erdoğan returned to Istanbul and not to official Ankara where resistance is continuing, and the coup is far from over even if doomed.

In the short-term, a lot will depend on the duration and ferocity of the fighting in Ankara. These are far from over, as the coup leaders proved capable of marshaling armored units, fighter aircraft and helicopters. They seized key institutions and did not shy away from bombing others. Even if the fighting subsides quickly, Erdoğan will keep looking over his shoulder for a long time. Moreover, the inevitable purge of the military – the third under Erdoğan – will leave behind deep wounds, shatter the loyalty of officers, and will sow the seeds of the next coup attempt.

Erdoğan and his coterie seem cognizant of the challenge. Indeed, they blamed the coup not on devotees of Atatürk's legacy but on the "parallel structure" – a term he has used to refer to his former ally and now arch nemesis Muhammed Fethullah Gülen.

In the long-run, Erdoğan will emerge stronger and more confident. The outcome of the coup attempt in Istanbul serves as a proof of the success and strength of the deep rooted Islamicization Erdoğan has been instilling. The path he charted for Turkey is irreversible for even a military coup could not derail it. Hence, Erdoğan said there was no attempted coup against him. The coup attempt was a challenge to the Islamist, pan-Turkic and neo-Ottoman course adopted by Turkey under Erdoğan's guidance. The failure of the coup proves Erdoğan right. As such, the coup attempt is, in Erdoğan's words, "a gift from Allah to us because this will be a reason to cleanse our army." Meanwhile, Erdoğan keeps urging the people to stay in the streets in order to deter by their mere presence the specter of another military coup he knows will not happen. Erdoğan wants the Islamicized mob to further consolidate and solidify.

The aftermath of the coup attempts heralds profound changes to Turkey's complex power structure. The remainder of the delicate balancing between the two camps of Turkey's security establishment – the military and the intelligence community – is over with Erdoğan's side winning big.

Most important, Turkey's Intelligence Service (MIT) emerges far stronger even though they had failed to warn about a coup being planned. The MIT remained loyal to Erdoğan and led the armed resistance to the military in the Ankara area even though their HQ was bombed from the air and by tanks. Indeed, the MIT's press spokesman, Nuh Yilmaz, was the first official to release a Tweet stating that "Turkey coup attempt fails."

The ascent of the MIT means increased focus on, and expanded resources for, the MIT's favorite policies – namely, the support for pan-Turkic neo-Ottoman insurrections and Jihadism from the Balkans in the west to the heart of China in the east. Although Erdoğan himself is a firm believer in the Islamist, pan-Turkic and neo-Ottoman future of Turkey – the MIT is far far more zealot in their convictions how to assertively, even recklessly, implement these visions for Turkey's future. Now, they'll get their wishes if only in order to ensure their enduring fealty regarding domestic-political challenges.

In contrast, the entire pro-Western/pro-NATO elements of the military will be purged anew irrespective of the extent of their role in the coup attempt. Erdoğan has long yearned for such a purge – all the more so after being compelled by courts to release key senior officers from jail. Erdoğan did not forget this complication.



Indeed, the first decree he issued on 16 July was to sack 2,745 judges previously involved in the amnesty and release process. Now, officers will be given the opportunity to work for the MIT or return to jail. Their political wings will be clipped either way. The aggregate impact will be the demise of the military's Atatürkist spirit and legacy – and thus also the specter of their attempting in a distant future to save Atatürkist Turkey from the jaws of Islamicization.

The prime victims of the coup attempt are Turkey's main restive minorities – the Kurds and the Alavis (Turkey's "Turkified" Alawites). Turkey is facing long-term demographic problems that no crackdown will prevent. There hasn't been a real census in Turkey for a long time so the population's composition is only rough estimates: Ethnic Turks 63-65%, Kurds 18%, Ahwazis 12%, and other minorities 5-7%. Ankara knows that it has a time-bomb on its hands because the birthrate of the Anatolian Turks is in sharp decline while the birthrates of both the Kurds and the Alavis keep rising fast – affecting the self-confidence of both Turks and minorities. Moreover, this estimate does not count the few millions of illegal and semi-legal Turkic refugees from the Balkans, Central Asia and China. They increasingly exacerbate Turkish militant chauvinism with dreams of pan-Turkism and an empire stretching from the Balkans in the west to Xinjiang in the east. The restive minorities must be suppressed in order to build the pan-Turkic neo-Ottoman empire.

Meanwhile, the main irredentist struggles in Turkey intensify. The Kurds have had a long history of secessionist insurrection. However, Turkey's support for the anti-Kurdish Sunni Jihadists in Syria and Iraq have awakened solidarity nationalism and secessionism. Similarly, the Alavis – the "Turkified" Alawites – are also awakening in response to Turkey's active support for the anti-Alawite Sunni Jihad in Syria and are increasingly resorting to the use of force.

Erdoğan is now cognizant that Ankara cannot trust the military. In Erdoğan's perception of Turkey, there now exists the possibility of these minorities sensing weakness in Ankara and thus escalating their armed insurrections while a hostile and humiliated military will not go out of its way to violently suppress these revolts. Consequently, if permitted to persevere, these insurrections might very well escalate into a civil strife or even civil war. The only way to avoid such grim prospects is to empower the ruthless MIT and the Gendarmerie the MIT effectively controls to ruthlessly suppress any semblance of Kurdish and Alavi quest for self-determination. However, the sizeable Kurdish and Alawite forces just across the Turkish border in Syria and Iraq will no doubt intervene in order to prevent the slaughter of their kin in Turkey. The cycle of cross-border violence will expand and escalate.

By now, the Westernized modern Turkey Atatürk established ninety years ago is no more. The soul of Turkey is the principal victim of the coup attempt. Valiant and defiant as the military's effort to prevent the demise of the legacy of Atatürk have been – their failure in the face of Erdoğan's Islamicized grassroots heralds a new era of audacious Turkish sponsorship of all pan-Turkic neo-Ottoman insurrections and Jihadism from the Balkans in the west to Xinjiang in the east.

Ever since he twice defied death to cancer, Erdoğan has been genuinely convinced that his miraculous survival is the proof of "a Mandate from Allah" to complete the revival and rejuvenation of an Islamist neo-Ottoman and pan-Turkic Turkey. Erdoğan's stalwarts in the MIT believe in the mandate and consider it a reinforcement and affirmation of their vision for the future of Turkey as a global power on account of Jihadism and pan-Turkism. The swift failure of the military coup is therefore yet another divine miracle that once again confirms Erdoğan's "Mandate from Allah." Hence, the self-confidence of both Erdoğan and the MIT will no longer be contained. They have once again proven to themselves and all would-be Believers that they indeed have "a



Mandate from Allah” for the pan-Turkic, neo-Ottoman and Jihadist audacious ascent they lead against seemingly impossible odds.

Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.

About the Author of this Issue

Yossef Bodansky has been the Director of Research at the International Strategic Studies Association [ISSA], as well as a Senior Editor for the *Defense & Foreign Affairs* group of publications, since 1983. He was the Director of the Congressional Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare at the U.S. House of Representatives between 1988 and 2004, and stayed on as a special adviser to Congress till January 2009. In the mid-1980s, he acted as a senior consultant for the U.S. Department of Defense and the Department of State.

He is the author of eleven books – including *Bin Laden: The Man Who Declared War on America* (*New York Times* No. 1 Bestseller & *Washington Post* No. 1 Bestseller), *The Secret History of the Iraq War* (*New York Times* Bestseller & *Foreign Affairs Magazine* Bestseller), and *Chechen Jihad: Al Qaeda's Training Ground and the Next Wave of Terror* – and hundreds of articles, book chapters and Congressional reports.

Mr Bodansky is a Director at the Prague Society for International Cooperation, and serves on the Board of the Global Panel Foundation and several other institutions worldwide.



Yossef Bodansky