

Long Read Review: Turkey's July 15th Coup: What Happened and Why edited by M. Hakan Yavuz and Bayram Balci

*Two years after the event, the collection **Turkey's July 15th Coup: What Happened and Why**, edited by M. Hakan Yavuz and Bayram Balci, brings together contributors to unpack the historical, political, religious and ideological dimensions of the 2016 coup attempt in Turkey. The volume offers insightful historical insight into the deteriorating relationship between AKP leader and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the Gülen movement and its ultimate impact on the events of 15 July 2016, writes Serhun Al.*

Turkey's July 15th Coup: What Happened and Why. M. Hakan Yavuz and Bayram Balci (eds). University of Utah Press. 2018.

Find this book: 

Political and cultural institutions of the modern Turkish Republic (established 1923) were mostly built by a small group of political elites with strong military careers under the undisputed leadership of Mustafa Kemal and with the aim of creating a secular and Western-style nation state. This was based on Western modernity as opposed to the Islamic and imperial character of the archaic Ottoman state (1299-1922). Under the secular Republic, Islamic groups mostly became an oppositional community and the competitor against the new state.

Moreover, this new state and nation-building were mostly engineered under and in parallel to the making of a strong and secular Turkish military. Thus, the modern Republic itself is a reflection of a nationalised military and a militarised nation within which the primary duty of all citizens has been to serve, protect and survive the state. The almost-hysterical psychology of the latter is of course an outcome of the traumatic, humiliating and depressing dissolution of the once-glorious Ottoman Empire at the hands of domestic and external destabilising forces.

That is why the Turkish military under the Republic was always determined to prevent a similar catastrophe along with the protection of the Kemalist character of the new state. Within this context, Turkish politics in the second half of the twentieth century was subject to various military interventions and coups (in 1960, 1971, 1980 and 1997). The communist and Islamic threats were the major factors that led to such interventions. Interestingly, the ultimate goal of the Turkish military was never to be the government itself, but rather to 'correct' the civilian government practices that would jeopardise the survival of the nationalist and secular character of the state. Thus, transition to civilian politics after military interventions was always imminent—very different from the military coup culture in Latin America or Africa, for instance. Yet, military tutelage and democratisation in Turkey have still been conflicting forces.

The secular Kemalist establishment first significantly began to shatter with a new hegemonic political actor in Turkish politics after 2002: namely, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, a pious Muslim with a political Islam background. AKP came to power by winning elections with a majority vote in 2002 and has remained the single-party government since then with its blend of social conservatism, Islamic piety and economic liberalism.



Behind the scenes, perhaps the most critical ally of Erdoğan in this process was Fethullah Gülen, the self-exiled religious cleric in the US who leads the so-called Hizmet (Service) or Gülen movement, a global Islamic network of education, business and media allegedly dedicated to raising a pious Muslim generation with emphasis on science, Islamic ethics and the market economy. This alliance was mostly based on mutual interests rather than a principled stance against the secular Kemalist establishment across the military, judiciary and other key state institutions. Thanks to this strong alliance, Erdoğan's rule showed resistance to the 2007 e-memorandum issued by the military against the presidential candidacy of Abdullah Gül, now an ex-comrade of Erdoğan, who also survived a party closure case by the Constitutional Court in 2008 based on charges of religious reactionism. Under the AKP governments, the bureaucracy and state institutions were mostly filled with pro-Gülen cadres who neutralised the secular Kemalist military officers and bureaucrats through the Ergenekon (2007) and Sledgehammer (2010) trials on the basis of alleged coup attempts against the democratically elected Erdoğan government. When one investigates these trials today, it turns out most of the accusations were based on fabricated evidence by pro-Gülen police officers and state prosecutors.

When AKP won the 2011 general elections with almost 50 per cent of the total votes, many believed that this was a victory against the military tutelage and that the era of military coups was over in Turkey. This is perhaps why no one in Turkey was expecting the 15 July military coup attempt in 2016—a traumatising shock to the whole nation. However, the nature of this failed intervention, which led to the death of 272 people, was a completely different story compared to previous Turkish military interventions in the twentieth century. 15 July was the outcome and peak point of a conflict and rivalry between old allies/new foes within the Islamic community itself: namely, Erdoğan and his AKP versus Fethullah Gülen and his so-called Gülen movement.



Image Credit: Anti-coup protesters after 15 July 2016 Turkish *coup d'état* attempt in Bağcılar, İstanbul, Turkey ([Maurice Flesier CC BY SA 4.0](#))

Turkey's July 15th Coup: What Happened and Why, edited by M. Hakan Yavuz and Bayram Balci, unpacks the historical, political, religious and ideological dimensions of this coup attempt. It provides a holistic perspective on why, how and under what conditions the relationship between Erdoğan and Gülen transformed from an invisible alliance after 2002 to an all-out conflict from 2013, which ultimately led to the 15 July coup in 2016. Despite skepticism in the international community, editors Yavuz and Balci as well as the contributors all agree without a doubt that 15 July was administered and masterminded by Gülenist circles within the military. Therefore, the book mostly rejects the allegations that 15 July was a 'Hollywood production' by Erdoğan to strengthen his grip on power.

In Chapter One, Yavuz explains the transformation of the Gülen movement from a pietistic Muslim community in the 1970s to a movement with global media, education and business networks in the 1990s, before becoming a politically motivated religious-ideological structure in the 2000s aimed at controlling the state. In this regard, Yavuz argues that the police in Turkey became fully under the control of Gülenist circles by 2007 and the judiciary by 2010. Yavuz also reveals how Gülen was mostly distant from other major Islamic groups in Turkey, such as Necmettin Erbakan's Welfare Party and the National Outlook Movement, for ideological and strategic reasons.

For Yavuz, Gülen is a political strategist who tends to see the Turkish state as being as sacred as Islam and thus perceives and embraces Turkish nationalism as mutually constitutive with an Islamic worldview. This is why Gülen's pro-state tendencies in the 1990s made him closer to centre-right political parties rather than political Islamist groups such as Erbakan's that had more anti-establishment and pro-ummah political views. Although Erdoğan was a student of Erbakan and came from the National Outlook tradition, his mutual interests with the Gülen movement — namely, a fear of military persecution and a desire to escape the political pressures of the secular establishment — brought them into a strategic alliance to transform state institutions. However, they were also competing for the same state resources and unwilling to share power with each other. Thus, the clash of Turkey's two most prevalent Islamic movements was inevitable, Yavuz argues.

In Chapter Two, Mujeeb R. Khan reviews how Gülenist circles gradually infiltrated state institutions in the 2000s. In Chapter Three, Yavuz and Rasim Koc unpack the reasons behind the clash between Erdoğan and Gülen based on their ideological differences. For instance, while Erdoğan and AKP mostly embraced pro-Palestinian and pro-Muslim Brotherhood views along with potential reconciliation with Iran, Gülen has been pro-Israel and anti-Iranian due to the movement's headquarters being based in the United States. Gülenist policy-making is closer to American neoconservatives and Saudi Wahabis in terms of undermining the anti-Western political Islamist movements in the region, most particularly the Muslim Brotherhood. In fact, if one traces the first dispute between Erdoğan and Gülen, one may point to the Davos incident in 2009, where Erdoğan publicly accused the late Israeli President Shimon Peres of being a murderer of Palestinians. Erdoğan's open anti-Israeli opposition put the Gülen movement in the United States in a tough spot. After the 9/11 attacks, the Gülen movement was seeking to become the symbol of 'good Muslims', Western-friendly and pro-democracy in the eyes of the American bureaucracy and public. Any anti-Western and anti-Israeli move by Erdoğan in Turkey hurt the Gülenists' desired public image in the West.



Image Credit: Grand National Assembly, Turkey, following 15 July coup attempt, taken in August 2016 during tour by Marine Gen. Joseph F. Dunford Jr., chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff ([DoD Photo by Navy Petty Officer 2nd Class Dominique A. Pineiro, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Flickr account CC BY 2.0](#))

In Chapter Five, Kilic Kanat compares and contrasts the military coups and interventions in Turkish politics and argues that what the coup plotters miscalculated on 15 July was the reaction of civilians. In Chapter Six, Caroline Tee analyses the rise and fall of the Turkish-Islamic alliance between the Gülen movement and AKP. While she argues that social conservatism, religious piety and economic liberalism are key common characteristics of the two groups, the Davos incident (2009), the Gaza flotilla raid by Israeli military against the Turkish-owned Mavi Marmara (2010) and the Oslo talks with the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) (2012) gradually deteriorated Erdoğan-Gülen relations. Erdoğan's first retaliation against the Gülen movement was his 2012 move to shut down university preparation schools (*dershane*), which were the recruiting and indirect indoctrination sites for the Gülenists.

In Chapter Seven, Sabine Dreher argues that the Gülen movement is an elite-oriented religious revival movement that promotes neoliberalism within its own understanding of globalisation based on education in private schools, business networks and intercultural dialogue. But she argues that making Turkey and Turkish Islam the premier of the market economy in the Muslim world has been the main national dimension in the worldview of the movement.

In Chapter Eight, Balci provides a historical account of the Gülen movement's expansion in the post-Soviet political space, including the Balkans, the Caucasus and Central Asia. Balci argues that the Turkic nature of these areas contributed to the movement's choice of operations. After the conflict began between Erdoğan and Gülen, Ankara demanded the abolition of Gülenist activities in many countries in these territories: for instance, Gülenists are criminalised in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, though they are still active in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, according to Balci. In Chapter Nine, David Tittensor analyses the Gülen movement's relationship with academics in the West and argues that it has tried to promote a pluralist self-image despite its secretive and hierarchical inner organisational structure. Thus, he argues that academics need to be cautious when they study large and powerful organisations in Turkey and elsewhere.

In Chapter Ten, Yavuz Cobanoglu introduces perhaps one of the few studies on the role of women in the Gülen movement. Based on a survey study with women who stay in Gülen dormitories in Tunceli, Cobanoglu reflects on how the movement is inherently patriarchal, hierarchical and authoritarian in nature. Women can be teachers, organisers, fundraisers and elder sisters (*abla*) in dormitories, but they can never become part of the core decision-making circle at the top of the movement.

In Chapter Eleven, Kristina Dohen analyses the post-coup attempt future of the Gülen movement, with a case study of Gülen schools in Tanzania. She argues that since the activity and image of the movement in Turkey has mostly collapsed, they may have to rely on non-Turkish members for its global survival. To do this, Gülenists may need a revised ideology beyond a Turkish-Islamic synthesis. In Chapter Twelve, Joshua Hendrick argues that the US policy of finding a model of 'good Islam' in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks has also led to the expansion and spread of the Gülen movement worldwide.

Overall, this edited volume offers three major arguments. First, the 15 July coup attempt was a Gülenist job. Second, despite the public relations promotion of the movement as a pluralist and democratic organisation, the Gülen movement's inner circles are highly hierarchical, secretive and patriarchal. Third, the infiltration of the Gülenists in the top cadres of the state institutions in Turkey was mostly encouraged by the AKP governments between 2002 and 2011.

The book offers an insightful historical account of how the Gülen movement and AKP relations evolved from a strategic alliance in the early 2000s toward an all-out-conflict that led the way to the 15 July 2016 coup attempt. Yet, the volume overlooks the theoretical literature on military coups around the world and fails to project under which political, economic and social contexts states may be subject to military interventions. Military coups rarely occur in liberal democracies and free societies. Hence, the book neither really addresses under what conditions this coup attempt would not have occurred nor how Turkey can overcome its historical pattern of military interventions.

The collection also largely neglects the post-15 July political situation in Turkey, where thousands of academics, civil servants, journalists, students, business people and ordinary citizens have lost their jobs and many have been prosecuted with weak due process. Thus, the book does not attend to how the 15 July coup attempt and the democratic defence of Turkish people have not brought the long-desired consolidated Turkish democracy, but have rather led to a persistent state-of-emergency politics along with a culturally and politically divided nation. Turkey now is governed under a newly adopted presidential system (approved as a result of the 16 April 2017 referendum), and Erdoğan has been the popularly elected first president under this new system following the 24 June 2018 national elections. This will be a new test for Turkish politics as to whether the era of military interventions is now bygone and the long-desired democratisation can ever be achieved.

Serhun AI is Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science and International Relations at Izmir University of Economics, Turkey. His research interests include the politics of identity, ethnic conflict, security studies and social movements within the context of Turkish and Kurdish politics. His recent publications have appeared in journals such as *Ethnopolitics*, *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, *Nationalities Papers*, *Globalizations*, *Journal of International Relations and Development* and *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*. He is the co-editor of a recent book entitled [*Comparative Kurdish Politics in the Middle East: Actors, Ideas, and Interests*](#) (Palgrave, 2018).

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.