

The Crisis in Turkey Could Swallow Us All. Is America behind the Coup?

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[Turkey has been in a growing crisis for years](#), and the end seems nowhere in sight.

In the wake of the failed military coup, Turkish officials and civilians are [pointing the finger at the U.S.](#) for instigating it. "America is behind the coup," said Turkey's Labor Minister Suleyman Solyu. Solyu is a close ally of Turkey's [President Recep Tayyip Erdogan](#), who also blames the U.S. for harboring the Islamic cleric he says was behind the coup.

Officially, the U.S. says that speculation that the U.S. supported the coup is "categorically untrue." Officially, the U.S. says it is "factually incorrect" to say it is harboring the cleric, Fethullah Gulen, who lives in a secluded, 26-acre gated compound in Saylorsville (pop. 1,126 in 2010) in rural, northeastern Pennsylvania. From there, at the Golden Generation Worship and Retreat Center, Gulen, 75, reportedly runs a murky, billion-dollar global program of Islamic education and proselytizing called the Gulen Movement, also known as Hizmet ("service") and Cemaat ("community"). And the Gulen people have [contributed substantially to the Clinton Foundation](#) and Hillary Clinton's campaign.

[Gulen has denied](#) any involvement with the attempted coup, although it appears to have involved Gulen Movement officers in the Turkish military. Gulen followers generally do not identify themselves as such. Gulen told the Associated Press: "In brief, I don't even know who my followers are. You can think about many motivations of people who staged this coup."

A Turkish court issued [an arrest warrant for Gulen](#) in December 2014 that is still outstanding. Another Turkish court issued an arrest warrant for Gulen in November 2015, [based on a 10,529-page indictment](#). In April 2016, Turkish police rounded up some 2,261 people accused of being Gulen followers creating a "parallel" state in Turkey.

The Erdogan government has demanded that the U.S. send Gulen back to Turkey, and may have also filed [a formal extradition request](#). Officially, the U.S. has received what the Turks described as "four dossiers ... of the terrorist chief" and the U.S. is "in the process of analyzing under the treaty" governing extradition. Erdogan and Gulen have been [fighting for years](#), after even more years as allies. Now the U.S. finds itself, innocently or not (Gulen had CIA help to get his green card), in what amounts to a high stakes lovers' quarrel. Whatever the U.S. ends up deciding is likely to prolong the chain reaction of critical events set off by the coup, with national, regional, and potentially global impact.

Turkish democracy is suspended by "state of emergency" declaration

Although the coup failed in part because of broad popular opposition to another military

takeover (Turkey has had four since 1960), widespread opposition to Erdogan and his Islamist government remains, even though they came to power through a democratic process. Turkey is both a democracy and, since 2002, effectively a one-party state. Turkey's population of 79 million is mostly Sunni Muslim, but the country has been proudly secular for most of a century. Both Erdogan and Gulen represent an Islamist challenge to secular government. Turkey's human rights record in recent decades has been bad enough to keep it from acceptance into the European Union. During World War I, Turkey committed genocide against Armenians, Assyrians, and Pontic Greeks, and Turkish law today forbids public discussion of its atrocities (a form of national denial). In the wake of the coup, the Erdogan government declared a three-month state of emergency, enabling it to act autocratically against broad sections of the population, [summarily punishing them](#) if not killing them. Long accused of consolidating ever more power in the presidency, Erdogan has moved quickly [to purge more than 50,000](#) suspected opponents, using the coup as a justification. Early reports, including a New York Times editorial headed "[Mr. Erdogan's Reckless Revenge](#)," include these actions:

- more than 6,000 soldiers detained (600,000-strong military is second-largest in NATO, U.S. is #1)
- 60 military high school students suspended
- 8,000 police officers detained or suspended
- 3,000 judges and prosecutors dismissed
- 100 intelligence officers dismissed
- 492 employees of the Religious Affairs Directorate dismissed
- 399 employees of Ministry of Family and Social Policies suspended
- 257 employees of the prime minister's office dismissed
- 300 employees of the energy ministry dismissed
- 15,000 employees of the education ministry suspended
- 21,000 teachers in the education ministry, licenses revoked
- 1,577 university deans, forced to resign
- 8,777 interior ministry workers dismissed
- 1,500 employees of the finance ministry dismissed
- 47 district governors dismissed

- 30 of 81 provincial governors arrested
- 103 admirals and generals (out of 375) suspended, at least 85 of them jailed, including the commander of Incirlik air base (he sought [asylum with U.S. forces](#), who refused)

Turkey's bad human rights record likely to get worse

Of these, roughly 9,000 have been taken into custody, including 6,000 soldiers. According to past behavior, the Turks will torture as many as they feel like. The scale of the purge has prompted the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Hussein to express "serious concern" and ask that independent monitors be allowed to visit those detained. This surge toward autocracy caused concern at a special meeting of the European Parliament, leading one member to say of Erdogan, "I hope recent events will not be used [to further 'Putinise' Turkey](#)." Erdogan's recent suggestion of reinstating the death penalty in Turkey led members to note that such a move would end the possibility of Turkey's joining the European Union.

The Erdogan government is taking such sweeping action because it believes a second coup attempt is possible, according to [Patrick Coburn of the Independent](#). Reportedly, the government believes pro-coup forces had penetrated the government more deeply than it had previously thought, so it must purge them to assure its long-term survival. That leaves the question: if that penetration is real, why didn't it surface during the coup?

Prime Minister Binali Yildirim claimed, although the purge provided no due process of law, that those dismissed or arrested were all members of the Gulen Movement: "This parallel terrorist organization will no longer be an effective pawn for any country.... We will dig them up by their roots."

Additionally, the Erdogan government has:

- Banned Turkish academics from travelling abroad, to prevent coup plotters from fleeing. At Istanbul University, 95 academic were sacked.
- Banned [all other active public servants](#) from travelling abroad, including the Turkish Defense Minister who was scheduled to attend [a coalition summit in the U.S.](#)
- Revoked the press credentials of [34 Turkish journalists](#).
- Blocked [20 online news websites](#).
- Promised to close more than 626 private schools.
- Revoked the licenses of [24 radio and TV operations](#), through the Supreme Council of Radio and Television.

The initial market reaction to Turkey's state of emergency saw [Turkish currency reaching an](#)

[all-time low](#), while stocks and bonds also fell sharply. While Western leaders mostly fretted from afar, Russian president [Vladimir Putin called Erdogan](#) and complimented him on surviving and restoring order so quickly.

Under [the state of emergency](#) declared by Erdogan, the constitution is suspended and the government will rule by decree. According to Erdogan, his [absolute power will be used in the interest of democracy](#), “and there will be no restriction on rights and freedoms.... We will remain within a democratic parliamentary system. We will never step away from it.” Although the state of emergency must be published in a state gazette and approved by Parliament [to become official](#), that has inhibited Erdogan from exercising its authority. “The aim of the declaration of the state of emergency is to be able to take fast and effective steps against this threat against democracy, the rule of law and rights and freedoms of our citizens,” Erdogan promised. (Curiously, New Jersey governor Chris Christie was also promising that, as President, [Donald Trump would try to act like Erdogan](#), and purge the government of all political appointees by President Obama, roughly 852 people out of 3,164 total political appointees.)

What would Turkey do in a crisis with the U.S., Europe, NATO?

[WikiLeaks has started releasing](#) hundreds of thousands of emails relating to Erdogan’s ruling Justice and Development (AKP) party. On July 19, the first release included 294,548 emails and thousands of attached files despite being under severe cyber attack (by Turkish forces, WikiLeaks assumes). The emails begin in 2010 and the most recent was sent July 6, 2016. WikiLeaks soft-pedaled the potential impact of these emails, saying that “emails associated with the domain are mostly used for dealing with the world, as opposed to the most sensitive internal matters.” Turkey has blocked access to the WikiLeaks website.

When Europeans criticized the Turkish state of emergency, Erdogan said they had “no right” to do so. If the Europeans get too tough with Turkey, what’s to prevent Turkey from releasing millions of refugees into Europe again? There are [2.7 million Syrian asylum seekers](#) in Turkey, mostly fleeing the Syrian government and sympathetic to the Islamic State (ISIS). Europe made a devil’s bargain with Turkey to keep them from over-running Europe. Why should an Islamist Turkey be expected to keep that bargain indefinitely?

Erdogan has said that the [U.S. will be making a “big mistake”](#) if it fails to turn over Fethullah Gulen. If that happens, will Turkey help less in [the “war” against ISIS](#), in which it has long been fighting on both sides? ([Donald Trump has said](#) Turkey is on the side of ISIS.) Or [would Turkey turn on the Kurds](#) in northern Syria who are currently the most effective anti-ISIS fighting force? Would Turkey find [that its military has been too weakened](#) to fight the Kurds effectively? Would Erdogan finally indulge his desire to join Syrian president Bashar al Assad in a real or virtual federal alliance to control the region? Pushed too hard by the U.S. would Erdogan turn to Russia?

Erdogan has said he did not want to link the delivery of Gulen to Turkish justice with the continued cooperation between the U.S. and Turkey in using the Incirlik air base – thereby linking the two. Incirlik is a Turkish base with a strong NATO presence (including some 2,700 Americans). The previous Turkish commander of the base is now under arrest for his role in the coup, including sending up F-16s and refueling tankers from Incirlik. Erdogan might well ask: what did the Americans there know, and when did they know it? Incirlik is important in the war on ISIS as the base from which most air attacks on ISIS originate. Responding to the coup, the Turkish government cut power to Incirlik and imposed a no-fly zone, shutting it

down. [That sealed-off condition](#) continued through July 20, with [no one allowed to leave](#) or enter the base, although air attacks on ISIS [have reportedly resumed](#). As of July 21, Incirlik was [apparently being held hostage](#) by the Turkish government, [although neither side is calling it a hostage situation](#).

And then there are the nuclear weapons stored at Incirlik, even though the air base has no planes capable of delivering them at present. Incirlik has about 50 B-61 hydrogen bombs, each more than ten times as powerful as the bomb dropped over Hiroshima. It is NATO's largest nuclear stockpile. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg has contributed to speculation that Turkey [could lose NATO membership](#), saying about Turkey: "Being part of a unique community of values, it is essential for Turkey, like all other allies, to ensure full respect for democracy and its institutions, the constitutional order, the rule of law and fundamental freedoms."

There are about 2,700 American troops at Incirlik. That is not a force sufficient to prevent the Turks from taking the base – and the nuclear weapons – pretty much any time they choose. And then what? As [Jonathan Marshall in Consortium News](#) pointedly wonders: What are we doing [storing nuclear weapons in Turkey](#) anyway? Who is the imagined target of these Cold War leftovers?

Turkey is a longstanding, unsolved, and intractable problem that presidents and candidates go out of their way as much as possible not to address. That will change fast if it's played as a hostage crisis. Presumably there's a U.S. aircraft carrier already in the eastern Mediterranean, or well on its way.

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