

Washington's Strategic Defeat: Erdogan Trumps Gulenist Coup

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For the past decade, the US intelligence agencies operating in Turkey have worked closely with the increasingly influential parallel government of Fethullah Gulen. Their approach to power was, until recently, a permeationist strategy, of covertly taking over political, economic, administrative, judicial, media, military and cultural positions gradually without resort to elections or military coups. They adopted flexible tactics, supporting and shedding different allies to eliminate rivals.

In 2010 in support of Erdogan, they played a major role in arresting and purging 300 Kemalist – military officials. Subsequently the Gulenists moved to prosecute and weaken the Erdogan regime via revelations of family corruption uncovered by their intelligence officials and publicized by its mass media outlets.

The Gulenists shared several important policies with Washington which favored “the convergence” that led up to the July 15, 2016 coup.

The Gulenists backed US-Israeli policies in the Middle East; opposed the ‘independent’ and erratic power projections of Erdogan; favored pro-Western free market policies; accepted US relations with the Kurds; rejected any accommodation with the Russians.

In other words, the Gulenists were far more reliable, dependent and subject to the dictates of EU-NATO-US policy throughout the Middle East than the Erdogan regime.

Erdogan was aware of the growing power of the Gulenists and their growing links to Washington. Erdogan moved decisively and successfully, to pre-empt the Gulenist power grab by forcing a premature coup.

Erdogan Power Bloc Defeats Gulenist Presence

The Gulenists were a powerful force in the Turkish state and civil society. They had a strong presence in the civil bureaucracy; among sectors of the military, the mass media and educational installations; and among technocrats in the financial agencies. Yet they were defeated in less than twenty-four hours, because Erdogan had several undeniable strengths.

First and foremost, Erdogan was an unmatched political leader with a strategy to retain power and a powerful active mass popular base. The Gulenists had nothing comparable.

Erdogan had a superior intelligence and military command which infiltrated and undermined the Gulenists who were totally unprepared for a violent confrontation.

The Gulenists 'permeationist' strategy was unprepared and totally incapable of seizing power and mobilizing 'the street'.

They lacked the cadres and organized grass roots support which Erdogan had built from the bottom-up over the previous two decades.

Erdogan's insider and outside Islamic-Nationalist strategy was far superior to the Gulenist insider-pro-US liberal strategy.

US Miscalculations in the Coup

The Gulenists depended on US support, which totally miscalculated the relations of power and misread Erdogan's capacity to preempt the coup.

The major flaw among the US advisers was their ignorance of the Turkish political equation: they underestimated Erdogan's overwhelming party, electoral and mass support. The CIA overestimated the Gulenists support in their institutional elite structures and underestimated their political isolation in Turkish society.

Moreover, the US military had no sense of the specifications of Turkish political culture – the general popular opposition to a military-bureaucratic takeover. They failed to recognize that the anti-coup forces included political parties and social movements critical of Erdogan.

The US strategists based the coup on their misreading of the military coups in Egypt, Libya, Iraq and Yemen which ousted nationalist and Islamic civilian regimes.

Erdogan was not vulnerable in the same way as President Mohamed Morsi (June 30, 2012 – July 3, 2013) was in Egypt – he controlled intelligence, military and mass supporters.

The US-Gulenists military intelligence strategy was unplanned, uncoordinated and precipitous – Erdogan's counter-coup forced their hand and struck decisive, sweeping blows that demoralized the entire Gulenist super-structure. Thousands of supporters fell like clay pigeons.

The US was put on the defensive – the rapid dissolution of their followers forced them to disown their allies and fall back on general, unconvincing 'humanitarian' and 'security' criticisms of Erdogan. Their claims that the Erdogan purge would weaken the fight against ISIS had no influence in Turkey. Washington's charges that the arrests were 'mistreating and abusing' prisoners had no impact.

The key political fact is that the US backed an uprising which had taken up arms and killed Erdogan loyalist military personnel and innocent unarmed civilians opposed to the coup undermined Washington's feeble protests.

In the end the US even refused refugee status and abandoned their Gulenist General's to Erdogan's fate. Only Fethullah Gulen himself was protected from extradition by his State Department handlers.

Consequences of the US-Gulen Coup

Washington's failure to bring down Erdogan could have enormous repercussions throughout the Middle East, Western Europe and the United States.

Erdogan ordered seven thousand troops to encircle the strategic NATO airbase in Incirlik, Turkey, an act of intimidation threatening to undermine NATO's major nuclear facility and operational base against Syria, Iraq and Russia.

Turkish intelligence and cabinet officials have called into question ongoing political alliances, openly accusing the US military of treason for its role in the coup.

Erdogan has moved to reconcile relations with Russia and has distanced his ties with the European Union.

If Turkey downgrades its ties with NATO, the US would lose its strategic ally on the Southern flank of Russia and undermine its capacity to dominate Syria and Iraq.

Washington's leverage in Turkey has been dramatically reduced with the decimation of the Gulenist power base in the civilian and military organizations.

Washington may have to rely on the anemic, unstable and servile Syriza – Tsipras regime in Greece to 'anchor' its policies in the region.

The failed coup means a major retreat for Washington in the region – and a possible advance for Syria, Iran, Lebanon and Russia.

There are two caveats to this proposition. After Erdogan 'completes' the purge of Gulenists' and condemns Washington, will he be willing and able to pursue a new independent policy or will he simply tighten internal control and 'renegotiate' a NATO agreement?

Will Erdogan consolidate political control over the army or will the defeat of the Gulenists be a temporary outcome which will unleash new military factions which will destabilize the political regime?

Finally, Erdogan depends on Western finance and investment which is highly resistant to backing a regime critical of the US, the EU and NATO. If Erdogan faces economic pressures from the West can he turn elsewhere or will he, in the face of capitalist 'realities' retreat and submit?

Erdogan, temporarily may have defeated a US coup, but history teaches us that new military, political and economic interventions are on Washington's agenda.

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