

Understanding the Ideational Sources of the Terrorist Coup Attempt

UFUK ULUTAŞ

- **How does the Gulenist infiltration strategy work?**
- **Have the Gulenists attempted any takeover before?**
- **What is the Gulenist link to the failed coup attempt?**

THE GULENIST INFILTRATION STRATEGY

A major difficulty in understanding the Gulenists' endgame and their involvement in the coup d'état derives from the group's ontology. Outsiders are confused about their organization and methods of operation due to their secretive nature, cult-like operation, cell-based structure, strict hierarchy, and extensive use of dissimulation. However, for those whose life ever crossed paths with that of the group (regardless of the extent of this conjunction), the Gulenist methodology of recruitment and infiltration is common knowledge. It is for certain that they have been laying the groundwork for a complete takeover of the state for decades. Considering the ranks of the captured military officers including the generals, one could argue that the terror organization has been operating within the Turkish army with varying capacity at least since the mid-1980s.¹ They have been following

three main strategies to expand their influence and operational capabilities in the army: infiltration, conversion, and the formation of alliances.

Although for many it was common knowledge, the July 15 coup attempt proved beyond all doubt that the Gulenists had not only infiltrated the army. It became clear that they considered the civil bureaucracy, the judiciary, and NGOs as means to expand their influence over the state and Turkish society. Yet, the military occupied a special spot in the group's list of priorities. This is primarily because Fethullah Gulen has an interesting affinity with the coups and junta regimes which he believes have the ultimate say in Turkish politics despite years of democratization especially during the AK Party era. For example, after a literary prelude to the 1980 Coup, Gulen described it as a resurrection and the last outpost of the nation's expectations and saluted the army with high praises.²

1. <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/askere-sizma-1986da-fark-edildi-ama-40156430>

2. <http://www.haberuyorum.net/icerik/fethullahin-12-eylulu-mehmetci-ge-selam>

UFUK ULUTAŞ

Ufuk Ulutaş is the Director of the Foreign Policy Studies at SETA Foundation. He received his BA in Political Science from Bilkent University, his MA in Middle Eastern History at the Ohio State University, and he is currently a PhD candidate at OSU. He studied Hebrew and Middle Eastern politics at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and lectured at OSU between 2004 and 2009. He is a columnist at Akşam Daily and currently hosting a foreign policy centered TV program at TRT Türk channel. He also serves at the executive board of a Somali-based think-tank, Heritage Institute for Policy Studies.

He praised one of the chief architects of the February 28 “post-modern” coup d’état, Çevik Bir, in a letter he penned in late 1997. Despite the rising power of civilian politics under the AK Party rule, the Gulenists came to believe that the armed forces are still at the center of gravity and if other attempts fail, a takeover via the armed forces could be a last resort.

One of the centerpieces of the Gulenist strategy of expansion and control has been training students from secondary school onwards for the military high school exams. Sharp students often from economically disadvantaged backgrounds are selected by the group, and the group elders initially socialize, indoctrinate and train them in apartments reserved only for the military high school candidates. In the earlier years, it is probable that there was a greater emphasis on the students’ mental and physical qualities. As the group expanded their influence within the armed forces and started to occupy key positions, such as the offices related to military recruitment, however, the group became less selective given that they had already gained more influence over the recruitment process in the armed forces.

The students who succeed in entering the armed forces are already indoctrinated by their contact person who uses their code names rather than their real ones. The aide-de-camp of the Chief of General Staff Levent Turkkkan explains this process clearly in his confessions. He explained that he comes from a poor farmer family, and the Gulenists first contacted him when he was a secondary school student. He also confessed that he was given the exam questions the night before the exam at a house owned by Gulenists, and after his admission to the Isikli Military High School, he continued his covert ties with the group and followed orders coming from the group, including wiretapping the then Chief of General Staff Necdet Ozel.³

The Gulenists also shape the students’ personal lives in an effort to preserve their ties to the group. In this sense, the students pray secretly and limit their ties with their families; the Gulenists even have a say regarding the women they should marry. These actions remove any morsel of doubt regarding the involvement of Gulenists with these students. Once they are in the armed forces, they follow orders from the group and at the same time try carefully to convert already-admitted students to Gulenist militants.

The Gulenists try to convert military school students as well as army officers. The students already indoctrinated by the Gulenists, as is the case in civilian life, socialize with potential recruits at school and outside. When a student is deemed ready for the next step, he is introduced to an elder contact person outside the school and invited to a house used by the Gulenists as a cell. He is then gradually indoctrinated using similar methods to those used in the secondary school years. These efforts of conversion are sometimes exerted in periods beyond school years as well; apparently there were group militants who were converted in later periods of their lives through friendships and marriages.

The Gulenists are also known for forging alliances with individuals who are pragmatists and have personal agendas that can be furthered by an alliance with the group. For many officers in the armed forces, the Gulenists are known as a strong clique that is influential in key decisions within the armed forces regarding issues such as promotions. Thus, an alliance with or submission to the Gulenist clique within the army had direct implications for officers who wanted a quick promotion or an appointment to a certain post.

PREVIOUS TAKEOVER ATTEMPTS

Although the Gulenists have been in the headlines due to the coup attempt of July 15, it should be noted that this was not their first attempt at total

3. <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/ve-orgeneral-akar-in-yaveri-40155810>

or partial takeover - obviously, however, it was the first one mobilizing their militant followers in the armed forces and using them to take full control of the state. However, they had tried and failed at least twice before under different capacities and aiming at different branches of the government. The first overt attempt was on February 7, 2012, when prosecutors with apparent links to the Gulenists summoned the Turkish Intelligence Chief for interrogation. The Gulenists tried to sack Hakan Fidan with accusations amounting to treachery connected to the MIT's involvement in the negotiations with the PKK. The attempt failed when the then Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, ordered Fidan not to comply with the summons. This move was unprecedented in the government-Gulenists relations as it was the first time the Gulenists openly targeted a key institution such as the MIT as a springboard for expansion. It was also the first public challenge by the Gulenists directed against the government via intended arrest of a key bureaucrat.

The second attempt was more extensive and directly targeted the government with a campaign involving bogus corruption charges, doctored whistle-blowing and media propaganda. This time, on December 17 and 25, 2013, Erdogan was openly at the center of the takeover attempt. Gulenist prosecutors targeted key AK Party officials, bureaucrats, and a number of businessmen close to the AK Party circles with allegations and doctored video and audio tapes to humiliate the AK Party government ahead of the approaching elections. It was the first time the AK Party openly declared that it was the Gulenists who were trying to topple the government with bogus allegations. The AK Party's ensuing electoral victories consolidated the AK Party's power and Erdogan was elected president despite the Gulenists' manipulations and harsh media campaign. Following the failure of the two attempts of partial or complete takeover by the Gulenists, since December 2013, the government has taken strict measures

against the Gulenists including their designation in the National Security Council as a terrorist organization. Following this designation, the government has arrested scores of Gulenists who were involved in illegal wiretappings, money laundering, espionage and the revealing of confidential documents and meetings. In addition, an arrest warrant was issued for the terrorist organization's leader, Fethullah Gulen, and his close aides.

THE JULY 15 COUP ATTEMPT

Since December 2013, Gulenist activities were first restricted and then banned by state authorities, and an open fight against the Gulenist influence over security services, civil bureaucracy, economic institutions, academia as well as the armed forces has been in progress. However, the Gulenists within the armed forces had been mostly untouched due to internal dynamics of the armed forces. Turkey has also been working on filing an extradition request for Fethullah Gulen who has been living in Pennsylvania, U.S.A, since the late 1990s. After the failure of the previous attempts there have been claims indicating a potential future coup attempt by well-known Gulenist social media users. Fugitive Gulenists such as Tuncay Opcin sent a threatening message over Twitter alluding to the takeover while Emre Uslu mentioned July 2006 as the date of his return to Turkey. Many of the armed forces personnel have also pointed to the Gulenist nature of the coup attempt based on their personal acquaintances with the coup plotters. Furthermore, police officers who had been sacked because of their membership in the Gulenist terror organization were captured by the police and civilians in tanks and armored vehicles wearing military uniforms.⁴ As the interrogation of the coup plotters continues, confessions are coming in establishing a strong case for the Gulenist role in the coup attempt. So far several soldiers, including Levent Turkkkan, have confessed

4. <http://www.yenisafak.com/video-galeri/gundem/fetocu-emniyet-muduru-askeri-kamuflejla-tank-icinde-yakalandi-2102548>

their ties to the Gulenists; it is fair to expect more such confessions to follow.

On June 15, 2016, the Gulenists played their last trump card in a bid to topple Erdogan's presidency and the AK Party government. The unprecedented level of violence perpetrated by the coup plotters indicates the level of the plotters' desperation to sur-

vive. In expectation of the High Military Council's meeting where a great purge of Gulenist officers was expected, the Gulenists rushed to execute a preemptive strike against the government. The attempt failed yet again and has already prompted an even more extensive purge of the Gulenists from the armed forces as well as from other government sectors.