

# The Triumph of Turkish Unity against the Coup Attempt

MUHİTTİN ATAMAN, GLORIA SHKURTI

- 
- **What happened on July 15 and who was behind the coup attempt?**
    - **How did domestic actors respond?**
    - **What was the response of international actors?**
- 

Sun Tzu, the famous military strategist has stated, “If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat. If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle.”

Seen from such a perspective, the Fethullah Gülen terrorist movement (FETÖ) in their last attempt to destroy the democratic structure of the Turkish state failed to know their enemy. While FETÖ considered the elected government as their enemy, another unexpected ‘enemy’ emerged –and that was the Turkish citizens. FETÖ did not realize the power of the Turkish people and took a malicious but blind step that backfired. They underestimated the fact that Turkey is a democratic state whose government is elected by the will of the Turkish citizens and that these people

were willing to sacrifice their lives for the sake of their nation. Consequently, it is no wonder that they succumbed in a matter of hours. Calling this coup attempt a ‘battle’ may be considered an exaggeration by some but for those who witnessed what happened that night it is not so. It was a battle because the putschists did not only aim to overthrow the elected government –they bombed governmental institutions and killed innocent civilians. Turkey has suffered many military coups in the past but what happened on July 15 was not a military coup. It was a battle against the right of self-determination.

## MAIN EVENTS DURING THE JULY 15 COUP ATTEMPT

On July 15, 2016, a fraction of the Turkish military attempted to overthrow the Turkish democratic struc-

---

### Muhittin ATAMAN

Mr. Ataman graduated from the Faculty of Political Science in the Department of International Relations at Ankara University. Ataman earned his MA at Central Oklahoma University, and PhD at University of Kentucky between 1996 and 1999. He worked as an RA and a faculty member afterwards in the Department of International Relations at Abant İzzet Baysal University from 1993 until 2014. Ataman is currently a faculty member at the Faculty of Political Science in the Department of International Relations at Yıldırım Beyazıt University. Mr. Ataman worked at SETA for three years as a part-time research in Foreign Policy Research Department. Currently, he serves as SETA’s Deputy General Director in Ankara, and conducts academic research on Turkish Foreign Policy, the Middle East Politics and the Gulf Politics.

### Gloria SHKURTI

Gloria Shkurti completed her BA in Political Science and International Relations in Albania. She is doing her Master studies at Sakarya University and is working on her thesis entitled “A Lethal Weapon that Became the Cure-all for Terrorism: Discursive Construction of the U.S. Dronified Warfare.” Her main research interests include drone warfare, security studies, counter-terrorism and geopolitics. Currently, she is working as the Assistant to Editor-in-Chief of Insight Turkey, a journal published by SETA Foundation.

ture and its elected government. Many governmental institutions in Istanbul and Ankara such as the Grand National Assembly (TBMM), the National Intelligence Organization (MIT), the Special Forces Headquarters, the Turkish National Police, the AK Party Headquarters, the Presidential Palace and television channels were bombed by warplanes and targeted by military helicopters. Moreover, in Istanbul both of the bridges and airports were shut down by tanks, while in other cities –including Ankara– tanks blocked the city centers.

A few minutes before midnight, a group of soldiers entered the building of TRT TV channel and at gunpoint the anchor was forced to read an announcement stating that the military had taken control of the government and had banned all citizens from going out in the streets. Soon after this, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım connected live with CNN Turk and NTV TV channels and claimed that this was an illegal coup attempt, calling for people to go out in the streets. These calls were repeated from the leaders of other opposition parties: the CHP and MHP. The calls accelerated the mobilization of people who marched in the streets of all Turkish cities, especially in Istanbul and Ankara.

The unification of the political elite, media outlets, security forces and people turned into a counter coup against the violent and illegal coup attempt. This unison among the people reflected the Turkish values to the world and lay witness to the consolidation of Turkish democracy. The government soon took control of the situation; however, the putschists did not spare the life of civilians and currently according to official sources, 240 people were killed and 1,535 were wounded.

## **THE MASTERMIND BEHIND THE COUP ATTEMPT**

Almost immediately it was obvious that this was not a typical military coup and that certain high and mid-ranking military officers –mainly members of the FETÖ– were behind the coup attempt. Calling them-

selves “Yurtta Sulh Konseyi” (Peace at Home Council), the putschists aimed to overthrow the government. This attack against the Turkish state structure is one among many others by FETÖ, while President Erdoğan has continuously been their main target.

This public animosity of FETÖ towards Erdoğan and the government emerged in 2013 after the latter declared the movement to be a terrorist organization. The main reason behind these declarations was the creation of a parallel organization within the Turkish state. While calling itself a religious movement, FETÖ started penetrating all institutions, aiming to gain control from within. Realizing the threat that this terrorist organization posed to the Turkish institutions, government and people, decisive steps were promptly taken to weaken and impede FETÖ from gaining more power.

The leader of the FETÖ terrorist organization, Fethullah Gülen, has been living in Pennsylvania, U.S.A, since 1999, and the Turkish authorities have continuously requested his extradition by the US government. Nevertheless, a proper response has never been given from Washington and Gülen has ceaselessly controlled and directed his followers in Turkey and other states.

Gülen is considered to be the main mastermind and, therefore, the one responsible for the death of more than 250 civilians, the injury of more than 2,000 people, and the destruction of many state buildings. All this has caused the discomfort of the Turkish people. Among others, they have expressed this agitation by using the hashtag #ExtraditeTerroristGülen on July 19 as a direct call to Washington; in a short time, this hashtag became a trending topic across the world.

After the July 15 coup attempt, Turkey submitted an official request composed of four folders to the United States for the extradition of Gülen and a response is expected in the following days. John Kerry stated that Turkey needs to provide proof of Gülen’s culpability. Following this statement, many reminded the United States that when Afghanistan requested proof of the culpability of bin Laden af-

ter the 9/11 attacks, the U.S.A. bypassed this and simply bombed Afghanistan. Washington's response will be crucial in terms of the relations between Turkey and United States especially in terms of the war on terror where Turkey has been one of the main allies and supporters of the United States. It should be recalled that Turkey has been collaborating with the U.S.A. since the 9/11 attacks. In this context, the Turkish intelligence captured some of the leading members of al-Qaeda and handed them over to the CIA. The American indifference to Turkish claims and requests will damage this cooperation against international terrorism.

### THE STANCE OF DOMESTIC ACTORS

Just a week ago, Turkey was shaken by a coup attempt organized with the aim to destroy Turkey's current order and development. To the surprise of those behind the coup attempt, its failure showed that the power of people and their right of self-determination should not be underestimated. Many actors played a significant role during the coup attempt and its aftermath; nevertheless, not all of them were on the side of democracy and the people.

All domestic actors played an effective role during the coup attempt. They can be separated into four different groups: the political elite, government officials (especially those working in the police departments), the media and, last but not the least, the people. As soon as the coup attempt began there was unison not only within the aforementioned groups but between these actors as well.

If we were to focus on the internal unison of each group, it would not be an exaggeration to assume that for the first time Turkey witnessed such a togetherness. Political, ideological and religious differences were put aside and all people united for the sake of their nation.

The statement of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan served as a turning point and had a direct impact on the failure of the coup attempt. Before his call, people had already started to march in the streets despite the on-air statement by those involved

in the coup that specified that people should not get out in the streets as this may endanger their lives. However, Turkish citizens were still confused and scared of what was going on. Erdoğan's presence on TV through FaceTime both calmed and accelerated people's mobilization. During his call, Erdoğan ensured the people that the government was in control of the situation and reiterated what the PM had previously stated: this was not a typical military coup but just a coup attempt that threatened the Turkish state structure and democracy. Moreover, Erdoğan called people to march into the streets and stop the putschists from pursuing their goals. This call turned the situation on its head and it soon became clear that the organizers of the coup attempt were caught by surprise by this quick mobilization of people and by their opposition to the coup attempt.

At the same time, the spokesman of the Turkish Parliament, İsmail Kahraman and the MPs of the AK Party, CHP and MHP gathered in Parliament. They remained in the building despite the fact that the putschists' jets and helicopters were bombing them from outside. The MPs refused to leave the building and through a live connection with TV channels they spoke to the whole nation. In this way they not only transmitted a message of unity to the people but they showed them that the Turkish legislators would not bow to such violent actions and that the government was standing firm and strong.

In terms of the political elite, all four political parties that are represented in the current Turkish Parliament –the AK Party, CHP, MHP and HDP– unanimously condemned the coup attempt. The Turkish Prime Minister and the leader of the AK Party, Binali Yıldırım, soon after the beginning of the coup attempt through a phone call with NTV channel stated that this was a coup attempt, and ensured the people that the situation was under the control of the government. The declaration of the PM was shortly followed by the statements of opposition leaders who similarly condemned the coup attempt and expressed their support of the Turkish government. Devlet Bahçeli was the first

leader from the opposition to contact the PM and stated that his party opposed this coup attempt and that they would stand by the Turkish government. Just less than one hour later, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu –the leader of the CHP– through a statement on Twitter emphasized that the CHP stands by the democracy of Turkey and was hostile to the coup attempt. The last declaration came from the HDP. Through a post on Twitter, the HDP –in a similar manner to the other parties– condemned the coup attempt. Moreover, other important political figures such as former Turkish president Abdullah Gül and former Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu harshly condemned the coup attempt.

Coming to the second actor, there were four main state institutions whose contribution was indispensable during the whole process of deterring the coup attempt. The National Intelligence Organization (MIT), the police, the Turkish Special Forces (those who refused to be part of the coup) and Turksat are the institutions that were in the front line of stopping the putschists from destroying the democratic values of Turkey. The cooperation among these officials helped in establishing superiority over the putschists in terms of intelligence and on a tactical level. The first three (the MIT, Police and TSK) played an important role as they managed to capture and detain all the soldiers who were part of the coup attempt. Some of the soldiers were captured by citizens who were protesting against the coup attempt and were later handed over to the police forces. The officials who were at Turksat on the other hand, even though they were not armed, defended –even with their lives– the freedom of the media and the right of free speech. The putschists entered the Turksat building with the aim of stopping the broadcasting of public and private TV channels. The officials of Turksat did not allow the putschists to use the TRT channel to transmit their declarations, nor did they permit the censorship of private channels. Had this attempt been successful, the chances of the coup attempt's success would have been higher. The Turkish media was the main source of information for the citizens during those difficult hours, and if such a

source had been cut off, it would have been impossible for the people to see the truth about the coup attempt and to act in the way that they did.

In this regard, the media –both private and public– is another actor that had a crucial responsibility. We live in a world where the role of media and communication is irreversible. The July 15 coup attempt showed the maturity of the Turkish media which served as a catalyst for the mobilization of the people. It is beyond doubt that on Friday night the free media in Turkey won over the coup attempt, which threatened Turkey's democracy. The putschists tried to take control of the national TV channel TRT but this did not intimidate the other media outlets, which continued transmitting live on the putschists' bombing of the main governmental buildings, and the targeting and murder of unarmed people by military helicopters. Soon the people marched towards TRT and managed to remove the soldiers from the building making possible for TRT to restart broadcasting. However, the soldiers participating in the coup attempt tried to cease the broadcasting of private media such as CNN Turk. As in the case of TRT, people retook the channel from the hands of the putschists. Focusing on the media during the July 15 coup attempt, two main elements warrant further discussion. First, the organizers of the coup made a tactical mistake by going to the TRT building. Even though this has proven to be effective in previous military coups, this time this step was detrimental. In the previous military coups, TRT was the only channel, and taking control of it was enough; currently however, in Turkey there are a large number of channels. The other channels, affected by the putschists' acts at TRT, reacted with harsher declarations against the coup attempt and made stronger calls for the people to march in the streets. Secondly, no one from those who lived this coup attempt will forget the face of the anchor, Tijen Karas, and no one is going to forget how all the TV channels united against the attempt. This was a surprising event, considering the fact that the media nowadays is prone to ideological or political divisions. It is very difficult

—not to say impossible— for the media in one state to speak the same language and protect the same values against a common enemy. Seen from such a perspective it is safe to say that the media unison delivered a strong blow to the putschists and their coup plan.

On July 15, the Turkish people sealed the fate of Turkey. People marching in the streets and the call of President Erdoğan and other leaders that accelerated this may have caught the coup organizers by surprise; the fact that in a matter of mere minutes millions of people started to march in the streets of Turkish cities was a shock to them. Turkey in the last years has gone through some difficult times when considering regional affairs and external pressures, and this has resulted in a disunity among the population. Nevertheless, on July 15, people left aside their differences and marched in the streets for one purpose: the protection of the Turkish government, state and democracy. The armed soldiers who were part of the coup attempt were confronted with unarmed men driven by the love for their country. Despite the bullets that were directed at them and the F-16 jets flying over their heads, the people never stepped back but they struggled until the last soldier was detained by the police.

The winners of the July 15 coup attempt were the people of Turkey and Turkish democracy. Turkish citizens were ready to lose everything in order to sustain the freedom of their country and their right of self-determination - and they won. They showed to the world that Turkey is not a third world country that can be easily destabilized and the democratic foundation on which Turkey stands is strong unlike many states where military coups have been successful. Most importantly, people with their peaceful attitude showed to the world that they support peace and not chaos. In a time when Turkish citizens have been the target of many woeful critics, they proved to themselves that they are capable of unity and of achieving great things.

### **THE STANCE OF INTERNATIONAL ACTORS**

While the domestic actors had a direct impact in preventing the coup attempt and its aftermath, Western

international actors, both leading political actors and media outlets, declared their disappointment over the failure of the coup attempt. Moreover, some of the actors, mainly from the West, triggered an exacerbation of the situation.

The stance of international actors will be analyzed under three categories: politics, media, and Turkish expats. With the exception of the latter, the behavior of the other two was not fair – not only towards the Turkish state, but most importantly towards Turkish citizens.

In the first hours after the coup attempt, the declarations of many state leaders or representatives were very vague. It was clear that their stance toward the coup attempt was going to depend on its outcome. When it became obvious that the putschists were losing ground, then state leaders started to declare their support for the democratically elected government. This pattern was followed primarily by the United States and other Western countries. A striking example is the message directed to US citizens from the US embassy in Turkey where the coup attempt was called “an uprising.”

While politicians were careful not to make any politically incorrect moves, the media used this reluctance to do what it has done best in the last years: vilifying Erdoğan. At the beginning, Western media did not hesitate to declare that the government in Turkey had fallen and that the military was in control. News about Erdoğan requesting asylum in Germany was widely broadcasted as well. In addition even when the President, the Prime Minister and other leaders declared that the state was under control and that this was just a coup attempt, Western media did not reflect this to their audiences.

Fabricated news about Turkey has made the headlines many times in Western media and this incidence was not an exception. It can be said that Turkey has become immune to these kinds of hoaxes, but most of the Western public is not there yet. The wide coverage of the coup attempt in Turkey from Western media is undeniable. Unfortunately, Western media almost



unanimously directly or indirectly began to accuse the Turkish government and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and, indeed, are still trying to portray him as responsible for these events. Firstly, mainstream Western media did not mention the name of those behind the coup. They have been presenting FETÖ as a peaceful face of Islam and Western countries continue to harbor its leader and leading personalities in their respective countries. Moreover, Western media and politics forget that the organizers of the coup attempt – FETÖ – pose an imminent threat to the security of Turkey and the measures taken in the aftermath of the coup are what any state would do to protect its national security.

Secondly, without mentioning how the putschists bombed the capital city, how the army helicopters mercilessly killed more than 250 innocent women, men and children, or even how the people, united, marched in the streets to protect their state, Western media focused only on President Erdoğan. Most of the headlines raised concerns about the “authoritative tendencies of Erdoğan and the purge against the opposition groups” concealing the reality and the message that the people on the streets transmitted. They refuse to see that all political parties represented in parliament declared their opposition to the coup attempt. Similarly the media refuses to demonstrate the support towards the coup attempt in the streets and squares of Kurdish-populated cities.

Thirdly, Western media and many journals have been warning and even threatening the Turkish authorities not to punish the putschists. It can be said that they do not want the Turkish government to take proper measures against them. Moreover, Western media declared their defiance against the state of emergency declared by the government in the context of the Turkish constitution, a move which is also accepted by the European Human Rights Convention. Their Orientalist approach towards Turkey shows that they still consider Turkey as a typical Middle Eastern or Third World country.

An important example that needs to be mentioned is WikiLeaks. Soon after the coup attempt, Wikileaks

posted in its official Twitter account that the people must get ready to fight as they were about to publish approximately 300,000 emails from the AK Party which would shed light on the coup attempt and those behind it. This was a shameful move by WikiLeaks and the media outlets that made news of this statement as it resulted in a huge sham. The emails that were made public were mainly spam emails followed by a couple of inconsequential emails. Many Turkish citizens mocked WikiLeaks, while the international media remained silent and did not update their previous news on this regard.

The media outlets in the Middle East were/are more neutral towards the coup attempt. They were divided into two opposing categories. The first category welcomed the coup attempt in Turkey, which has been considered as the last Ikhwan-like regime in the region. This view was shared by the Egyptian media, which is completely under the control of the Sisi government, an administration established after a military coup in 2013. Similarly the media outlets controlled by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) were also strongly pro-coup attempt and anti-Erdoğan. Those who are in favor of a one-man rule and strictly authoritarian regimes consider Turkey as one of the last remnants of the popular and democratic movements of the Middle East. The second view welcomed the crackdown of the coup attempt and declared their support for the Turkish people and their legitimate administration.

Lastly, the Turkish expats in different states of the world went out in the streets to support the democratically elected government of Turkey in its battle against the FETÖ terrorist organization that organized the coup attempt. Many Turks gathered in front of Gülen’s mansion in Pennsylvania and requested his extradition to Turkey from the US government. At a time when the Turkish people are intimidated by the West, the support of their expats was/is essential. However, some influential Turks living in the West and working for Western think tanks followed their host institutions, criticized the Turkish government and President Erdoğan, but neglected the death toll and the exceptional resistance of the Turkish people.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, domestic and international actors, in most cases, had a reverse impact on the events of July 15. While the domestic actors served as a catalyst for unity and therefore for the defense of the state structure and democratic values, international actors mostly

tended to obliterate the reality especially through their biased media. For what it's worth, it can be said that Western antagonism did nothing but further unite Turkish citizens. Today, they are aware of their power and this has made people stronger than ever; a notion, which the West has long taught but little supported.

**SETA**

SIYASET, EKONOMI VE TOPLUM ARAŞTIRMALARI VAKFI  
FOUNDATION FOR POLITICAL, ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL RESEARCH  
مركز الدراسات السياسية والاقتصادية والاجتماعية

[www.setav.org](http://www.setav.org) | [info@setav.org](mailto:info@setav.org) | [@setavakfi](https://twitter.com/setavakfi)

### SETA | Ankara

Nenehatun Caddesi No: 66 GOP Çankaya  
06700 Ankara TÜRKİYE  
Tel: +90 312.551 21 00 | Faks: +90 312.551 21 90

### SETA | İstanbul

Defterdar Mh. Savaklar Cd. Ayvansaray Kavşağı  
No: 41-43 Eyüp İstanbul TÜRKİYE  
Tel: +90 212 315 11 00 | Faks: +90 212 315 11 11

### SETA | Washington D.C.

1025 Connecticut Avenue, N.W., Suite  
1106 Washington, D.C., 20036 USA  
Tel: 202-223-9885 | Faks: 202-223-6099

### SETA | Kahire

21 Fahmi Street Bab al Luq Abdeen  
Flat No 19 Kahire MISIR  
Tel: 00202 279 56866 | 00202 279 56985