

# Orientalism Reloaded: How Western Media Covered the Coup Attempt in Turkey

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- How did the media in a number of Western European countries cover the military coup attempt of July 15 and the terrorist attacks in France?
    - What is the role of Islamophobia and Orientalism in the Western media coverage of the military coup attempt in Turkey?
  - How did European politicians frame the debate about the demonstrations of people of Turkish origin in their countries?
  - What does all this tell us about the notion of democracy as a reality in the Western democratic culture?
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## INTRODUCTION

The way the ‘Western’ media covered the coup attempt in Turkey on July 15, 2016 is quite remarkable. ‘Western’ is put in quotation marks, since this short study does not aspire to an analysis of all Western media. Rather, ‘Western’ here means the tendency of the vast majority of media coverage in the largest media outlets such as *The New York Times*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, and *Courrier International*. In the coverage of the coup attempt, which presented itself as saving secularism, we draw on Edward Said’s notion of Orientalism. For Said, Orientalism is about *‘the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate theories, [...] social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, ‘mind,’ destiny and so on.’*<sup>1</sup> Orientalism serves ‘Western’ powers to rationalize European colonialism based on a self-serving history in which the “West” constructed the “East” as extremely different and inferior, and therefore in need of Western intervention

<sup>1</sup> Edward, Said; *Orientalism*, Penguin, London, 2003, p.3.

or “rescue.” This study looks at how the coverage of the media coup in large ‘Western’ media outlets was essentially an Orientalist approach.

## COMPARING FRANCE AND TURKEY - A DISPARATE MEDIA COVERAGE

After the failed coup attempt by the Gülenist Terror Organization (FETÖ), which killed at least 240 people including 170 civilians and wounded over 2,191, and after the silence of most Western political leaders in the first two hours following the coup attempt, it is interesting to look at how the ‘Western’ media framed the issue. Searching the term ‘Turkey’ in ‘Western’ media on the Internet brings the following results: “Turkey approaching East”; “Mass dismissals in Turkey”; “Accusations of torture against soldiers”; “Turkey to proceed against Journalists” etc. This negative and one-sided attitude increased dramatically after the Turkish government declared a state of emergency. At the very same time, it is interesting to see that a similar search using “France” as a keyword after

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the declaration of a state of emergency following the terrorist attack in Nice brings the following results: “France is European Champion Under-19 Juniors”; “Terrorist Attacks in Nice”; “Even Leftist blame Hollande for lying”; “Rihanna bans Pokemon Go at her live shows.” This extract from a number of headlines indicates that the media coverage of the coup attempt in Turkey primarily focused not on the coup attempt itself, but on the reactions of the political leadership of Turkey. However the main headlines regarding France’s political situation after the extension of the state of emergency was quite different. Not only apolitical themes like Rihanna or football were of great interest to media coverage but also the perpetrators of the attacks themselves were understandably of great interest to the media.

The disparate coverage of these two incidents also becomes clear when looking at specific well-known media outlets. The most important German broadcast television, the ARD (Consortium of the public-law broadcasting institutions of the Federal Republic of Germany), publishes short information in its own social media channel like Facebook. There, ARD titled both emergency cases thus:

- Turkey: “Emergency Rule in Turkey: Now Erdogan has so much power”
- France: “The French National Assembly has decided: State of Emergency to be prolonged for six months”

The coverage of the French situation clearly represents France as a civilized democratic country where the rule of law is respected, and offers an unemotional image of France. But in the case of Turkey, political processes are reduced to a personality, suggesting that this would strengthen only one person, against whom a media smear campaign has been going on for years now. While France, with its semi-presidential system, already has a strong man at the top and a state of emergency only strengthens this position, in the case of Turkey, this politically-complex situation becomes personalized. In five points under these two very disparate headlines, the Turkish state of

emergency was described the following way: “Civil Liberties Suspended, Ruling by Decree, Controlling and Forbidding Media Coverage, Confiscating Estate, Banning Going Out.” In contrast to that, the French emergency case was characterized the following way: “Closure of Websites, Dissolution of Radical Associations, Restriction of Mobility, Declaration of House Detentions, Search without Judicial Decision.” It seems obvious that the coverage of Turkey suggests to the reader that in Turkey, Erdogan would use his power to reduce basic freedoms, while in France, a state of emergency only means that necessary steps are being taken against radical people. More interesting is that for the case of France, the state of emergency was prolonged for another six months over a year and a half after the terrorist attacks in Paris. In the case of Turkey, the prolongation was set for a maximum of three months and the president declared that the government would try to make it even shorter and normalcy would be restored as soon as possible. This biased coverage is the case for the majority of the media coverage in West European countries.

### **BIASED PRESENTATION AND BLIND SPOTS**

The majority of the ‘Western’ media covered the coup attempt in a one-sided manner. For the ‘Western’ media, it was not the cruelty of the putschists and their massacring of civilians on the streets by heavy weapons such as F16 jets, tanks, and attack helicopters that grabbed their attention but the people on the streets and their alleged cruelty against the soldiers. It seems that the whole logic of the coup attempt was turned upside down. In reality, the Turkish people showed great civil courage and took to the streets to protect democracy and the rule of law against the coup plotters. But reading the ‘Western’ media, one gets the impression that the people on the streets were radical Islamists, Erdogan adherents and even ISIL sympathizers. Consequently one can claim that the media widely ignored the killings of civilians by putschists, and instead they criticized, demonized, and delegiti-

mized the civilians who took to the streets to defend their future and democracy.

The American Fox News even declared “Friday night's failed coup was Turkey's last hope to stop the Islamization of its government and the degradation of its society,” hence clearly positioning itself on the side of the putschists. *The New York Times* tweeted a story on its official Twitter account saying “Erdoğan supporters are sheep and they will follow whatever he says”; this sentence did not appear in the article itself, strongly suggesting biased journalism.

The FETÖ's failed coup attempt of July 15 and the crimes during this heinous endeavor shocked the overwhelming majority of the Turkish people and the international community. However it was not a big surprise for those who have been observing Gülen's infiltration of the Turkish state institutions for about half a century. This is why the coup attempt cannot be framed as a fight against a ‘religious’ governance, but rather as a threat to the legitimate government by a small group, which was feared by the Kemalist secularists, as well as conservative democratic actors like the AKP.

It is surprising that Gülen and his organization, which the Turkish government consider to have been behind the coup attempt, were nearly absent from the ‘Western’ media coverage. Whenever a terrorist attack or attempt takes place in Europe, stories about the upbringing, psychical conditions, ideology, networks, etc. of the terrorists are covered extensively for weeks. But in the case of the Gülen movement, this organization seemed to be of nearly no interest to the European public, although the Turkish government clearly named it as being behind the coup attempt.

Gülen had a religious education and from his early youth had worked as an imam in public mosques. He became well known after he began to give intense sermons in Izmir, which were recorded and distributed among pious people in Turkey. Gülen was not like other imams in Turkey and used a very emotional style. He was known as “Ağlayan Hoca,” literally translated as “the crying imam.” He talked as if the Prophet Mohammad were present during his sermons and im-

plied that he saw prophets and other Muslim saints in his dreams. This style attracted many Muslims in Turkey and Gülen was professional at manipulating religious feelings. Because he presented himself as an overtly open-minded ‘cleric,’ calling for interreligious dialogue and coexistence of faiths, he was openheartedly welcomed in the West.

Over the span of 50 years Gülen has built an empire of schools, universities, NGOs, foundations, banks, and companies that spread to 140 countries all around the world. It is no secret that all these institutions are under Gülen's control and their overall financial value is estimated somewhere around 150 billion dollars. Gülen and his terrorist organization do not only control these institutions but also the private life of their followers, going so far as to even decide whom a member should marry. The members are indoctrinated under strict rules and regulations in ‘light houses’ which aim to destroy any critical and rational thinking. Consequently Gülen's followers are raised and educated to follow the orders of the organization without questioning. Therefore although it is not allowed for pious Muslims to drink alcohol Gülenists are advised to do whatever necessary to hide their main intentions and infiltrate Western liberal societies. Although the Gülenist movement represents itself as an open-minded and liberal movement its real face is quite autocratic and suppressive of individualism. By any Western standards this kind of education and indoctrination would be considered alarming. Yet, the majority of ‘Western’ media ignore this dark side of the Gülenist Terror Organisation.

### **CONSPIRACY THEORIES**

Although it is clear that Gülen and his followers were behind this bloody coup attempt the perception in ‘Western’ media is the other way around: it was alleged that President Erdoğan himself was behind the coup attempt to use it for his own goals of establishing his power and making himself an omnipotent president. While this unbelievable the-

ory was cautiously uttered by a number of politicians with question marks, what remained was that Erdogan would make use of this coup attempt to broaden his own power sphere. It is interesting that this conspiratorial thinking would have never been accepted in the case of, for instance, the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Following this attack, no serious voice would first and foremost discuss the reactions of the Bush administration insinuating that they longed for this attack to widen their own sphere of political power and legitimize the Iraq invasion and other policies. While the terrorist attacks definitely legitimized these political interventions, as much as the terrorist attacks in France in 2015 enabled the French government to suppress demonstrations of labor unions, again no serious political analyst would suggest that 9/11 was an inside job or that the French government planned the killing of *Charlie Hebdo* journalists to impose a new labor law. However, this was done for Erdogan with the backdrop of a prolonged Erdogan-bashing that characterized him as a ‘Sultan,’ and ‘a cruel despot’ in line with Orientalist imaginations of a ‘bloody Muslim ruler.’ In more far right newspapers like the German *Preußische Allgemeine Zeitung*, this conspiracy was uttered quite openly: “Coups attempt in Turkey by the military was dilettantish. Erdogan’s reaction however was well-prepared.” All these media coverages ignore the fact that the Gülen movement was declared a vital security threat by the Turkish National Security Council in March 2015 and thus all their members and activities were under surveillance by the Turkish intelligence for quite a long time.

### **INTERNATIONAL MEDIA QUESTIONING TURKEY’S DEMOCRACY**

As a result of all this, the ‘Western’ media has focused not on the coup attempt, but rather on Erdogan and his power in Turkey today, portraying him as despotic ruler. *The Economist* headlined “Erdogan’s Revenge.” The German *Der Spiegel* headlined “Once There Was a Democracy.” The German *Frankfurter*

*Allgemeine Zeitung* headlined “Erdogan’s Demons.” And the French *Courrier International* headlined “Turkey: A failed coup and a winner: Erdogan.” This shows us that ‘Western’ media’s concentration was completely removed from the coup attempt itself, shadowing the hesitant reactions of Western political leaders. Rather, a number of media outlets implicitly reproduced the conspiracy theories of President Erdogan himself being involved in the plans and using it to widen his power. The German *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* published an article on August 1 declaring that according to evidence it was now clear that Erdogan was not part of this conspiracy.

From what has continuously been said in the ‘Western’ media for the last two years, it seems as if democracy is a Western value that cannot be practiced and lived in a Muslim society. The biased statements clearly suggest a biased journalism against the Turkish government and the conservative masses supporting it. More importantly it implies that the Turkish people and especially conservative people do not deserve democracy. By focusing on some uncommon instances during the street protests, such as religious slogans and the seemingly religious outfit of some protesters, ‘Western’ media outlets suggest that these people cannot be protesting for democracy. The statement that “Erdogan supporters are sheep that will follow whatever he says” is highly problematic, and most importantly an Islamophobic approach that denies any political agency to the Turkish people. However watching many video recordings from that horrible night makes it clear that the Turkish people from all segments of Turkish society displayed great civil courage and that they are individuals who have developed strong political consciousness and civil courage.

The unbelievable pictures of many courageous women, who risked and sacrificed their lives to defend democracy by taking to the streets, were also ignored by these media outlets. Especially the resistance of many Muslim women wearing headscarves on the Bosphorus Bridge is something that shuttered

the prejudiced picture of the suppressed Muslim woman. One picture was extraordinarily astounding: a woman with a headscarf is challenging putschist soldiers on the bridge despite having been beaten by them many times. In normal circumstances this picture would be praised and even become an iconic symbol of civil courage like the Tiananmen Square tank man. Yet, because she was a woman with a headscarf her actions were widely ignored.

### DOMESTIC POLITICAL REACTIONS

It is not surprising that politicians would frame a story their own way. Shortly after the suppression of the coup attempt, it was disturbing to hear many 'Western' politicians say "All parties in Turkey should support the democratically elected government of Turkey, show restraint, and avoid any violence or bloodshed" (John Kerry). This statement positions the democratically elected government at the same level as the coup plotters. It is also disturbing to see that many political leaders did not speak harshly against the coup attempt nor did they congratulate the people on the streets, who made a fifth military coup in modern Turkish history impossible.

Looking at the case of Austria, one can see that this also had severe implications for domestic politics. A country with a large minority of Turkish people, these people took to the streets on the night of the coup attempt to celebrate the success of the democratic state against the putschists. The very next day, another demonstration took place, where an alleged Kurdish restaurant was damaged by a few of the protesters, which was condemned by the organizers of the demonstration. While people of all political stripes demonstrated against the coup attempt, for the Austrian media these were pro-Erdogan loyalists. An MP of the Greens reacted harshly with the words "I don't want any Turkish conditions in Austria." The minister of interior argued "To spread Turkish opinions in Austria under the cloak of freedom to demonstrate is not acceptable." The minister of integration and foreign affairs said

"Whoever wants to participate in Turkish domestic politics is free to leave our country" and asked the citizens of Turkish origin to be loyal to Austria. A conservative mayor of a city even called on these people not to put a Turkish flag anywhere in their houses or balconies. According to him "Whoever supports Erdogan is welcome to leave us." The far right candidate for the presidential elections built on these exclusionary utterances by politicians of centrist parties -ruling and in opposition- to call for a ban of citizenship in the case of Turkish people who have two citizenships. These statements clearly mark a shift to the far right in the political discourse of mainstream politicians. Not only is it not forbidden to participate in politics of other countries, but also it is worrying to hear such voices of prejudices against any specific minority. Loyalty is being defined in an exclusionary and narrow sense. When the discourse suggests that many people of Turkish origin with different political ideologies should leave the country rather than congratulating them on defeating a coup attempt against a democratically elected government, this tells us which side these politicians are on. When the tabloid press builds on this discourse to say in an advertisement "Traveling to Turkey will only support Erdogan," this suggests that the democratic culture of a European society is weakening rapidly.

### CONCLUSION

Looking at the picture outlined above one can clearly claim that it reveals a biased and one-sided coverage of the coup attempt in Turkey. It also reveals the facts about which the media were silent, and highlights how the media reversed the perspective on the coup attempt by turning the protesters into cruel perpetrators of torture and silencing the cruelty of the military. This picture also reveals the relevance of a long-standing Orientalist framing of Muslim societies. Democracy here, in a typical Islamophobic manner, becomes a leading force when it is implied that democracy belongs to the West and

cannot be part of any Muslim society. Neglecting the democratic power of the ordinary people in the Turkish streets shows that the notion of democracy is exclusively 'Western.' At the same time, such a one-sided debate had a clear impact on domestic politics. We can see by the reactions to the demonstrations of Turkish-origin people in many European

nation states how far right Orientalist perspectives have spread further and throughout biased media coverage. Prohibiting Erdogan from speaking to the protesters in Cologne via Video screening reveals how the democratic standards in Western societies are slowly diminishing with the excuse of fighting extremism and radicalization.