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WHY TAKE THE RISK? UNDERSTANDING GULENISTS' INVOLVEMENT IN THE THWARTED COUP IN TURKEY

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This policy brief examines the role of the FETÖ group in the 15 July failed coup attempt in Turkey, which terrorized Turkey in an unprecedented scale. In particular, the brief studies how the organization's evolution into a diasporic structure has contributed to its implication in the chain of events leading to the 15 July coup attempt. It seeks to answer the question why the FETÖ group took such high-risk political moves that jeopardized their entire gains in the civic sphere. The brief argues that the apparently 'irrational behaviour' on the part of FETÖ is largely because of the fact that it has increasingly internalized a diasporic character and derived power from the international level, as well as building new relationships with international actors.

In the aftermath of the 15 July failed coup attempt, which terrorized Turkey in an unprecedented scale, most signs point to the Gülenist network as the main culprit. Over time, the extent of the Gülenists' involvement in this act and their underlying motivations will get clearer. It will be useful to study how the organization's evolution into a diasporic structure has contributed to its implication in the chain of events leading to the 15 July coup attempt, which will also shape its future evolution.

Firstly, it needs to be noted that any analysis on the subject has to proceed on the postulate that the coup attempt was result of a deliberate political choice on the part of the Gülenist structure, whereby it waged a fight against the Turkish political system in general and AK Party governments in particular. As a Janus-faced structure, it has

amalgamated an esoteric religious community, civil society network, web of economic enterprises, and a parallel structure seeking to penetrate into and capture state institutions, most significantly the security apparatus. Over time, it has achieved enormous gains, thanks largely to untraced yet simultaneous operation of these various components in a power multiplying fashion. In the obscure relationship between the civic face and the political face –i.e., 'parallel state structure' (PDY) as the Turkish state defines it now-, for a long time, the networks in the religious and civil society realm had been at the forefront. This has served as a major tool to establish effective communication with different societal segments and political actors both at home and abroad. Moreover, the very same civic face has served as the realm from which the movement as a religious '*cemaat*'

extracted power, resources and most importantly devout followers.

Since at least February 2012, the political struggle has been pronounced more openly. As was observed in the case of the closure of the prep-schools, some observers questioned why the *cemaat* would risk undermining its gains in the civil sphere. Today it has become clearer that the self-confidence derived from the depth and breadth of the parallel structure has been a major factor behind its reckless behavior. Still, the very same question is raised today to cast doubts on the *cemaat's* involvement in the 15 July coup attempt, which risked the total elimination of its entire power in the civilian and political spheres. Behind this apparently 'irrational act' on the part of FETÖ lies the fact that it has increasingly internalized a diasporic character and derived power from

the international level, as well as building new relationships with international actors.

In its aggressive growth strategy, the 'Gülen movement' has expanded through a skillful utilization of cross-linkages between its various components, as well as rendering such linkages obscure. Moreover, it has capitalized on political agenda of the time effectively, by drawing, among others, on the vast network of media assets it controls. Oftentimes, it has established its strategy on the prevailing political issues of the time, such as democratization or counter-terrorism. By developing a powerful discourse on those issues, it has managed both to build critical alliances that enabled it to expand room of maneuver and to ride on the back of other actors that acted in line with its own agenda.

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Convergence with the international agenda

Following its emergence as a formidable force in ‘diaspora,’ the Gulenists’ discourse has increasingly evolved in line with the international agenda. The global network achieved partly through this internationalized discourse has progressively rendered the Gulenist structure less dependent on its home base in Turkey, in terms of both financing and recruitment. For instance, after its transfer of resources abroad was curtailed following the March 2014 municipal

elections, Turkish papers ran the headlines that the PDY’s international operations will be significantly limited. The fact that its influence has largely remained intact underscores the relevance of its diasporic character.

As it developed an effective network abroad, the Gulenist structure benefited enormously from the tools and experience in lobbying, public diplomacy, and etc., it had acquired over years. Thanks to the ties it built with the dominant political actors in Turkey, including the AK Party until the start



of the break-up of the alliance in 2012, it has found a fertile environment to expand internationally. Given its strengths in adopting the hegemonic discourse or contributing to the production of the dominant discourse, this organization has gained enormous political capital in Washington, D.C., which offers a very telling example. When the quality of Turkish democracy became a topic of discussion in the U.S. capital, for instance, the representatives of the group have taken different positions conjecturally. Until the split that followed the February 2012 National Intelligence Council (MIT) crisis, the group's networks had effectively served as Turkey's lobbyists in Washington, arguing that Turkish democracy was on a solid course. In the following period, as it embarked on a bitter political struggle against the AK Party governments, the same group resorted heavily to the authoritarianization

thesis, which was embraced by the U.S. intelligentsia, especially after the 2013 Gezi events.

The most convenient and practical way to explain this obvious contrast between the two positions has been the 'demonization of Erdoğan.' The hegemonic reading in the West, which personified the entire political processes around President Erdoğan and employed heavily the Orientalist metaphors of 'Sultan,' has been an important discursive tool embraced by the PR leg of the Gulenist structure. At the same time, another tool to legitimize the Gülenists' change of course has been on the foreign policy side, whereby the same circles were instrumental in producing and disseminating the long-running speculations pertaining to the alleged ties between Turkey and the ISIS. As a result of this pragmatic relationship with the international actors,

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it has become increasingly difficult for the ‘*cemaat*’ to conceal its political agenda, and step into a new phase where it started to use its parallel state to wage an aggressive political war.

Meanwhile, following the September 2010 constitutional amendments, which particularly affected the judiciary, and the National Security Council meetings of 2010 and 2011 –where the influence of Kemalist military bureaucracy over civilian politics was curtailed significantly-, the group appeared to have concluded that the conditions were particularly ripe to further consolidate its penetration

into the state apparatus. At this stage, the nature of its relationship with the international actors has grown even more obscure. To the extent that its agenda converged with the strategic preferences and interests of the international actors, it has become increasingly irrelevant whether this convergence was a result of a relationship of alliance, convenience, proxy, or mere coincidence. Therefore, the deep suspicions harbored by the Turkish body politic regarding the involvement of the United States in the failed coup attempt of 15 July or its instrumentalization of

the Gülenists will be hard to dispel.

Why take the risk?

Coming back to the question posed at the outset, why the Gülenists took such high-risk political moves that jeopardized their entire gains in the civic sphere. The account so far helps us build a credible case: a sense of exponential power accumulation and invincibility, derived from the favorable balance of power at home and set of alliances abroad, turned the FETÖ structure into a political warrior. It has waged a war of choice, it believed it would win. Despite President Erdoğan's various calls on the *cemaat* to normalize, i.e., withdraw to the civil sphere by disengaging from the political sphere and dismantling the parallel state, which were symbolized in his invitation on Fethullah Gulen to "return home," the group

preferred to escalate the tensions after February 2012.

It turns out that, in addition to its domestic motivations, the FETÖ has been driven by a combination of external calculations. In the run up to the July 15 failed coup attempt, a combination of factors such as self-attribution of inflated power potential relying on external alliances, the appeal to external audiences, or the necessity to act in line with the external agendas have shaped its calculus.

Moreover, it is plausible to suggest that, at the discursive level, they might have calculated that there existed a conducive environment to legitimize the coup. As the Middle East goes through a tectonic transformation, the Western policies seem to have favored two postulates recently: curbing political Islamist movements' power and where necessary supporting anti-democratic pro-Western regimes, based

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on the authoritarian stability thesis. Taking a careful note of the hegemonic narrative, the coup plotters must have calculated that the new *status quo* –i.e., a new government formed by the coup- would receive blessing from the West. Indeed, the declaration issued by the putchists, self-declared *Peace at Home Council*, exactly sought to capitalize on such a political platform.

The delayed and ambivalent Western reaction to the coup served as the *prima facie* evidence for many Turks that there existed a deep connection between

the Gulenists and the Western powers. The statements coming from the FETÖ members in the wake of the thwarted coup, in an attempt to whitewash its involvement, show little sympathy for the deep threat 15 July coup attempt presented to the country and Turkish democracy. Large segments of the Turkish body politic have converged on the involvement of Gülenist structure in the coup, in one way or another. Yet, in its reaction to the post-July 15 developments, Gülenist structure seeks to synchronize its message with the international agenda as part



of the very same political warfare it has been waging against the Turkish state. As such, the group once again demonstrates the extent to which it has been alienated and disconnected from the realities of Turkey.

Internalized hatred and “Yazid”

At the same time, it appears that this aggressive discourse, which appears to have been adopted due to pragmatic considerations, has been internalized in such a way that it becomes part of the identity formation process of ‘*cemaat*’ members. The convergence with the Western political agendas and actors, either for the sake of gaining allies or due to certain pressures, has been the last asset at the disposal of the FETÖ structure. The new political discourse produced to align with the Western political agenda has increasingly detached from the sociological, political

and economic trajectory of Turkey. Anti-Erdoganism or heavy dosed criticism toward Turkish foreign policy has gone beyond pragmatic political posturing and become a key marker of the political identity of the devoted members of an esoteric religious movement. The extreme violence unleashed on the night of 15 July, when the putchists of the FETÖ structure terrorized the Turkish nation and state institutions, can only be explained with reference to this disconnect, foreignness and internalized hatred.

The most obvious reflection of the internalized hatred has been perhaps the metaphor of “Yazid,” used to refer to President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. As much as it has had an instrumental value to bolster the criticism of authoritarianism prevalent in the West, which stems from the group’s political pragmatism, the demonization of Erdogan has

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a theological function as well. As the core religious movement politicized over time, which was anathema to the tradition from which it claims to hail, and its political agenda has been alienated from the spirit of the Turkish body politic, the Yazid discourse has served the group's efforts to reproduce inner justification, which is needed to sustain the followers' commitment. The ability of this esoteric and Messianic group to prevent the defections from its ranks in the civil sphere and the parallel state structure at least since February

2012 owes a large deal to this discourse of 'fighting a just cause', as well as other practical reasons.

In the wake of the thwarted coup attempt of 15 July, the Gulenists seem determined to wage the same political battle. As they continue to demonize Turkey's leadership, they are likely to evoke *hijrah* to encourage further emigration, bolstering the diasporic community. Having been gradually disconnected from Turkey not only politically and sociologically but also demographically, the evolution of the FETÖ group in the



diaspora will probably proceed on two axes: the political discourse and posturing convergent with the pragmatic relationship forged with international actors, and an exponentially esoteric religious narrative to facilitate its followers' internalization

of this discourse. In either case, it signals a very problematic relationship with the homeland, which, if not managed properly, may create negative repercussions for Turkey's relations with the West.

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