



# *Understanding the July 2016 Military Coup: The Contemporary Security Dilemma in Turkey*

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## **Abstract**

This study explores the link between religious identity and conflict in contemporary Turkey by examining the dramatic reversals in the relations between the country's two prominent Islamic social forces, the ruling party AKP and the Gülen Organization. It shows how a particular trajectory of power and identity between the two religious forces transformed into a brutal security competition in the Turkish society and polity. It puts the analytical foci on the following puzzle: how did the Gülen community — once a confidential ally of AKP — turn into a coup plotter in the Turkish military to bring down the elected government? In order to explore the puzzle, the study offers significant departures from the standard approaches to religious identity and conflict by employing a distinct concept — the inter-societal security dilemma.

**Key words:** Justice and Development Party, 15 July Coup Attempt, Gülen Organization, Security Dilemma

## **Introduction**

On 15 July, 2016, Turkey experienced the most violent military coup attempt in its history. Among the main culprits<sup>1</sup> of the bloody coup attempt was an Islamic organization — the Gülen Organization (GO)<sup>2</sup> — which aimed to overthrow the ruling party, the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AK Party, AKP). From midnight to dawn, the coup plotters shot dead the protesters and crushed civilians with tanks. The bloodiest clashes mounted after the rebel officers stormed the Special Forces Headquarters and seized vital strategic chokepoints such as the Bosphorus Bridge in Istanbul. Turkish military F-16 fighters took to the air in order to bomb the parliament building in Ankara, while a group of specially trained soldiers tried to capture the President in Marmaris, Muğla. Overall, more than 200 civilians and security forces were killed, and more than 2000 were wounded. What makes the showdown most peculiar is that for a country where all the previous military interventions had secular excuses, the latest attempted coup was staged against

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an Islamic-oriented party by an organization with an Islamic agenda. The putsch by the Gülen Organization becomes all the more puzzling because it was known for its promotion of tolerance and interfaith dialogue, representing the “good” trend in Islam in the West with millions of followers in Turkey and abroad (Yavuz & Balci, 2018). The puzzle turns into a riddle, when considering the fact that the AKP had been in alliance with this organization against Turkey’s secular establishment (the self-appointed guardians of the regime including the military, judiciary, and the presidency). How can we make sense of these reversals and dramatic changes? In order to understand the *dynamics* of the deteriorating relations, it is necessary to go beyond the journalistic accounts or commonplace academic explanations that often portray the relations in religious terminology such as a messianic eschatology versus radicalism or moderate Islamism vs. extreme Islamism that depict the wrangle largely as a Manichean struggle.

The existing literature on the cause of the fierce conflict between the GO and the AKP gives four areas of argument, culminating in a bloody coup attempt in which 8,651 soldiers, and 171 generals (out of a total number of 358 generals), 35 fighter-jets, 37 helicopters, 246 tanks, and 3 navy ships took part (Aslan, 2018:2). According to the first, the alliance between the GO and the AKP was based on a common threat, the Kemalist bureaucracy. For example, Yavuz points to the lack of a common enemy as the main source of conflict between the GO and AKP. Accordingly, he claims the following: “once the kitchen had been cleared of other potential sources of resistance, they decided that there was not enough room for two chefs. Both movements turned on each other in a fiercely acrimonious way” (Yavuz, 2018:12). According to the second account, the AKP’s political reforms, which removed the discriminatory measures against religious expression, “posed an existential threat to the Gülenist cult as their clandestine hierarchy and criminal activities.” This was so because such activities “were previously justified as a necessity in order to survive under an illiberal secularist regime persecuting public expressions of religious piety” (Aktürk, 2016:156). The third explanation holds that the Gülenists saw the AKP as an obstacle in their aim to harvest the fruits of the joint victory over the Kemalist establishment, and they therefore tried to undermine Erdoğan’s power with graft probes, media attacks, and other means (Esen & Gumuscu, 2017:61). The last argument, mostly embraced by Gülen-friendly scholars, points out the authoritarian slide of the AKP and paints the GO as the victim of such a turn (Yılmaz & Bashirov, 2018:1821). The last argument, unsurprisingly, leaves no agency for the GO in the explanation of the bloody coup attempt.

This study, unlike the existing literature, explores the link between religious identity and conflict in contemporary Turkey by examining the dramatic reversals in the relations between the country’s two prominent Islamic social forces, namely the AKP as a political Islamist party and the Gülenists as an Islamist organization. In particular, it seeks to solve the following puzzle: How has the Gülen Organization, once a



confidential ally of the AKP, turned into a coup plotter determined to bring down a democratically elected government? In order to explore the puzzle, the study offers significant departures from the standard approaches to religious identity and conflict by employing a distinct concept of International Relations: the security dilemma. The latter can help to explicate many of the enduring conflicts between Turkey's dominant social forces, including the secular Kemalists and the Islamists. The present article argues that even though the latter had been bitterly involved in security competition for the control of the Turkish state and society between 2002 and 2011, only two competing social blocs were left in Turkish politics after 2011 — the AKP and the GO.<sup>3</sup>

The article is organized as follows: the first section details the theoretical argument to show how the security dilemma facilitates a culture of violent confrontation in Turkey. To understand the nature of the confrontation and the parties to the conflict, the second part examines the rise and fall of the alliance between two Islamist forces by contextualizing their relations in historical and political terms. Such an inquiry is necessary to understand why these two movements have eventually come to experience deep divisions over fundamental theological and political issues even though both employed an Islamist social discourse. The notable lines of division include the differing perceptions about the West and membership in Western institutions, security policy, relations with other Abrahamic religions, and the approach toward Iran (Yavuz & Koç, 2016:139). The third section analyzes the said security dilemma by explaining the conditions and contours of the alliance between political Islamists and Gülenist social forces formed against the secular forces in the first decade of the 2000s. It then shows how the dilemma between the two (Islamic) social forces matured under new political conditions where a third identity group (here, the secular Kemalists) was decisively defeated. The last section explains the security dilemma between two Islamic forces that eventually resulted in an all-out violent showdown in the July, 2016 coup.

### **The Security Dilemma Revisited**

In addressing the sources of conflict between different societal actors, the existing literature mainly employs primordialist, constructivist, or instrumentalist perspectives (Hasenclever & Rittberger, 2000). That is, in order to explain the rise of hostilities and outbreak of war, the existing perspectives incorporate such factors as the collective beliefs/fears, structures of the domestic political systems, or alternatively, the power-seeking elites that instrumentalize primordial identities to advance self-interests (presented as the group interest) (Kier, 1999). While offering important insight into the relationship between group identity and conflict, these approaches largely fall short of providing explanations for the outbreak of hostilities between similar identity groups and ideologies or alternatively lack of confrontation and hostilities



between divergent social forces (Balçı, 2017; Kardaş & Yeşiltaş, 2017). These shortcomings are particularly showcased in the outbreak of violent confrontation between the social bases of the AKP and the followers of Gülen on July 15, 2016, which necessitate alternative perspectives.

One such alternative, namely “the security dilemma” can be found in the International Relations discipline. In general, the security dilemma refers to a conflict situation which lead parties to go to war even though they may not wish to. It is an “irreducible dilemma” in which parties may end up in conflict or war since misperceptions or uncertainty of intentions of one party produce fear of harm followed by a preemptive attack by the other party (Herz, 1951; Wheeler & Booth, 1992). Many aspects of the classical security dilemma (SD) approach are also suitable for intra-state enquiry. For instance, Snyder and Jervis (2012) show that “the security dilemma, widely used to explain conflict between states in an anarchical international system, provides analytical insights into civil wars as well” (77). In addition, the identity-oriented re-readings of the SD excavate important new venues for understanding the sources of societal conflicts. However, given the lack of engagement with the broader social field of identity in security studies, the study of the relationship between the religious identity/discourses and violence remains understudied. New insights might be gleaned from an examination of religious identity and its relation to security. Overall, although the inclusion of societal identity groups as an important constituent of the nature of security (dilemma) is a welcome theoretical move, taking social identities as given abstract concepts or blanket categories can be analytically obstructive. The question of how similar identity groups or ideologically analogous movements might engage in fierce security competition is mostly left understudied. The present study takes Turkey’s religious groups, not as pre-given entities with preordained goals or strategies, but as discursively united and institutionalized social forces that aim to secure their group identity from threats within the context of changing power relations.

Hence, the present article builds upon the theory of intra-state security dilemmas in order to account for the dynamics that led to violent confrontation between different societal groups within a state. An important constituent of the intra-state security dilemma is inter-societal security dilemma, which refers to a condition where “the actions of one society, in trying to increase its societal security (strengthen its own identity), causes a reaction in a second society, which, in the end, decreases the first society’s own societal security (weakens its identity)” (Kardaş & Balçı, 2011; Roe, 1999:194). A societal insecurity might ensue when social groups see their identities under threat. The perception of an insecure identity can lead these groups to employ extreme security measures including coups and purging opponents. An inter-societal security dilemma can take three forms: “tight,” “regular,” and “loose” for explaining the outbreak of violence between identity groups (Roe, 2005:8–17). A *tight* SD emerges from misperception, that is, two security-seeking actors misperceive the nature of



their relationship as predatory and consequently end up being insecure. A *regular* SD occurs when the security actions/measures of one actor may lead to the insecurity of the other. Here, actions/measures, rather than misperceptions, are the primary sources of conflict. A *loose* SD is a result of “incompatible goals” or power-seeking behavior rather than security competition. In a *loose* SD, actors often get involved in conflict behavior to secure their existing powers under “ever-decreasing spoils” rather than simple strategic considerations (Roe, 2005:16–23). Here, security-driven fears and “predatory motivations” (power-seeking) are particularly difficult to distinguish since the “long-term fears may drive security seekers to take every opportunity to exploit others in an effort to build up their reserve of strategic resources even when they face no immediate security threat” (Snyder & Jervis, 2012:78–79).

### **A Tight Security Dilemma: A Tale of Two Islamist Movements in Turkey**

In Turkey, the historical roots of both the GO and political Islam go back to the late 1960s. While Necmettin Erbakan set forth the manifesto of Millî Görüş (National Outlook) in 1969 for the general public, Fethullah Gülen — a state-employed religious preacher in Izmir at the time — was attracting disciples from particular segments of the society such as university students and small businessmen (Öktem, 2012:91–98). Despite certain similarities in the religious outlook, the two branches of the Islamic movement in Turkey differed in the idea of the state, ideology, and methodology.

To understand the Gülenists’ idea of the state, it is necessary to examine the Organization’s political strategy. The latter chose to spread Islamic values blended with Turkish nationalism by striving to establish hegemony within the Turkish society and polity. Rather than forming an Islamic state connected to the Muslim *ummah* (global community of believers), the Gülenists sought widespread bureaucratic hegemony in state institutions. For the GO, it was the idea of a nation-state model that could establish social unity through puritan community building in a state otherwise deeply divided along class, ethnic, and sectarian lines. For the Gülenists, the alternative would be domestic strife and even violent confrontation. The model, for instance, foresaw the *assimilation* of Kurds into an imagined new Turkish nation by favoring their cultural rights rather than granting constitutional minority rights to Kurds, which could, for them, lead to the break-up of the state (Yavuz, 1999). Likewise, while the political Islamic Movement of Erbakan strived for the representation of different segments of society through parliamentary power in open and fair electoral competition, the GO aimed at seizing institutional state power through incremental and clandestine infiltration of its members into civilian and military bureaucracy such as judiciary, the police, and the army. In ideological terms, the two movements particularly differed in their approaches toward the Western world. For Erbakan, a blind dependence upon the Western culture not only destroyed the Islamic identity,



but also robbed Turkey of its strength. Hence, confronting westernization and the westernizing elite became a religious activity par excellence (Kadioğlu, 2012:36). On the other hand, the GO tried just the opposite by launching inter-faith dialogue, religious tolerance, and cordial relations with the West.

Such differences started to surface particularly with the rise of Erbakan's new party, the Welfare Party, which rose to power in the 1994 municipal elections and the 1995 general elections. For example, Erbakan's visit to several Muslim countries to organize an Islamic Union, also known as the D-8 (Developing Eight), in late 1996 and early 1997 became a topic of debate between the GO and the followers of the National Outlook Movement. Fetullah Gülen defined D-8 as a vain project and a "very cheap message" to Erbakan's constituency (Kuru, 2005:270). He supported the 28 February, 1997 crackdown against the Erbakan government, spearheaded by the Turkish Armed Forces, and even suggested that the Erbakan government had led the country to chaos and should resign in a TV interview in April, 1997 (Hale & Özbudun, 2009:15). In the post-28 February period, the GO continued to distance itself and clarify its difference from Erbakan's political Islam by stressing a tolerance-based discourse and condemning radical Islamist outlook. It had become commonplace for the secular political class, including then-President Suleyman Demirel and PM Bülent Ecevit, to defend Gülen's activities and back his moderate Islamist discourse as an antidote against the discourse of political Islam championed by Erbakan and his Movement.

Despite meticulous efforts to distance itself from political Islamism in general and the Welfare Party in particular, the GO remained a source of deep suspicion for the hardline Kemalist-secularists. After Gülen's remarks against secularism were broadcast on a private TV channel in June, 1999, when he was in the United States for medical treatment, a state security court issued an arrest warrant for Gülen on suspicion of plotting religious unrest in Turkey, a crime punishable by death. As a self-appointed guardian of Turkey's secular regime and the most influential wing of Kemalist-secularists, the General Staff grew particularly weary of, and remained concerned about the GO's motives to infiltrate into the army's rank and file. The prosecution accused Gülen of cunningly infiltrating thousands of his partisans into critical posts of the army with a view to taking command and control of military in the next 10 years in order to overthrow the secular system in Turkey (Cumhuriyet, 2013:1). As a result, the army command had been adamant in expelling its personnel attached or close to the organization whenever it detected them inside. In all, the General Staff assumed the worst-case scenario and put the GO in the famous National Security Council Red Book (a top administrative document, listing grave threats to the State). Thus, back in 2002 and based on the latter book titled *Activities of the PKK, the DHKP-C and Reactionary Terrorist Organizations in Europe*, the General Staff defined and delineated the GO as an organization aiming to establish a state based on religious principles in Turkey (Milliyet, 2002).





The AKP's coming to power in November, 2002 increased the apprehension of the armed forces about the GO. Although no official or close relationship between the GO and the AKP was evident at the time, the AKP government nonetheless provided a shield for Islamic groups in general that included the Gülen Organization against the intrusions of the armed forces and other Kemalist institutions in Turkey. For instance, the AKP government issued a memorandum to Turkish embassies abroad asking them to cooperate with the pro-Islamic National Outlook organization and the officials of the Gülen schools in April, 2003. As the collaboration between the two gained traction, the secular Kemalists reacted. During the National Security Council meeting on May 1, 2003 the military officials asked the government to review and withdraw the said memorandum issued by the foreign ministry on the grounds that the Gülenists were just included in the list of reactionary religious movements in numerous reports prepared by the state officials in the past.

Cordial relations notwithstanding, it would be erroneous to assume that the two Islamist movements perceived each other as natural allies, given their religious dispositions. On the contrary, they held increasingly suspicious views about each other. As an important constituent of the inter-societal security dilemma, ambiguity in actors' intentions plays a significant role in turning social relations into an SD. Ambiguity and suspicion were the main reasons that eventually locked the GO and AKP into a tight security dilemma until the 2007 general elections. For example, a confidential note on April 7, 2005 from the then US Ambassador to Turkey, Eric Edelman, to the US government read that the GO "has infiltrated hundreds of adherents into the national police, judiciary, and Sayistay (GAO equivalent) and also has made inroads into the AKP government, but more recently has signaled its dissatisfaction with the way Erdoğan has tried to govern and appears to be distancing itself from him" (Aytulu, 2016:np).

### **A Four-Year Alliance of the AKP and the GO**

Even though the dilemma between the AKP and the GO persisted from 2002 to 2008, soon after the relationship shifted from a tight dilemma into an alliance. This dramatic change warrants explanation. What can explain this puzzle? In the period from mid-2006 to the beginning of 2008, Turkey's domestic political scene witnessed a fierce battle between the Kemalist secular block and the AKP. The murder of a top member of the staunchly secular judiciary in an attack by a self-styled religious-nationalist lawyer in May, 2006 triggered mass secular public protests against the Islamism of the AKP government. The attack was portrayed by the media and top secular figures to be motivated by "Islamic anger" at a ban on wearing headscarves in state institutions. The secular block's prominent representatives, then President Ahmet Necdet Sezer, the Head of High Courts, and Chief of General Staff, encouraged and even called further public mobilization against the AKP and



the threat of Islamic reactionaries (*irtica*, or religious reaction). In his speech at the opening class of the Military Academy in October, 2006, the new Chief of Staff, Yaşar Büyükanıt, defined “irtica” as an enduring threat for Turkey and declared “the constitutional duty of the military” in protecting “the secularist character of the state” (Balci, 2015a:69).

It was under such a boiling atmosphere that a *loose* security dilemma between the AKP and the secularist Kemalist block reached a crisis point at the beginning of 2007 over the presidential elections and set off an action-reaction process. In the eyes of the military, the nomination of the then Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül as the AKP’s candidate for presidency was simply unacceptable. It was unacceptable because Gül’s wife was wearing a headscarf, which, in turn, was taken as an unequivocal symbol of religious fanaticism or irtica. The fear that prevailed was that Gül’s presidency would mean that the AKP’s “antiseccular” laws that were rejected by the former president could now be passed. Gül would also have a big say in bureaucratic appointments in critical state institutions such as judiciary, university and military. In short order, Gül’s nomination to presidency became a security issue and was turned into a culture war between the secular and religious societies. In April, 2007, an ultraseccularist civil society organized unprecedented mass rallies, also known as the “Republican Rallies,” in big metropolises such as İstanbul, İzmir, Ankara, and Samsun. Unsurprisingly, the management of threat and successful mobilization of fear were promoted and appropriated by the Kemalist segments in the military. On April 12, 2007, after lending indirect support to mass rallies, then Chief of Staff General Büyükanıt asserted that the next president must be “attached to the basic values of the republic” alluding to Gül’s wife. This was followed by the military’s direct intervention into politics in the form of the famous e-memorandum of April 27, 2007 staged against the religious social forces and the AKP. Through the memorandum, the Turkish military not only declared that it had openly sided with a particular social force (i.e., the secular community), but more significantly that it threw its weight as an *armed* actor of the security problematic.

The AKP’s reaction was to go to snap elections in response to the military’s e-memorandum that resulted in a landslide victory with 46.5% of the votes. Other right-wing parties which sided with the secular block during the presidential elections paid a heavy price as they were effectively left out of the parliament by the electorate. For the tight security dilemma between the AKP and the Gülenists, this meant not only the collapse of the GO’s political investment in Mehmet Agar (Tan, 2011) and his party, True Path Party, but also the consolidation of the AKP as the only alternative for right-wing politics. Despite its clear political victory, the AKP came to the conclusion that electoral mechanisms are not enough for its survival against the Kemalist bureaucratic establishments with whom it was locked in a loose security dilemma. It was this struggle for survival that forced the AKP to desperately seek alliance with the Gülenists who could stand up to the Kemalist establishment





(Yavuz & Koç, 2016:136). As part of the cooperation, the AKP government allowed members of the GO to staff and take control over the police, the judiciary, and large segments of the state apparatus in order to defeat the secular Kemalist bureaucracy, including the military from within. To curb the tutelary powers of the military over Turkish politics, the government and the Gülenists launched a series of police operations and mass trials from 2008 to 2011 against the army, including its top brass (Balci & Jacoby, 2012). The GO's stealthy expansion of power reached its climax mostly because the Gülenists captured high representative positions in the Turkish judiciary system and the military by replacing those who were purged from high-ranking military offices through the Ergenekon and Sledgehammer investigations. The tight security dilemma between two Islamist social forces gave way to an open alliance. Together with other conservative forces promoted by former Prime Minister Turgut Özal, Gülenist members in the police force were seen as the guardians of the Islamists and as a counter-balancing power against the military.

Overall, a structural aspect of the Turkish politics was that the military often acted as the guardian for the secular segments of the society and the Kemalist political regime. It staged military coups in order to restore Kemalist principles. However, the Ergenekon and Sledgehammer trials during 2008–2011 led to the imprisonment and discharge of Kemalist officers including the top brass, as a result of which hardline secularists lost control in the armed forces and society. These trials not only undermined the clout of Kemalists in the military but also paved the way for the Gülenists to fill the ranks and replace pro-Kemalist bureaucracy. The “replacement” proved to be of great significance in the 15 July military coup attempt by Gülenist officers. As Sedat Ergin, a veteran journalist from *Hurriyet Daily*, showed, the perpetrators of the July 15, 2016 coup attempt against the AKP (see below) were Gülenist military officers who had been promoted to their critical military positions largely vacated by those very trials (Ergin, 2016). What changed the relationship between the Gülenists and the AKP from amity to enmity? How did the security dilemma change from tight to loose in a short period of time? We argue that the source of change can be located in the relations between Islamists and the secular Kemalists after 2011.

### **A Regular Security Dilemma in the Making: The End of the Alliance**

The animating features of the inter-societal security dilemma analysis are generally the prevalence of ambiguity, uncertainty, worst-case assumptions, and action-reaction processes in relations between the parties of the security dilemma (Roe, 2005). In most cases, the penultimate stage of action-reaction before the outbreak of violent confrontation usually follows from the alterations and variations in the processes of ambiguity, uncertainty, and worst-case assumptions. However, the particularities of the present security dilemma case do not lend credence to such a strict theoretical model. The deterioration of relations between the two ideologically complementary



Islamist Movements and the subsequent variations in the types of security dilemma seem to be linked directly to ambiguity and the action-reaction process. That is, the relations suffered mostly from ambiguity (i.e., the suspicions about the real intentions mentioned above) and action-reaction processes rather than just conflicting ideas or misperceptions.

The action-reaction process leading to the outbreak of violent confrontation in July, 2016 can be traced back to the removal of top Gülenist bureaucrats from judiciary and Istanbul police.<sup>4</sup> Angered by the removal of Gülenist top bureaucrats such as Zekeriya Öz (the top prosecutor of Ergenekon trials) and Ali Fuat Yılmaz (the deputy security director of Istanbul in charge of police intelligence) in March, 2011 (Ergin, 2013), the GO was further antagonized when dozens of pro-Gülen MP candidates were unexpectedly removed from the AKP's electoral list by Erdoğan before the June, 2011 General Elections (Selvi, 2015). Despite these two early signs of the unfolding crisis between the two Islamists, the GO did not sever ties, but instead waited for the Supreme Military Council (YAS) to test the liability of the AKP. It is, historically, routine practice that the council has been the only legal-institutional platform that can remove officers from duty deemed unfit for military service on the grounds mostly because of ideological affiliations. The August, 2011 Supreme Military Council decisions were to be a turning point, not only for the military's role in Turkish politics, but also for the souring relations between the AKP and the GO.

Following the post-Ergenekon purge of secular Kemalist military officers, the top brass, including the then Chief of Staff General Isik Kosaner, along with the heads of the ground, naval, and air forces, resigned in protest. The resignations signified the end of the tutelary powers of the Turkish military over civilian governments. However, the GO had put forward certain demands from the Erdoğan government regarding the decisions to be taken in the Council as to who would be purged from the military ranks. One of the leading columnists in the pro-Gülen daily *Zaman Hüseyn Gülerce* warned the government in his column on June 16, 2011 that “the result of 12 June elections cannot be perceived as the success of the AKP alone”<sup>5</sup> implying the Gülenists' contribution in the landslide victory. He went on to claim that “the first two tests of Erdoğan's ‘master period’ will be the formation of the new cabinet and decisions of Supreme Military Council” (Gülerce, 2011). Asking for a greater share in political representation as well as military bureaucracy, the GO's warning indicated that the post-Ergenekon Turkish politics was heading to another confrontation. Erdoğan's decisions in the Supreme Military Council and the formation of the new cabinet, to the detriment of the Gülenists, revealed Erdoğan's new-found determination to balance the rising tide of Gülen's political power. The warning and Erdoğan's counter-decisions indicated that the tight security dilemma was about to change into the regular SD.

In due time, the *Zaman Daily*, the main mouthpiece of the GO, began to criticize Erdoğan. On September 12, 2011 Ali Ünal, a prominent figure of the GO,



openly declared in his column three apprehensions about Erdoğan's rule. He openly warned Erdoğan about the need to "listen the man close to Allah" by reminding him of a hadith of the Prophet Muhammed: "If Allah likes a ruler, He bestows him a vizier [Gülen] who can remind him of his wrongdoings" (Korucu, 2011; Ünal, 2011). Heavy criticism toward Erdoğan by *Zaman* writers throughout the second half of 2011 triggered a series of reports documenting reasons why the GO and the AKP were now clashing.<sup>6</sup> One day later, the leaking of a wiretapped conversation in Oslo between the Turkish officials and the Kurdish militants affiliated with the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party) shocked the Turkish public. According to the recordings, the National Intelligence Organization (MİT) deputy undersecretary, Afet Güneş, the deputy undersecretary of the PM, Hakan Fidan, Sabit Ok, Zübeyr Aydar, Mustafa Karasu, and senior PKK officials attended the meeting (Kadioğlu, 2018; Köse, 2017). Although fingers were pointed at different actors about the sources of leaked secret talks, Aydar claimed that the GO was behind the leak because of its clash with the AKP over the control of state bureaucracy. The AKP government later accused the GO of leaking the Oslo talks (*Hürriyet Daily News*, October 23, 2015). The aim of the leak was not simply to condemn and corner the government for its secret peace initiative with the PKK, but also to showcase the power of the GO to do so. This was the second time that the tight security dilemma between the two Islamists escalated toward regular SD by the action-reaction process rather than first going through the processes of ambiguity or uncertainty.

### **The Action-Reaction Process**

The security dilemma finally turned into a *regular* SD with a stunning move by the Gülenist forces in the judicial bureaucracy. In February, 2012, the recently appointed chief of the Turkish Intelligence Agency Hakan Fidan, a confidante of Erdoğan, and four of his former colleagues were called to court by the Istanbul Prosecutor to testify as part of an investigation into the PKK, a Kurdish group that was classified by Turkey, the US, and the EU as a terrorist organization. The accusation was levied on the grounds that Hakan Fidan and his former colleagues had held secret meetings with the PKK leaders in Oslo. It was the first spectacular extra-political attempt to debase the Erdoğan government's ability to run the decision-making process. This tour de force by the Gülen Organization had two implications for the AKP. First, it proved that the GO was bureaucratically mighty enough, and ready to defy even the most powerful and popular person in town, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Secondly, it indicated that the alliance with political Islamists was instrumentally forged by the GO for capturing the bureaucratic institutions and corridors of power in Turkey. Unsurprisingly, the GO soon turned into a source of fear for Erdoğan and his popular base. Hakan Fidan refused to testify to the Prosecutor, the government moved swiftly to block the questioning, and the prosecutor was eventually removed



from the case. These moves triggered the political Islamists' complaint of a "parallel state" within the state run by the GO, which was widely believed to be behind the attempt. The "failure" to confront Fidan and by default Erdoğan, had one implication for the GO: Erdoğan had now become the main obstacle to their ambitions to seize the Turkish state. The Gülen supporters also grew increasingly frustrated with the way Erdoğan had grown invulnerable, particularly after his landslide victory with 50% of the votes in 2011 general election.

After the attempt to arrest Hakan Fidan, a deep distrust and loss of confidence started feeding the worst-case assumptions on the part of the political Islamists. Ayşe Bohurler, a founding member of the AKP, said that the lack of transparency and clear organizational structure made it impossible to hold the Gülenists accountable. She added that "There is no reference point; they are kicking in the shadows... They are everywhere and nowhere" (Bilefsky & Arsu, 2012). The later reactions by the AKP government proved so harsh since Erdoğan believed that the real target was not Fidan, but himself. The shift into regular security dilemma became evident when Erdoğan went public about the affair by openly declaring that "it was me who sent him [Fidan] to Oslo and to Imralı [where the PKK's leader Abdullah Öcalan is imprisoned]. Then, prosecute me" (*Sabah*, 2012). In short order, the Gülenists' demarche to arrest Fidan was a "declaration of war" (Selvi, 2012) in the eyes of Erdoğan and leading figures in the AKP. The shift into a regular SD was complete between the two actors.

The subsequent reactions of the AKP and Erdoğan were to limit the maneuvers of pro-Gülen bureaucrats. Firstly, the Intelligence Act was immediately amended so as to strengthen the immunity of its members, obliging prosecutors to first ask for the prime minister's consent before launching a probe against the MİT personnel. Secondly, the AKP government curbed the broad authorities of the special authority courts in June, 2012. The then Deputy PM, Bekir Bozdağ, asserted that "While taking steps against military and civilian tutelage, against gangs, mafia and other power groups in the name of relieving Turkey, we cannot tolerate new groups [establishing their] own tutelage" (*Hürriyet Daily News*, June 12, 2012). While Bozdağ implied the GO as the next candidate for tutelary power over the elected actors in Turkey, pro-Gülen dailies heavily criticized the government's policy to curb the broad authorities of such courts (Balci, 2015b:13, 14). In all, the AKP government showed its determination to limit the power of the Gülenists in Turkish politics and bureaucracy. But such steps were not enough to curb the Gülenists' power in the police force and judiciary in Turkey.

Gezi protests were another incident that fed suspicions about each other's real intentions. The AKP's policy to re-erect the historical monument of Topcu Kışlası (the old Ottoman artillery barracks) in the Gezi Park area of Istanbul triggered a harsh protest of the country's secular population. The protests soon grew out of control and became a litmus test for the ruling party as the protesters camped in Gezi Park so as to prevent the bulldozers from destroying the park. The protesters' tents



were burned down and the fateful event triggered mass protests in many parts of Istanbul and Turkey. Within a couple of days, the Gezi protests dealt a serious blow against the AKP, tarnished its democratic image, and deteriorated its decade-long status as an important democratic force in Turkey. During the protests, Gülen heavily criticized the AKP government in his sermon on June 6, 2013 arguing that “We are committing so many wrongdoings just to eliminate one wrongdoing. We cause various kinds of wrongdoings and injustice to happen. We only add fire to the flames of grudge and hatred. We cause things to grow out of control. And today you see the examples in the streets” (Gülen, 2013). While Gülen openly took side with the protesters and accused the government of causing the nationwide protests, the columnists from *Zaman* criticized the party of authoritarianism in dealing with social demands.<sup>7</sup> This critical stance made the GO appear as a middle way between the “marginality” of the Gezi Movement and the “authoritarianism” of Erdoğan and his followers (Tugal, 2013).

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### **From Regular to Lose Security Dilemma: The Road to Military Coup**

The Gezi Protests, and corruption investigation in particular, put the AKP on the defensive and Erdoğan felt an existential security threat against his own survival as a leader of his social base to rule the country. Although the AKP government reacted swiftly by suspending the key prosecutors and police officials involved in the graft probe, secret recordings of the probe were leaked on the Internet. Since social media was used to air these recordings, the government ordered the shutdown of YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook. Hence, the more the AKP tried to prevent the GO’s moves against the government, the more it appeared authoritarian. Despite the salience of the GO’s role in these affairs, the oppositional parties in Turkey, global media,



international human rights organizations, civil society organizations, and foreign political leaders harshly criticized the alleged authoritarian stance of the AKP rule. The March, 2014 nationwide municipal elections turned into a vote of confidence for the AKP rule and the leadership of Erdoğan. In the run-up to the election, the GO did everything it could to turn the political fortunes in its favor and against the AKP. Not surprisingly, a well-known student of Turkish politics called those elections “the most tense and polarized elections in contemporary Turkish political history” (Keyman, 2014:21).

The victory of the AKP in the elections turned the tide against the GO. There were four consequences of the victory. First, the GO misread the electorate’s reaction to the corruption scandals and wiretaps. Second, the AKP took more than 40% of the votes and reconsolidated its domestic legitimacy that had been devastated by the Gezi protests and corruption scandals. Third, the GO lost its natural popular base given the fact that the GO, as a religious movement, could only appeal to those who had traditionally supported the AKP. Last but not least, the GO not only disclosed its clandestine power base in the state institutions such as police and judiciary, but also gave a political excuse to Erdoğan to dismantle the GO from the state apparatus.

The security dilemma turned into *loose* immediately after the AKP government later labeled the GO a “terrorist organization,” now designated under the acronym FETÖ (*Fethullahçı Terör Örgütü*). This governmental decree made all the activities promoting the FETÖ a criminal act. Once a four-year AKP ally, the GO was now considered a criminal organization simply because it had established a “parallel state structure” by placing its followers in state institutions such as the judiciary and police. It also exerted strong influence through its media outlets in order to legitimize its efforts to run a parallel state structure. As part of this new policy, the AKP appointed government trustees to manage business companies with close ties to the GO, closed down Gülenist media operations, including TV channels and a news agency, arrested leading public figures of the GO, and seized its newspapers and magazines.

A ray of hope rose for the GO after the June 1, 2015 general elections when the AKP lost about 70 seats and was 17 seats short of a majority rule needed to establish the government. Although the AKP was still Turkey’s most popular party, three oppositional parties in the parliament were at last given a chance to establish a new government despite strong ideological differences. However, the coalition talks failed to produce any concrete gains, paving the way for a snap election in November 1, 2015. The result of the November general elections was devastating for the GO because the AKP swept back into a single-party government with a convincing win. A new wave of governmental crackdown against the GO followed two days before the November elections. In line with the action-reaction process of the loose security dilemma, on October 28, the police raided the Istanbul offices of the Gülen-affiliated Koza İpek group, which owned five media outlets: daily newspapers *Bugün* and *Millet*; Kanaltürk TV; Bugün TV; and Kanaltürk Radio. The next day, police





raided Ankara headquarters of the Koza İpek group to enforce a court decision that ordered the company to be placed under the management of a trustee approved by the government. After securing a majority that allowed the AKP to continue its single-party rule, the AKP orchestrated its latest blow in the form of a campaign against Gülen himself, issuing an arrest warrant with the charge of operating an “armed terror group” from the US.

After the November elections, the action-reaction process went apace. On March 4, 2016, the Turkish government seized the *Zaman Daily*, the main mouthpiece of the GO. The companies with close ties to Gülen were confiscated, pro-Gülen media as a whole was seized, and Gülenist bureaucrats were fired from state institutions. The three pillars of the GO hegemony in Turkey were now laid broken. However, one significant pro-Gülen element, a security actor par excellence remained unscathed, the Turkish Armed Forces. The latter was largely immune from the action-reaction process of the loose SD, as none of pro-Gülenist officers in the military had been touched. Soon after, some of the high-ranking officials were detained for allegedly fabricating evidence in trials against the military officials sentenced for ties with the Ergenekon case in 2011 (*Milliyet*, 2016). The AKP reversed the Ergenekon trials by releasing those arrested after the Ergenekon and Sledgehammer trials and aligned with the anti-Western Kemalists (*Ulusalcılar*). At the time, there were indications that a much larger sweep was being readied with rumors flying that in the annual meeting of the Supreme Military Council in August, 2016 the Gülenist high-ranking officers would finally be discharged from the military (Reynolds, 2016; Rodrik, 2016). Finally, the last fort of GO within the state turned the night of 15-16 July into the bloodiest coup attempt in Turkish history.

### **Conclusion: Reconsidering the Inter-Societal Security Dilemma in Turkey**

The trajectories of conflict and contemporary power sharing in Turkey can hardly be reduced to ideational factors such as the theological preferences, the Islamization of public space, and easternization of Turkey’s foreign policy. The growth and ultimate breakdown of relations between the GO and the AKP proved to be one of the most significant factors behind the changing social, political, and military structures of the Turkish state and society. Indeed, the initial alliance between these two identity groups yielded the most substantial Islamic social and political experiment in nation building that, finally in 2011, broke the political hegemony of the secular-Kemalist state.

The present study demonstrated that an important source of recent tectonic shifts in the composition of the Turkish state is rooted in the inter-societal security dilemma between two religious social forces — Gülenist organization and political Islamists. It reconstructed the processes of societal security dilemma between these two influential religious identity groups in order to show how they have ended up



in a security competition over the control of state and society, culminating in the bloody coup attempt of July, 2016. It argued that the critical reversals in Turkey's recent history can be examined as the outcome of a particular social dynamic rooted in the security-identity nexus. It explained the crucible of the deteriorating relations between these two erstwhile close allies of similar religious convictions through the prism of the societal security dilemma.

The present study on Turkey's societal security dilemma offers two reconsiderations regarding the relationship between identity and security. First, unlike the animating features of previous studies on the security dilemma, where the territorial or ethnic unity of the state is under threat, the group identity of GO poses a radically different kind of threat since the aim is to establish the GO's hegemony as an armed religious cult across the whole spectrum of state and society, including the military and civilian bureaucracy. In other words, the GO poses an unusual threat to the modern state itself to seize the entire governance structures *en masse* with all the posts gradually filled by the die-hard aficionados of the GO to advance its social and political clout. The former employs legal *and* illegal means, such as stealing the nationwide university and bureaucracy entrance exam questions, to establish an army of civilian and especially military bureaucracy loyal exclusively to the community that surpasses all other previously held identities. It is therefore to note that the end result of the GO efforts has been to run a parallel terrorist state that is counter to the logic of legitimate use force, state sovereignty, and contours of modern political representation.

Secondly, another important outcome of the societal security dilemma between the said religious social forces in Turkey is that the remaining social identity groups (such as the secular Kurds and Turks) feel that they are increasingly excluded from the upper echelons of power, which is achieved by the rule of one identity group over others and not necessarily by brute force or political bickering, but largely by an incrementally built control of the civil society and the state. For instance, the Gülenist bureaucratization of social forces and political order was not based on officialdom or rationality, but on the credence of a secret religious cult led by the theocratic authority of Fethullah Gülen. The outcome of dominating the civilian and military bureaucracy through the security dilemma dynamics led to the hegemony of one (religious) identity in the polity at the expense of other identity groups, who see their group identity under threat. In short, the struggle between the elected political Islamists and religiously motivated/bureaucratically organized Gülenists eventually turned into a vital security issue with serious implications for the sovereignty and survival of the state.

### Notes

1. Although the coup plotters were made up of different cliques, including opportunistic officers jumping in at the last minute, Gülen supporters were the ringleaders. See Cizre (2016), Aktürk (2016), Yavuz and Koç (2016), Mis (2016); for a different perspective, see Jacoby (2016).



2. We prefer to use the Gülen Organization simply because the Gülen Movement refers mostly to the religious aspect of this entity. However, Gülenists have been interested in media, business, and trade union, and more importantly they organized a clandestine power base in the state institutions.
3. The AKP and the Gülenists competed over the Anatolian Sunni conservatives in Turkey. As shown in the study, the AKP as a political party and the Gülenists as a religious organization were, at times, overlapping categories; consequently, the sources of conflict were political as well as social.
4. Arguably, one of the first sources of suspicion between the AKP and GO came in the aftermath of the Mavi Marmara [the Flotilla Attack] incident with Israel in 2010. Then, while the AKP raged against Israel, the GO preferred continuation of relations with Israel.
5. For an early analysis of the rift between AKP and the Gülen Organization, See, Keskinsoy (2012).
6. See for example, Karaca (2011).
7. See, for example, Alkan (2013), Cengiz (2013).

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