

TURKEY'S THIRTY-YEAR COUP

Did an exiled cleric try to overthrow Erdoğan's government?

By Dexter Filkins

At nine o'clock on the night of July 15th, General Hulusi Akar, the chief of the Turkish Army's general staff, heard a knock on his office door in Ankara, the nation's capital. It was one of his subordinates, General Mehmet Dişli, and he was there to report that a military coup had begun. "We will get everybody," Dişli said. "Battalions and brigades are on their way. You will soon see."

Akar was aghast. "What the hell are you saying?" he asked.

In other cities, officers involved in the coup had ordered their units to detain senior military leaders, block major roads, and seize crucial institutions like Istanbul Atatürk Airport. Two dozen F-16 fighters took to the air. According to statements from some of the officers involved, the plotters asked Akar to join them. When he refused, they handcuffed him and flew him by helicopter to an airbase where other generals were being held; at one point, one of the rebels pointed a gun at Akar and threatened to shoot.

After midnight, a news anchor for Turkish Radio and Television was forced to read a statement by the plotters, who called themselves the Peace at Home Committee, a reference to one of the country's founding ideals. Without mentioning the President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, by name, the statement said that his government had destroyed the country's institutions, engaged in corruption, supported terrorism, and ignored human rights: "The secular and democratic rule of law has been virtually eliminated."

For a time, the rebels seemed to have the upper hand. Provincial governors and community leaders surrendered or joined in, along with police squads. In a series of text messages discovered after the coup, a Major Murat Çelebioğlu told his group, "The deputies of the Istanbul police chief have been called, informed, and the vast majority have complied."

A Colonel Uzan Şahin replied, "Tell our police friends: I kiss their eyes."

But the plot seemed haphazard. A helicopter team sent to locate Erdoğan in Marmaris, the resort town where he was vacationing, failed to capture the President, despite a shootout with guards at his hotel. The rebels took control of only one television station, and left cellular-phone networks untouched. Erdoğan was able to record a video message, played on CNN Turk, in which he called on Turkish citizens to “take to the streets.” They did, in huge numbers. Faced with overwhelming popular resistance, the troops had to decide between shooting large groups of demonstrators and giving up. By morning, the uprising had been broken.

Erdoğan declared a national emergency and, in the weeks that followed, made a series of appearances to remind the nation of the cost of the coup. Some of the plotters had brutally shot demonstrators and comrades who opposed them. One rebel major, faced with resistance, had texted his soldiers, “Crush them, burn them, no compromise.” More than two hundred and sixty people were killed and thousands wounded. The F-16s had bombed the parliament building, blasting holes in the façade and scattering chunks of concrete in the hallways.

In Erdoğan's telling, the coup was not a legitimate sign of civic unrest. In fact, it did not even originate in Turkey; the rebels “were being told what to do from Pennsylvania.” For Turks, the coded message was clear: Erdoğan meant that the mastermind of the coup was Fethullah Gülen, a seventy-eight-year-old cleric, who had been living in exile for two decades in the Poconos, between Allentown and Scranton.

Gülen, a dour, balding proselytizer with a scratchy voice, had fled Turkey in 1999, fearing arrest by the country's military rulers. From afar, though, he had served as a spiritual guide for millions and overseen a worldwide network of charter schools, known for offering scholarships to the poor. Gülen's sermons and writings emphasized reconciling Islam with contemporary science, and promoted charity; his movement is called Hizmet, or “service.” For many in the West, it represented a hopeful trend in Islam. Gülen met with Pope John Paul II and the leaders of major Jewish organizations, and was fêted by President Bill Clinton, who saluted his “ideas of tolerance and interfaith dialogue.”

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To many outside observers, Erdoğan's accusation sounded like something out of an airport thriller: a secret cabal burrowing into a modern state and awaiting orders from its elderly leader on a hilltop half a world away. For Erdoğan, though, it was a statement of political reality. Gülen, once a crucial ally, had become the leader of a shadow state, determined to bring down the Administration. In the following weeks, Erdoğan's forces detained tens of thousands of people who he claimed were loyal to Gülen. In outraged statements to the United States government, he demanded that Gülen be extradited, so that he could be made to face justice in a Turkish court.

Ever since Gülen retreated to the Pennsylvania countryside, he has been a recluse, flooding Turkey with audio and video recordings but refusing to appear in public. When I first asked to talk with him, in 2014, I wasn't hopeful. At the movement's Manhattan office, the Alliance for Shared Values, the executive director, Alp Aslandoğan, told me repeatedly that an interview might never happen. "His health is very fragile," he said. Even if Gülen agreed to speak, it was possible that after a few questions he would be too tired to continue.

The following July, after a year of refusals, I was abruptly summoned to the compound. From New York, I drove west through the farmland of northern Pennsylvania, then south down a winding road to Saylorsburg, a town of about twelve hundred people. A couple of miles away, past the Mt. Eaton Christian

Church, I found Gülen's compound, the Golden Generation Worship and Retreat Center, which occupies some twenty-five acres of woodlands and lawns.

Getting out of the car, I felt as if I'd arrived in the Anatolian countryside: the two main buildings were in the Ottoman style, with high windows and obliquely slanted roofs; women wore the stylish fitted head scarves popular among Turkey's middle class; everyone was speaking Turkish. Aslandoğan greeted me and led me to an ornate conference room furnished with couches that all faced a thronelike chair, which was reserved for me.

After a few minutes, Gülen entered. He was dressed in a black suit, the kind you might find at Target or Marshalls; his head was bowed, and he moved with a hesitant shuffle, more resembling a pensioner awakening from his afternoon nap than the patriarch of a global organization. He had a large, pale head, an expansive nose, and eyes freighted by enormous sacks. The only trace of vanity was a wisp of gray mustache. Gülen greeted me with an indifferent nod; after seventeen years in the U.S., he speaks almost no English. He led me into a hallway to show me his living quarters: two tiny rooms, with a mattress on the floor, a prayer mat, a desk and bookshelves, and a treadmill.

There was no chitchat, and Gülen didn't smile. When I asked about his relationship with Erdoğan, he told me, through an interpreter, that Erdoğan had never willingly shared power with anyone. "Apparently, he always had this vision of being the single most powerful person," he said. Erdoğan and his followers were all alike: "In the beginning of their political careers, they put up a façade of a more democratic party and leadership. And they appeared to be people of faith. And therefore we did not want to second-guess their motives. We believed their rhetoric."

He spoke elliptically, something he is famous for. "You can't understand him," a Turkish intelligence official warned me. When I asked whether his movement had an interest in politics, Gülen told me he had so many followers that some were bound to end up in important places, but that hardly amounted to a conspiracy. "No citizen or social group can be completely isolated from politics, because policy decisions and actions affect their lives," he added. "Such a role for civil-society groups is normal and welcome in democratic societies—and it doesn't make Hizmet a political movement." We talked a little more, but, as his aides had predicted, Gülen seemed to tire. After about forty-five minutes, Aslandoğan signalled that the interview had come to an end.

I had found a better embodiment of Gülen's ideas in Turkey: Mustafa Aksoy, a businessman I met in 2011, in the café of an Istanbul hotel. (After the coup and the subsequent crackdown, Aksoy asked to be identified by a pseudonym, to protect his family in Turkey.) Like many followers of Gülen, he was clean-shaven, wore a Western business suit, and projected an almost aggressively cheerful appearance. He was a very successful man: he owned a construction firm, a hotel-services company, and a housewares factory, which together employed about six hundred people. For three years, Aksoy had lived in Europe. He spoke fluent English and was married to a Scandinavian woman; his work had taken him to every corner of the world.

Aksoy told me that he became associated with the Gülenist movement in 1993, when he accompanied a group of businessmen on a trip to Turkmenistan, one of the Turkic-speaking countries of Central Asia. While there, he was given a tour of a secondary school that had been built by Gülen's followers. The school stirred Aksoy's patriotic pride; it was named for a former Turkish President, a Turkish flag flew at graduation, and a large photo showed the Turkish and Turkmen Presidents shaking hands. "It was the best school in the country," Aksoy said. "All the parents were trying to get their kids into it."

Through the schools, Aksoy got involved in the Gülen movement, donating money as he travelled throughout Africa, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia. "It became like a hobby for me—whenever I go somewhere, I just go and visit the Gülen school," he said. The schools served as a sort of beachhead for Turkish interests. "Even in California, in the Hispanic area, I see schools that are totally Turkish. When I arrived in Tanzania, there were two schools there, but no embassy. Now there is an embassy and many businesses."

Aksoy said the schools formed a loose network: "They're communicating with each other, and they're keeping up standards. There's a continuous flow of information." But, like Gülen, he insisted that the movement had no secret agenda. He said the complaints about the Gülenists tended to come from people who were nostalgic for Turkey's old secular order, an era that he regarded as dead. "The people who lost power cannot see the real changes," he said. "Things are changing so fast in Turkey, and they need to blame someone."

From the beginning, the Turkish Republic was designed as a secular state. It was founded in 1923 by Mustafa Kemal, better known as Atatürk—a fierce nationalist who believed that religion and politics needed to be kept strictly apart.

Once in power, he abolished the Islamic Caliphate, which had existed for thirteen hundred years, and put the country's clerics on the state payroll, to make sure they didn't step out of line.

As a result, for most of the twentieth century Turkey's pious majority was governed by a small secular élite. The Turkish military, perhaps the country's strongest institution, saw itself as the guardian of Atatürk's secular state; several times in the nineteen-seventies and eighties, Islamist parties rose to prominence, only to be shut down and banned. Displays of religious fervor were seen as undesirable, even dangerous.

In 2001, the Justice and Development Party—known by its Turkish initials, A.K.P.—was founded by a group of men led by Tayyip Erdoğan. A dynamic former mayor of Istanbul, Erdoğan had recently emerged from prison; he had been jailed by the country's military leaders after giving a speech that included the lines “The mosques are our barracks . . . and the believers our soldiers.” The next year, he announced his candidacy for Prime Minister. In campaign speeches, he proclaimed himself an Islamist, a voice for pious Turks, but he also promised to keep Islam out of politics.

The A.K.P. swept into power in national elections, and Erdoğan began remaking Turkey. He overhauled the judicial system, liberalized the economy, and eased relations with long-suppressed minorities like the Alevis and the Kurds. The G.D.P. doubled. In the West, Erdoğan was seen as a bridge to the Islamic world—the leader of a prosperous, democratic, and stable Muslim country.

In the same years, Gülen was making his own accommodation with Turkey's secular establishment. Gülen, a preacher in the coastal city of Izmir, may have been employed by the state, but he charted his own spiritual path; for inspiration, he looked to the theologian Said Nursi, who emphasized the compatibility of Islam with reason and scientific inquiry. While many Islamists espouse anti-Western, anti-capitalist, and anti-Semitic views, Gülen's sermons were pro-business, pro-science, and—virtually unheard of in the Muslim world—conciliatory toward Israel.

In 1971, after a military coup, the new regime arrested Gülen on charges of conspiring to overthrow the secular order, and he served seven months in prison. After that, he became a model Islamist of the secular establishment, meeting often with the country's leaders and publicly expressing his support. “I have said time and again that the republican order, and secularism, when executed perfectly, are

blessings from God,” he once said on Turkish television. Such proclamations earned Gülen the ire of Islamist leaders, but they seemed to buy him a measure of protection from secular authorities.

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To Western audiences, Gülen's appeal could be mysterious. He speaks in Koranically inflected Turkish, and his theology can seem like a blend of bumper-sticker slogans about love, peace, tolerance, and interfaith dialogue. “His charisma comes from his emotion,” one former follower explained. “He cries, he reacts quickly and unpredictably, he shows all of his emotions. For Westerners, this might be difficult to understand. But for Muslims it can be magical.”

In a kind of verbal sleight of hand, Gülen sometimes quotes people's accounts of speaking to the Prophet, giving the impression that he was the one who had the divine encounter. “I was doubled over with the troubles of Muhammad's followers and especially the Turkish people,” Gülen said, in one sermon. “Then I cleared my mind and said ‘O Muhammad, what will become of us?’ All of a sudden, Muhammad graced me with his appearance. This wasn't a dream.”

When Erdoğan took office, Gülen estimated that he had as many as three million followers in Turkey, part of a rising class of entrepreneurial, moderately religious Turks who were challenging the secular elite and taking places within the country's bureaucracy. As Gülen preached in favor of business, his followers had set up a network of test-preparation centers, which readied young people to take entrance exams for college, military academies, and the civil service. The centers were said to be highly lucrative, and successful adherents donated money to Gülen's programs. Gradually, his followers built an empire, reportedly worth billions of dollars, that included newspapers, television stations, businesses, and professional associations. The Gülenist schools spread; there are now two thousand of them, in a hundred and sixty countries, including at least a hundred and twenty in the United States.

In the early years of Erdoğan's tenure, he and Gülen shared an interest in finding a place for Islam in public life, but they collaborated only sporadically. Then, in the

spring of 2007, Erdoğan and the military had a dramatic confrontation. After he attempted to nominate an Islamist confidant as President, the office of the chief of the general staff posted a memorandum on its Web site. “It should not be forgotten that the Turkish armed forces are a side in this debate and are a staunch defender of secularism,” it said. “They will display their convictions and act openly and clearly whenever necessary.”

Instead of backing down, Erdoğan denounced the military, called for an election, and won decisively. Still, he was terrified that the generals, backed by the secular establishment, would come after him again. “The Gülenists saw an opportunity,” Ibrahim Kalın, an Erdoğan aide, told me. “We were newcomers. When our party came to power, the only thing it had was the support of the people. Our party did not have any access to state institutions—no judiciary, no security forces.” Gülen, with his supporters in the bureaucracy, was an appealing ally. He and Erdoğan began to work together more closely.

Erdoğan thrived in the years that followed, but rumors spread about the price that he had paid for his alliance with Gülen. In late 2011, I drove to the outskirts of Ankara, to visit Orhan Gazi Ertekin, a judge in the secular tradition; at his office, a portrait of Atatürk hung on the wall, and Nina Simone was playing on the stereo. Ertekin told me that he had recently attended a convention to elect the Supreme Council of Judges and Prosecutors, which picks jurists for appointments across the country. “I had arrived with some candidates in mind, and I came prepared to make deals and coalitions,” he said. At the conference, though, he began to believe that a group of fellow-judges, all Gülenists, were conspiring to exclude others. “In the beginning, I had only the vaguest idea of what was happening,” he said. “They were using a secret language.” After the vote, Ertekin saw that several new council members were followers of Gülen. “The Gülenists had decided who they were going to choose, and they had no need to coöperate.”

Ertekin told me that Gülen controlled the justice system. “Erdoğan can accomplish what he wants in the judiciary only by going through Gülen,” he said. “The Gülenists determine the outcome of every important political and economic trial.” He was increasingly worried, but felt that it was dangerous to speak up. “There is no public domain in which free and open criticism of the Gülenists can take place,” he said.

I wasn't sure how seriously to take Ertekin's claim. The secular tradition in Turkey was on the wane, and it seemed possible that he was spinning a conspiracy theory to explain its decline. But as I travelled around Turkey I heard more stories of this kind—tales of people who raised questions about the schools, or about Gülenist infiltration of the police corps, and were arrested and sent to prison. In private, people spoke of a secretive cabal, hidden within the state, that was steadily growing in power.

In 1973, Ahmet Keleş, a high-school freshman in the central Turkish city of Kırıkkale, first heard a tape recording of a sermon by Gülen. Keleş was awestruck; Gülen spoke so passionately about the Holy Prophet that as he listened he started to cry. Keleş was from a poor family—his father ran a small store selling table decorations—and for the first time he came alive to his faith. “Gülen was making people ask themselves, What is your mission as a Muslim?”

That summer, Keleş travelled to Izmir to meet Gülen, who invited him to attend his summer camp, free of charge. Keleş did, and returned for the next two summers. After he graduated from high school, Gülen asked him to run one of his “lighthouses”—student dormitories that doubled as religious discussion centers.

Many Gülenists—perhaps most of them—practice their leader's ecumenical ideas earnestly. But as Keleş was pulled into the movement he came to understand that it had a clandestine goal. “The only way to protect Islam was to infiltrate the state with our followers and seize all the institutions of government,” he explained. “The legal way to do it was by election, by parliament—but you couldn't do it that way, because the military would step in. The only way to do it was the illegal way—to infiltrate the state and change the institutions from within.”

From then on, Keleş told me, all his energies were dedicated to preserving the Gülen secret while maintaining a positive façade. “This is the dual structure—it is in the genetic code of the organization,” he said. Keleş rose through the ranks, taking on larger and larger tasks with growing pride. “Imagine—I am the son of a poor laborer and I am involved in this powerful organization,” he said. “I felt like a very important person.”

Keleş, who has since left the movement, said that while Gülen presented himself as a humble, self-denying cleric, in private he was entirely different: vain, megalomaniacal, demanding total obedience. The organization was hierarchical,

divided into seven levels, with Gülen at the top. Keleş joined “level three”—a senior leadership assembly. “Level two” conducted covert operations, which he said he was never informed of. (Aslandoğan, the manager of Gülen’s Manhattan office, says that this characterization is misleading.)

In meetings of the leadership assembly, Gülen described his plans as divinely ordained. “He would tell us, ‘I met with the Prophet last night,’ and he told me to do the following things,” Keleş said. “Everyone believed him.” Indeed, Gülen’s followers came to see his teachings as an entirely new faith. “He started with Islam, but he created his own theology. We thought Fethullah Gülen was the Messiah.”

Other former Gülenists told me much the same thing. “On the surface, he projects this idea that he is not interested in money or women or power, that he only wants to be close to God,” Said Alpsöy, a follower for seventeen years who left the movement in 2003, said. “The goal is power—to penetrate the state and change it from within. But they will never talk about power. They will deny it.”

In a taped sermon from the late nineties, Gülen exhorted his followers to burrow into the state and wait for the right moment to rise up. “Create an image like you are men of law,” he told them. “This will allow you to rise to more vital, more important places.” In the meantime, he urged patience and flexibility. “Until we have the power and authority in all of Turkey’s constitutional institutions, every step is premature,” he said. But, ultimately, he promised, their work would provide “the guarantee of our Islamic future.”

Keleş told me that the chief targets of infiltration were the police and the judiciary. The schools and test-preparation centers were central to the plan. At the schools, acolytes were recruited at an impressionable age; at the centers, they were prepared for entrance examinations to the country’s bureaucracy. In many cases, “brothers” within government agencies fed answers to Gülenist candidates. Once the recruits were hired, fellow-Gülenists promoted them and furthered their careers.

In infiltrated police departments, each Gülenist officer had a code name, and each unit was overseen by an outside “imam,” regarded by the officers as a higher authority than the police chief. By the early nineties, Keleş said, he had become the movement’s “imam” in Central Anatolia, overseeing fifteen cities. By then, he estimated, forty per cent of the police in the region were followers, and about twenty

per cent of the judges and prosecutors. “We controlled the hiring of the police, and the entrance exams, and we didn’t let anyone in who wasn’t a Gülenist,” he said.

Gülen, despite his reputation in the West for moderation, at times took hard-line positions, denouncing the United States as “our merciless enemy” and suggesting that wife-beating could be acceptable “if it would make a hundred women more obedient.” His book “From Chapter to Chapter,” published in 1995, contained a rant in which he accused the “Jewish tribe” of developing ideas, such as Communism, that seduced the world into disaster. “This intelligent tribe has put forth many things throughout history in the name of science and thought,” Gülen wrote. “But these have always been offered in the form of poisoned honey.” He continued, “Jews will maintain their existence until the apocalypse. And shortly before the apocalypse, their mission of acting as the coil-spring for humanity’s progress will come to an end, and they will prepare their end with their own hands.”

Keleş told me that at first he rarely questioned Gülen, even when he started to speak of world domination. “My father’s only goal was to have his son working as a laborer,” he said. “And here was this man with a plan to manage the world.” Today, Keleş is astonished by how credulous he was; he attributes it in part to Gülen’s charisma. “The line between crazy and genius is very thin—with him, it was the same thing,” he said. “His knowledge, his theological views, his organizational skill—he is a genius. We were all crazy at that time.”

Inside the movement, Keleş and Alpsoy said, people often lost themselves in fantastical rituals. In one, a group of men gathered in a room would grab a comrade, pin his legs and arms, and remove his socks and shoes, often against his will. “They would hold him down, and everyone would kiss his feet,” Alpsoy said. “This I witnessed hundreds of times.”

In the Islamic world, feet and shoes are symbols of filth; in many places, it is considered offensive to cross your legs and show the bottoms of your feet. The foot-kissing ritual, Alpsoy said, was a way of demonstrating pure affection: “If you kiss a person’s feet, then you must really love him.” Alpsoy could never bring himself to kiss anyone’s feet, he said, “but they did it to me three or four times.”

Keleş recalled that the ritual sometimes took other forms: “To show love for someone, people would fill his shoe with water and drink from it.” (Aslandoğan says that he has no knowledge of such rituals.) Alpsoy said that once a man appeared at a

service with a shoe that he said had been worn by Gülen. “People were so excited—they stripped the leather from the shoe and boiled it for a long time. Then they cut the leather into pieces and ate it.” Members often fought over scraps of food that Gülen had left on his plate. A Turkish intelligence official told me that one Gülenist received a package from her husband, who was living on the compound in Pennsylvania: inside was a piece of bread that Gülen had gnawed on and left behind. “Gülen knew about all these things,” Keleş said, “but he would just laugh.”

It took years for Keleş to leave the movement. The turning point came in 1997, when Gülen publicly attacked Necmettin Erbakan, Turkey’s first Islamist Prime Minister, directing his followers in the media to undercut him. Under pressure from the military, Erbakan stepped down in 1997. “Erbakan and Gülen said they wanted the same things—an Islamic state—and yet Gülen destroyed him,” Keleş said. “Power was more important to him than religion.”

Not long after that, Keleş wrote a letter to Gülen, enumerating the ways in which he had drifted from Islam in the pursuit of power. Gülen expelled him from the movement. Keleş said that it was only after he left that he realized how cut off he had been. “I woke up to the real world,” he said.

In 2005, according to a cable written by Stuart Smith, an American diplomat, three senior members of the Turkish National Police visited the U.S. Consulate in Istanbul, seeking a favor for Gülen. Three years earlier, Gülen, living in exile in the Poconos, had applied for permanent residence, claiming that he was an “exceptional individual” who deserved special consideration. The U.S. declined his application, on the ground that he was not an especially remarkable person and that he had exaggerated his credentials as a scholar. The policemen at the Consulate were pressing an appeal.

Smith was skeptical. In his cable, published by WikiLeaks, he noted Gülen’s “sharply radical past as a fiery Islamist preacher” and the “cult-like obedience and conformity that he and the layers of his movement insist on in his global network of schools, his media outlets, and his business associations.” If anyone was being persecuted, he suggested, it was Gülen’s critics: “Given the Gülenists’ penetration of the National Police (TNP) and many media outlets, and their record of going after anyone who criticizes Gülen, others who are skeptical about Gülen’s intentions feel intimidated from expressing their views.”

Despite such official American assessments, Gülen won his appeal, in part because influential friends wrote letters in his support. They included George Fidas, a former director of outreach for the C.I.A.; Morton Abramowitz, a former American ambassador; and, perhaps most notably, Graham Fuller, a former senior C.I.A. official.

During the Cold War, while Fuller was a field officer in Turkey, the C.I.A. advocated supporting the growth of Islam along the southern border of the Soviet Union, in places like Iran and Turkey, to contain its expansion, with a cordon known as “the green belt.” Fuller, who now lives in Canada, told me that he had met Gülen only after retiring from the agency, while researching a book on political Islam, and said that he was unaware of an arrangement between him and the C.I.A. He had written to the F.B.I. because he admired Gülen’s “highly progressive” vision of Islam, and wanted to help resist any attempt to extradite him to Turkey. “I’d write the letter again,” he said.

In Turkey, though, the connection has fed theories that Gülen was supported in his early years by the C.I.A. Some prominent Turks have said that the assistance continued at least into the nineties, when the Muslim-majority states of the former Soviet Union declared independence and Gülen’s network began to establish itself there. In 2010, Osman Nuri Gündeş, a former senior intelligence official, wrote in a memoir that Gülen’s schools in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan had sheltered as many as a hundred and thirty C.I.A. agents, posing as English teachers. Ismail Pekin, a former head of Turkish military intelligence, told me that the agency maintained a similar arrangement with workers at schools in Africa. “They might not have been C.I.A. employees, but they were engaged in intelligence gathering and mobilization,” he said. Pekin had raised concerns about Gülen to American officials, he said, but they were routinely dismissed: “We always brought it up at NATO meetings, every time. Every time, the subject of Gülen was pushed aside as ‘Turkey’s domestic problem.’ ”

Within the country, the military saw Gülenists as a considerable threat. Gareth Jenkins, a fellow at the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute in Istanbul, said that, during the nineteen-nineties, the armed forces expelled hundreds of officers on suspicion of harboring links to Gülen. In a cable released by WikiLeaks, an American diplomat wrote that secular officers devised a test: they invited fellow-soldiers and their wives to pool parties, reasoning that women who declined to appear in public wearing swimsuits must be restricted by their religion. According to the diplomat, the

Gülenist wives became aware of the tactic and came up with a countermeasure: they started wearing bikinis more revealing than their hosts'. When military inspectors began searching officers' homes, the Gülenists stocked their refrigerators with decoy bottles of alcohol and planted empties in the trash.

Gülen's followers recognized that they needed greater numbers in the military. A former A.K.P. member named Emin Şirin told me that in the fall of 1999 he visited the compound in Saylorburg, and Gülen told him that a "golden generation" of acolytes were working their way into Turkey's institutions. If a more tolerant general was appointed to lead the military, he said, it would "bring me peace." He mentioned General Hilmi Özkok as a desirable candidate. "I thought what I heard was insane," Şirin recalled. But in 2002 Özkok was named chief of the Army, and the vigilance within the military relaxed. According to Jenkins, Gülen's followers began to fill the ranks. "This created an enormous amount of unease in the officers corps," he said.

As Erdoğan started a new term, in 2007, the growing momentum toward political Islam in Turkey brought him and Gülen closer. Gülen had divided the country into seven districts, each with a regional chief, who regularly travelled to Pennsylvania to consult on initiatives. Erdoğan, too, sent high-placed representatives to Gülen's compound—"not every month, but when he needed support for something," Jenkins told me. Gülen was sometimes referred to as the second most powerful man in the country.

The strengthening alliance helped Erdoğan to confront his rivals in the secular élite and the military. In 2007, police arrested the first of hundreds of people whom the government accused of forming a secret organization devoted to keeping Islamist aspirations in check. Turks called this network *derin devlet*, the "deep state," and it was said to have links across the military, media, academia, and law enforcement.

Turks have long disputed the exact size and nature of the "deep state," but few doubt that something like it once existed. According to scholars and former officials, it was a network of police, soldiers, and informants, begun during the Cold War, to control domestic dissent and keep democratically elected governments off balance. It is believed to be responsible for many assassinations—of Islamists, leftists, and, especially, Kurdish activists.

When the arrests began, police claimed they had finally penetrated to the deep state: a secret organization called Ergenekon, named for a mythological place in Central

Asia that is sometimes invoked by ultra-nationalists. Shortly thereafter, they began a second investigation, aimed at the most senior generals in the Turkish military, who they claimed were fomenting a plot, called Sledgehammer, to overthrow Erdoğan's government. The cases spread to include not just former military and police officers but also academics, journalists, aid workers—the core of the opposition to the new Islamic order.

According to Turkish and Western officials, both investigations were headed by Gülenists in the police and the judiciary. For years, *Zaman*, the country's largest newspaper, and Samanyolu TV, both run by Gülen loyalists, cheered on the investigations and demonized anyone who questioned the evidence. "In some cases, the critics were vilified," James Jeffrey, the U.S. Ambassador to Turkey from 2008 to 2011, told me. "In others, they were arrested outright." Erdoğan supported the investigations with equal enthusiasm, saying that they were necessary to remove the shadow of the military from public life. "How and why could anyone try to stop this?" he said in a speech to his party in 2009. "The crimes in these charges violate our constitution and laws. Let the justice system do its job."

As diplomats and independent journalists began to review the prosecutions, it became clear that both contained fabricated evidence. In my own investigation into the two cases, I found several instances of unmistakable forgery. The evidence in Sledgehammer was built largely on a series of computer disks, which ostensibly contained blueprints for a wide-ranging military coup. But, while prosecutors alleged that the plan had been drawn up in 2003, it was written mostly on a version of Microsoft Office that wasn't released until 2007. Similarly, many specifics of the plans—license-plate numbers of cars to be seized, a hospital to be occupied—referred to things that did not exist in 2003.

Hanefi Avcı, the police chief for Eskişehir Province, told me that he saw Gülenist police, prosecutors, and judges fabricate evidence in political investigations. But when he alerted his superiors he was ignored. "I talked to ministers and I wrote memos and didn't get any replies," he said.

In 2009, Avcı secretly began writing a book detailing the Gülenists' activities in the police and judiciary. He described a movement of protean adaptability, whose methods resembled those of terrorist groups and criminal organizations; they framed opponents by planting evidence or blackmailed them with information gleaned from wiretaps. "What made the Gülen movement different is that it was inside the state,"

he said, noting that infiltrators in his department had sabotaged the careers of at least ten colleagues. The book, called “Simons Living on the Golden Horn” (the title is an abstruse metaphor for not seeing what is in plain sight), became a best-seller. It seemed especially authoritative because Avcı, a conservative Islamist, had two children in Gülenist schools.

A month after the book was published, Avcı was arrested and charged with membership in a Communist terrorist organization called the Revolutionary Headquarters. Avcı insisted that he was innocent—“I’m not even a liberal,” he said—but prosecutors only added to the charges, claiming that he had written the book on orders from Ergenekon. Avcı was sentenced to fifteen years in prison.

Some six hundred people were convicted in the Ergenekon and Sledgehammer trials, including scores of senior generals in the Turkish military and several prominent journalists. About two hundred were sentenced to long prison terms, many in cases presided over by judges thought to be loyal to Gülen. After the trials, Turkey’s secular élite was completely vitiated.

That left Erdoğan and Gülen as the two strongest forces in the country, and they soon began to turn on each other. The judiciary, emboldened by Ergenekon and Sledgehammer, pursued the investigations ever closer to Erdoğan. In the early months of 2012, police issued a subpoena to Hakan Fidan—the chief of national intelligence and a confidant of the Prime Minister—and arrested Ilker Başbuğ, the country’s highest military officer. “They felt that they could arrest *anyone*,” Gareth Jenkins said. Erdoğan responded in a way that seemed calculated to hobble the Gülenists: he started closing down their schools—a crucial source of income—and working to restrain the police. “For Erdoğan, that was a declaration of war,” Jenkins said.

On the evening of January 1, 2013, a cargo jet from Accra, Ghana, bound for Sabiha Gökçen International Airport, in Istanbul, was diverted, because of fog, to Istanbul Atatürk Airport. When the plane landed, customs officials found that a shipment labelled “mineral samples” actually contained more than three thousand pounds of gold bars. The gold belonged to Reza Zarrab, a twenty-nine-year-old Turkish-Iranian businessman who counted among his friends some of Turkey’s most powerful politicians, and it was ultimately destined for Tehran. Turkish investigators, listening in on Zarrab’s phone, determined that he was transporting extraordinary amounts of gold to Iran, as part of a far-reaching scheme to help the Iranian regime

evade economic sanctions. At the peak of the operation, Zarrab said later, he was moving two thousand pounds of gold a day.

It seemed at first as if the case had limited implications within Turkey. “We didn’t expect this little investigation to give way to a bigger one,” Nazmi Ardic, the chief of the Istanbul police department’s organized-crime unit, told me. Then, investigators say, they heard wiretapped conversations suggesting that Zarrab was bribing officials in Erdoğan’s government. Within days, Ardic said, police and prosecutors determined that Zarrab had paid millions of dollars to at least four Turkish cabinet ministers. According to documents filed in U.S. District Court in Manhattan, the Minister for the Economy, Zafer Çağlayan, accepted more than forty-five million dollars in cash, gems, and luxury goods. When police entered the home of Süleyman Aslan—the C.E.O. of Halk Bank, which Zarrab used to launder money—they found shoeboxes stuffed with four and a half million dollars’ worth of cash.

The bribery allegations electrified Turkey. Zarrab, the center of the investigation, seemed made for tabloid news. A brash young trader with a pouf of dark hair, he was married to one of the country’s biggest pop stars, Ebru Gündeş, famous for such songs as “Fugitive” and “I Dropped My Anchor in Solitude.” He was also friendly with Erdoğan: he’d stood with him at public functions and donated \$4.6 million to a charity run by his wife, Emine.

The allegations came at a time when Erdoğan was increasingly embattled, and also increasingly aggressive. In the spring of 2013, police had broken up a peaceful demonstration in Istanbul’s Gezi Park, igniting protests in which millions of people took part. Erdoğan turned loose the police; eleven people died, and more than eight thousand were injured. That year, more than a hundred journalists were fired after criticizing Erdoğan.

On December 17, 2013, police arrested Zarrab and eighty-eight others, including forty-three government officials. Although they did not arrest any of Erdoğan’s ministers, they detained the sons of three of them, claiming that they were conduits for bribes. Erdoğan’s son Bilal also came under suspicion, after a wiretap captured what was alleged to be a conversation between him and his father. Erdoğan has insisted that the tape was doctored, but it circulated widely on social media, and Turks claimed to recognize his voice.

TAYYIP ERDOĞAN: Eighteen
people’s homes are being searched

right now with this big corruption operation. . . . So I'm saying, whatever you have at home, take it out. O.K.?

BILAL: Dad, what could I even have at home? There's your money in the safe.

TAYYIP: Yes, that's what I'm saying.

A little while later, the two apparently spoke again.

TAYYIP: Did you get rid of all of it, or . . . ?

BILAL: No, not all of it, Dad. So, there's something like thirty million euros left that we haven't been able to liquidate.

Western officials told me that they regarded the investigation as a Gülenist attempt to topple Erdoğan's government—but that the evidence seemed credible. As the investigation gathered force, four of Erdoğan's ministers resigned. One of them, Erdoğan Bayraktar, called on Erdoğan to quit, saying, "The Prime Minister, too, has to resign."

Instead, Erdoğan struck back. He denounced the investigation as a "judicial coup" and enacted a wholesale reorganization of the country's criminal-justice system, forcing out thousands of police, prosecutors, and judges linked to the Zarrab case. Ardıç, the police chief who headed the investigation, was removed from the case and later imprisoned. Ultimately, the bribery charges were dropped.

In speeches, Erdoğan began lashing out at his former ally, speaking of a "parallel structure" that sought to rule Turkey. "O Great Teacher, if you haven't done anything wrong, don't stay in Pennsylvania," he told a rally in February, 2014. "If Turkey is your motherland, come back to Turkey, come back to your motherland. If you want to get involved in politics, go ahead and go into the public squares and make politics. But don't mess with this country, don't steal its peace. . . . The parallel structure is involved in grand treason."

After the bribery case collapsed, Erdoğan pursued the Gülenists relentlessly. Thousands of public employees who were suspected of having ties to Gülen were pushed out, and government agents raided Gülenist businesses. Senior leaders in the movement began to flee the country.

On Christmas Day, 2015, Turkish intelligence breached an encrypted messaging app called ByLock—an apparently homemade network with two hundred thousand users. According to Turkish officials, it was set up not long after Erdoğan began purging suspected Gülenists from the government. When the network was discovered, the server, in Lithuania, quickly closed down, and its users switched to Eagle, another encrypted messaging app. “They went underground,” a Turkish government aide told me.

The intelligence officials say that they were able to decrypt the exchanges, and one told me, “Every conversation was about the Gülen community.” By checking the ByLock users’ names against government records, they found that at least forty thousand were civil employees, mostly from the judiciary and the police department. In May, two months before the coup, the government began suspending them.

In July, the intelligence department notified the military that it had also identified six hundred officers of the Turkish Army, many of them highly ranked, among the ByLock users. Military officials began planning to expel them at a meeting of senior generals that was scheduled for early the next month. “We think the coup happened in July because they needed to move before they were expelled,” Ibrahim Kalın, the Erdoğan aide, told me.

The details of the failed coup are murky and often contradictory, but it seems clear that the attempt was organized in haste. Several detained soldiers said that it was supposed to begin six hours later, at 3 A.M., then was rushed for reasons that are unclear. As the officers scrambled to take control, no leader came forward. In some cases, troops who’d received orders from rebel commanders apparently didn’t realize that they were taking part in an operation to overthrow the government, and refused to go along when they did.

Indeed, it seems that the plotters staked their operation on capturing or killing Erdoğan and persuading General Akar to join them. “If those things had happened, the coup would have succeeded,” Kalın said. But none of the most senior generals of the Turkish armed forces could be persuaded to join, which may have left the

plotters without a military leader. By 4 A.M., the coup plotters were running for their lives.

“Has the operation been cancelled, Murat?” one officer asked, in a text message.

“Yes, Commander,” Major Çelebioğlu replied. When another officer asked whether to mount an escape, the Major replied, “Stay alive, Commander. The choice is yours.”

After the coup, several statements, purportedly from the plotters, were released to the press. The statements were impossible to verify. None of the men who confessed have spoken publicly, and most of their statements appear to have been heavily expurgated. Photographs have circulated of officers who confessed; in several cases, they have wounds on their faces, suggesting that they were beaten.

Two Western diplomats who spoke on the condition of anonymity told me that they found the government's accusations against Gülen's movement compelling, if not entirely convincing. One said, “Undoubtedly, Gülenists played a credible role in it. But there were also anti-Erdoğan military opportunists mixed in.” Many people in the armed forces, and in Turkish civil society, were enraged by Erdoğan's growing authoritarianism. Brigadier General Gökhan Sönmezateş, one of the plotters who went to Marmaris to capture Erdoğan, said in a confession, “I am absolutely not a Gülenist.” But when one of the plotters called on a secure line to recruit him, he thought that things in the country were bad enough that he agreed to go along.

Some former American officials said it was likely that Gülenists played the leading role. After the purges of the preceding decade, they argued, no other group in the Army was large enough or cohesive enough. “The Gülenists are the only people who could have done this,” Jeffrey said. One officer, identified only as Lieutenant Colonel A.K., testified that he was informed of a coup plot a week before, by a man who he assumed was a Gülen leader. The man spoke of the troubles that the movement had been facing, and said that some three thousand officers were going to be purged during the meeting of senior generals in August. “Gülen didn't want this meeting to happen,” the man said. “We can't lose our last fort.”

Erdoğan's government has given the U.S. tens of thousands of pages of documents, tracking the Gülenists' history in Turkey. According to American officials, little or none of it is relevant to the question of Gülen's direct involvement in the coup. General Akar, the chief of the general staff, said in a statement that while he was

being held captive, one of the senior plotters said, “If you wish, we can put you in touch with our opinion leader, Fethullah Gülen.” One of the Western diplomats, who has followed Akar throughout his career, told me, “Akar has been, since he took the position, a guy defined by integrity.”

The most compelling account came from Lieutenant Colonel Levent Türkkan, one of the officers who took Akar captive. The son of a poor farmer, Türkkan dreamed as a boy of joining the Army. His family couldn't afford to send him to a test-preparation school, so he started studying in the homes of Gülenist “brothers.” On the eve of the exam to get into an élite military school, the brothers gave him the answers—taking care to include a few wrong ones, to avoid arousing suspicion. He has remained a follower ever since. “I believed that Fethullah Gülen was a divine entity,” he told his interrogators. In his confession, he identified seventeen colleagues as Gülenists, including Erdoğan's personal military aide, Colonel Ali Yazıcı. (Aslandoğan disputes Türkkan's testimony, but says that he can't speak to specific claims.)

In 2011, Türkkan was promoted and became an aide to General Necdet Özel, the chief of the Turkish Army. “I started carrying out assignments given by the sect,” he said. For four years, he planted a small “listening device” in Özel's office every day and removed it every night. “The battery lasted one day,” he said. “I would take the full device to my ‘sect brother’ once a week and get an empty one from him.”

The night before the coup, Türkkan said, a fellow-Gülenist, a colonel, asked him to step outside for a cigarette. Once they were alone, he described a plan: “The President, the Prime Minister, the ministers, the chief of general staff, other chiefs of staff and generals would be picked up one by one. Everything would be done quietly.” Türkkan's assignment was to help find Akar and “pacify” him. Disturbed, Türkkan went to see his “brother” in the Gülen movement, who lived in a house behind a nearby gas station. He wasn't there, but several others were, and they confirmed the operation.

Türkkan has suffered since the coup. In a photograph released with his testimony, he is wrapped in a hospital gown, with his face visibly battered and his rib cage and hands swaddled in bandages. In his confession, he expressed bitter remorse. “When I learned from the TV that the parliament was being bombed and civilians were being killed, I started regretting it,” he said. “What was being done was like a massacre.

This was done in the name of a movement that I thought worked for the will of God.”

Three weeks after the coup, Erdoğan, addressing a group of local officials in Ankara, apologized for having once been Gülen's ally. “We helped this organization with good will,” Erdoğan said. He said that he had trusted Gülen, because of his apparent reverence for education and his organization's aid work. “I feel sad that I failed to reveal the true face of this traitorous organization long before.”

For Erdoğan, though, retribution has always come more easily than apologies. The state of emergency that he declared after the coup gave him dictatorial powers, which he used to carry out a far-reaching crackdown that began with Gülenists but has grown to encompass almost anyone who might pose a threat to his expanded authority. The figures are stupefying: forty thousand people detained and huge numbers of others forced from their jobs, including twenty-one thousand police officers, three thousand judges and prosecutors, twenty-one thousand public-school workers, fifteen hundred university deans, and fifteen hundred employees of the Ministry of Finance. Six thousand soldiers were detained. The government also closed a thousand Gülen-affiliated schools and suspended twenty-one thousand teachers.

It's difficult to know whether those targeted were hard-core followers of Gülen, or sympathizers, or not related to the movement at all. Public criticism of Erdoğan has been almost entirely squelched, either by the outpouring of national support that followed the coup or by the fear of being imprisoned. Erdoğan has closed more than a hundred and thirty media outlets and detained at least forty-three journalists, and the purge is still under way. “The Gülenist cult is a criminal organization, and a big one,” Kalın, the President's aide, told me. “You know, over eleven thousand people participated in the coup, according to our current estimates. We're going after anyone with any connection with this Gülenist cult, here and there, in the judiciary, the private sector, the newspapers, and other places.”

The irony of the attempted coup is that Erdoğan has emerged stronger than ever. The popular uprising that stopped the plot was led in many cases by people who disliked Erdoğan only marginally less than they disliked the prospect of a military regime. But the result has been to set up Erdoğan and his party to rule, with nearly absolute authority, for as long as he wants. “Even before the coup attempt, we had

concerns that the government and the President were approaching politics and governance in ways that were designed to lock in a competitive advantage—to insure you would have perpetual one-party rule,” the second Western diplomat said.

Erdoğan has solidified his power, but he has also put himself in the awkward position of denouncing a man who enabled his rise. Talking about Gülen and his movement, he can seem almost to be in pain. “They came asking for seventeen universities, and I approved all of them,” he told a crowd in 2014. “He asked for land for schools, we gave it to him,” he added. “We gave them all kinds of support.” Erdoğan rarely spoke Gülen’s name in these speeches, but this time he addressed him and his followers directly. “So this is treason?” he asked, sounding dismayed. “What did you ask for that you couldn’t get?”

The day after the coup, Gülen emerged from seclusion. He spoke to reporters who had gathered at his compound and denied any involvement.* As he watched his followers being arrested en masse—and as he became a national pariah—an edge crept into his voice. He told his followers that Erdoğan had staged the coup, and that no one outside Turkey believed that Gülen was responsible. In a sermon recorded a few days later, he said, “Let a bunch of idiots think they have succeeded, let them celebrate, let them declare their ridiculous situation a celebration, but the world is making fun of this situation, and that is how it is going to go down in the history books.

“Be patient,” he told his followers. “Victory will come.”

Gülen is old and ailing; it seems unlikely that he will be able to keep up the fight for much longer. Listening to his sermon, I thought back to my meeting with him last year. Even then, his movement was being dismantled, his followers on the run. I asked how he thought he would be remembered, and he gave me an answer the like of which I’ve never heard from another leader in politics or religion. “It may sound strange to you, but I wish to be forgotten when I die,” he said. “I wish my grave not to be known. I wish to die in solitude, with nobody actually becoming aware of my death and hence nobody conducting my funeral prayer. I wish that nobody remember me.” ♦

*An earlier version of this article incorrectly stated that Gülen summoned reporters to his compound.

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