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**“Revisiting the 2016 military coup attempt in Turkey:
an evaluation of the role of national intelligence services.”**

Dionysios Dragonas

*(Postgraduate Student, Msc Crisis and Security Management, Leiden University,
the Netherlands, & RIEAS Senior Analyst)*

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(www.rieas.gr) – Publication date: 28 March 2021.**

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Abstract

Intelligence services constitute the backbone of national security in democratic societies. Military coups pose an eternal threat for democracies. From the combination of the aforementioned phrases derives the logical assumption that coup prevention holds the primacy of prioritization of national intelligence services. Buying that assumption triggered the composition of the present paper. In this regard, the essay is concentrated on a country that has a long history of overthrown regimes; Turkey. From 1960 to 2016, Turkish society has undergone 5 military coups, five of them “successful”. However, the latest coup, that of 2016, is to be characterized as a failed attempt, as, the Turkish President R. T. Erdogan, managed to maintain his authority, overcoming the threat of the establishment of a military regime. Verily, a series of questions are brought about in the aftermath of the events of July 2016, in terms of the role of intelligence services prior, during and after the coup attempt. To this end, the present paper accounts for an attempt to evaluate the role of the National Intelligence Services of Turkey (MIT) in the failure of the military coup attempt of July 2016.

Key words: Turkey, military coup, MIT, National Intelligence Services, politicization

Introduction

The present paper accounts for an attempt to evaluate the role of the National Intelligence Services of Turkey (MIT) in the failure of the military coup attempt of July 2016. The events are studied via an intelligence perspective, which is based upon

Richard K. Betts's theory on politicization of intelligenceⁱ. The presentation of the theoretical background is accompanied by the research question, as well as the methodological tools used for answering the latter. After this, the case study at hand is briefly presented, namely the failed military coup attempt of July 2016 in Turkey. The analysis that follows constitutes the backbone of this paper, examining the actions of Turkish military services in the period before, during and post to the coup, using the *lenses of politicization*. The conclusion briefly reiterates to the findings of the present paper, provides an answer to the research question posed and highlights the limitations of the conducted research.

Methodology – Theoretical background

The methodology followed to examine the case study at hand is productive in its logical approach – as it transits from a general idea to a specific concept- and qualitative in terms of the examined empirical data. Namely, having focused on the intelligence services actions prior, during and after the failed coup attempt of 2016 in Turkey, a bibliographic research was conducted. The research material included academic articles, books, international organization reviews, policy briefs and governmental reports.

Politicization in the reality of Turkish intelligence community is perceived not as a choice but as a condition. Hence, the research question is formulated as follows: “How did politicization of Turkish intelligence services (MIT) affect its actions towards the failed coup attempt of July 2016?”

For the purpose of setting a theoretical contour in the present paper, politicization is defined as the action of transfusing a political tone or character to something.ⁱⁱ Within the realm of *intelligence studies* there is an ongoing controversy on the impact of politicization on intelligence derivatives. On the one side, politicization becomes the synonym of fabrication or even distortion of information in the purpose of serving specific interests.ⁱⁱⁱ On the other side, such as in the case at hand, politicization is perceived as a condition rather as a choice.^{iv} Namely, given intelligence intertwined nature with the realm of politics, as its “raison d’être” is to contribute to policy outcomes, it would be irrational to assume that it could be completely isolated from

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politics. To this end, as Betts best puts it “*intelligence cannot live with politicization but policy cannot live without it*”.^v Betts, in his essay, emphasizes on two different types that best describe policy interaction with intelligence: the “Kent” and “Gates” models. As far as the first one is concerned, Sherman Kent, the “founding father” of intelligence studies, stressed the need for intelligence personnel to abstain from maintaining close relations with policymaking circles, as this could affect their impartiality and compromise their integrity.^{vi} Hence, Kent recognizes the lack of objectivity as the main source leading to politicization of intelligence. Contrariwise, Gates suggests that the level of utility of an intelligence analysis is relevant to the level of its ability to engage policymakers’ concerns.^{vii} In other words, intelligence is useless unless it is related to political objectives, offering a wide range of options, in the spirit of facilitating and optimizing the decision-making process. However, this process is perceived as contextualization and realistic management of intelligence rather than politicization.^{viii}

Overall, these two major contesting models do not only argue about the nature of politicization, but also incarnate two different forms: a top-down variety and a bottom-up coloration.^{ix} The Gates model is perceived as a process of top-down dictation of intelligence conclusions by policymakers to intelligence personnel. Whereas, Kent’s model attests for a bottom-up approach, where, in the name objectivity, opinions are passed off as facts, giving rise to the danger of inclusion of unconscious biases in intelligence analyses.^x On a last remark, there is also a third form that operates in both directions, oscillating between the contradictory perceptions and interpretations of policymakers and analysts.^{xi} All forms shall be reiterated later in the analysis part of the paper at hand.

The unfolding of the military coup attempt of 16th July 2016

Early in the afternoon of July 15th 2016, a military helicopter pilot known as Major H.A., visited the National Intelligence Organization (MIT) in Ankara. There, he was thoroughly interviewed by the MIT director Hakan Fidan, and confessed that he had received orders to carry out a night flight that night and kidnap Fidan. Then, the Deputy Chief of General Staff, General Yaşar Güler was informed, and at around 6.15 p.m. he

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held an emergency meeting with Fidan and the Land Forces Commander, General Sali Zeki Çolak. The orders were to halt all army aviation flights until further notice.^{xii} By this time, the conspirators realized that their action plans have been compromised, hence they were obliged to rush their operation and initiate the coup earlier than planned.^{xiii}

Shortly after 22:00 of the same day, two F-16 fighter jets departed from the Akinci Air Force Base and making several low passes over Ankara. At the same time, approximately 30 soldiers blocked the two bridges across the Bosphorus, in Istanbul. The plotters kidnapped high ranked military leaders and deployed squad-sized units to central locations. Several air assaults, meanwhile, targeted the Turkish Parliament, the Special Operation Forces, the Presidential Palace and the National Intelligence Organization.^{xiv}

At 00:00, the rebels managed to highjack TRT television studios and broadcasted a declaration entitled “Peace at Home Council”, referring to Kemal Atatürk’s maxim ‘peace at home, peace in the world’. According to the declaration, the military officers, orchestrated the coup to reinstate freedoms, human rights, constitutional order, security as well as the rule of law.^{xv} The group of military officers supported that “the armed forces had taken over the administration of the state”, imposing martial law throughout the country and closing all airports and frontiers.^{xvi} However, the emptiness of this claim, as none of the members undertook the responsibility of leadership, lead the crowd to massive protest in the streets of Ankara and Istanbul among other cities. Protestors acted as a fierce opposition, mobilized by the social media, they poured into the streets defying rebel tanks and soldiers.^{xvii}

The turning point of the coup attempt was held half an hour later, at 00:28, with Erdogan’s impromptu broadcast via a smartphone, who was vacationing in Marmaris, stating that the rebels constituted a minority which did not have control over state structure, calling people to pour out into the streets and protest.^{xviii} Another crucial part of the resistance was also the stance held by the Commander of the First Army, General Ümit Dündar, who maintained his loyalty to the government. Despite the fact that rebels

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took over some units in Istanbul, without the total support of the First Army Command their assertion for power was almost certainly ill-fated from the beginning.^{xix} At 4.15 am. President Erdogan held a press conference, in which he declared victory and claimed that the plotters had ‘taken orders from Pennsylvania’, namely from his long lasting enemy Fethullah Gülen¹, and praised all those who resisted the coup.^{xx}

In the aftermath of the coup an unprecedented cleansing took place, with the country being declared under a state of emergency. More than 160.000 people, including military officers, journalists, academics, civil servants and civilians were subjected to trials under the accusation of conspiracy in the 2016 failed coup, while approximately 50.000 were arrested.^{xxi}

Analysis: The role of MIT and the impact of politicization

After laying down the main events of the coup attempt, it is essential to take a closer look to the time prior, during and after the coup in order to shed light on the ambiguity of the role of the Turkish intelligence services owing to politicization.

In the months leading up to the failed coup attempt, rumors that the military, or part of it, might pursue to overthrow the government were circulating. On March 16, 2016, Michel Rubin published an article for the American Enterprise Institute under the title “*Could there be a coup in Turkey?*” warning that the current polarization within the Turkish society had severely upgraded the likelihood of a military coup.^{xxii} Furthermore, on March 27, the pro-government newspaper “Daily Sabah” supported that approximately 50% of Turkish F-16 fighter pilots were part of the Gülenist network.^{xxiii} Despite the circulating rumors, no visible actions were taken by MIT at this point.

Furthermore, a few months before the coup, MIT agents had discovered that the Gülenists were operating the encrypted smartphone messaging application ByLock to

¹ Fethullah Gülen is a Turkish Islamic preacher who resides in the United States and guides a transnational religious network. His movement expands to over 170 countries through scientific education, philanthropic works and interfaith dialogue, having a long lasting presence within Turkish society.

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communicate. The MIT, after having penetrated this, by May 2016, managed to identify close to 40,000 undercover Gülenist operatives, including 600 high ranked military officers. As soon as members of the network realized that ByLock communications had been compromised, they switched to a more secure application, WhatsApp, which was the one used to plan the coup. However, Turkish intelligence community supports that despite the fact that members of the network had been located and identified, no clear information about a coup preparation was existent.^{xxiv}

During the day of the coup, Fidan and Akar's decision to not immediately inform the government received harsh criticism by a plethora of Turkish officials, including the Prime Minister, Binali Yıldırım. Fidan, "acting on incomplete information" had tried to contact President Erdogan, but seemingly he was unable to do so. It is to be underlined that a sense of urgency was missing because even at the day of the attempted coup no one believed that armed forces would ever attempt to overthrow the government.^{xxv} Reiterating to the "bottom-up" politicization of intelligence theory, Fidan's act constitute a textbook example of lack of objectivity that leads to a biased assumption on the durability of Erdogan's regime.

In the aftermath of the coup, several academics and journalists indicated a series of inconsistencies and loopholes in the official coup storyline, including the lack of conclusive evidence.^{xxvi} These, include among others, the conflicting assumptions on when and how Erdogan learned about the coup, as well as the mystery behind the Chief of the General Staff, Hulusi Akar's role who had rejected the rebels' invitation to lead their scheme and was kidnaped during the night of the military coup attempt. However, the mystery lies between the two meetings held between Akar and the Head of MIT, Hakan Fidan, the day before and the day of the coup.^{xxvii}

Buying the assumption that the Turkish intelligence community was aware of the plotters but not of the plot, then all paths lead to the construction of a "top-down" politicization argument. Namely, one may claim that high ranked intelligence officers, as well as Erdogan himself, were aware of the coup plot and its limited capacity and decided to let it evolve in order to legitimately eliminate the Gülenist network operating within the country, in the aftermath of a "controlled coup". In other words, Erdogan

purposely ignored all the intelligence reports indicating to an imminent coup attempt, gambling with the fate of Turkish society, in order to maximize political gains. Reiterating to the “top-down” politicization theory, this act is applicable to the key concept of manipulating intelligence in the direction of reflecting to policy preferences. Even more, the narrative of the “staged” coup is not to be undermined as it is widely supported within the Turkish society, as well as by the opposition Republican People’s Party’s (CHP). More precisely, CHP’s report to the Parliamentary Commission on the 15th of July 2016 events was titled *‘The Controlled Coup that was Foreseen, not Prevented, and Exploited’*.^{xxviii}

On a first scenario, the failure of the coup accounts for a success of the Turkish intelligence services. Managing to get timely and enlightening intel on the imminent coup impacted negatively the decision making process as well as the coordination of the conspirators, who were forced to engage with their scheme in the evening of 15th rather than the morning of 16th as planned.^{xxix} On a second scenario, if the intelligence community was on alert and could read between the lines, identifying the potential signs left by conspirators, then the coup attempt would have been prevented, saving more than 250 lives, accounting for an epic failure of MIT. On a third scenario, stripped of ethical dilemmas, in which Turkish intelligence services knowingly let the “controlled coup” fail in front of the public eye, one would claim that MIT failed in the short term –as it did not manage to protect Turkish society- but succeeded in the long term, denuding threatening networks that were rooted deeply within the Turkish society. Thus, paving the way for a reinforced and more transparent democracy. However, in the aftermath of the coup, the regime shifted towards authoritarianism rather than democracy, drawing a thin line between failure and success of MIT in the case of the failed coup attempt of 2016.

Epilogue

Overall, politicization of intelligence is present as much before, as during and after the coup, borrowing elements from both the “Kent” and the “Gates” model. Thence, the shape politicization takes in the case study at hand is more applicable to the third form laid down in the theoretical framework, as it seems to have operated both ways, with

Erdogan adjusting intelligence to policy preferences on the one hand, and the intelligence community to generate unconscious biases on the resilience of Turkish government. The abovementioned sustainably backed claim provides a sufficient answer to the central research question posed.

Concluding, the present paper offers a valuable insight in the impact of politicization on Turkish intelligence actions towards the failed military coup attempt of 2016. The extent up to which MIT carries out the duty of safeguarding a democracy and its people in the aftermath of the events of July 2016, is yet to be examined. The limitations of this research are recognized in the premises of examining the quality of Turkish democracy in the post-coup period. Future research may delve deeply into this issue, using the paper at hand as a starting point to identify the ties between Erdogan's regime and Turkish intelligence community.

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