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The military institution in Turkey traditionally used to play a prominent role in the political life, and Ankara has suffered several military coups including the failed coup attempt in the summer of 2016. The Turkish army which fought the War of Independence and is considered the founder of the modern Republic of Turkey, has always identified itself as the guardian of the Republic, including its principles, interests and survival, which motivated it to intervene in political life many times through military coups or through exercising pressures on governments. But the recent failed coup attempt and the subsequent fight against the parallel entity [known as Fethullah Gülen Terrorist Organization (FETO)] that is accused of standing behind it, as well as the restructuring of the military institution and the transformation of the governance system into the presidential system led to positive assessments that Turkey has exceeded the risk of military coups, amid consolidation of the Turkish democratic experiment.

This paper examines the prospects for a future military coup in Turkey by analyzing the main differences between the recent failed coup attempt and the previous coups, and the impact of the failure of the 2016 coup, as well as the main obstacles to such likelihood in the future and the risks that may increase its chances. However, the paper concludes that the occurrence of a military coup in Turkey has become very difficult but never impossible.

Four coups

Since its foundation, the Turkish Republic has witnessed several interventions by the military in political life, including numerous attempts and plans to overthrow the elected governments; but most of them were either, retracted, revealed before implementation, or failed. However, the country witnessed five clear military coups, four of which preceded the rule of the AK Party, with only one failed coup attempt (in 2016) during its rule, i.e. the coups of 1960, 1971, 1980, 1997 and the failed attempt in 2016.

1- The 1960 Turkish coup d'état is the first coup ever in the Republic of Turkey. The coup was staged by a group of 38 young Turkish military officers, acting outside the Staff Chiefs' chain of command. However, it was ultimately led on 27 May 1960 by General Cemal Gürsel against the democratically-elected government of the Democrat Party under the cover of the so-called "National Unity Committee".

The pretext of the coup was that the governments of the Democratic Party, which ruled Turkey since 1950, had turned the country into a repressive regime, caused internal upheavals and made decisions that "violated the State secularism". However, some sources referred to an external factor, the CIA, as standing behind the 1960 coup which took place at a time of both socio-political turmoil and economic hardship, as the U.S. aid from the Truman doctrine and the Marshall Plan was running out and so Prime Minister Adnan Menderes was planning to visit Moscow in the hope of establishing alternative lines of credit to fund some industries.

The National Unity Committee abolished the Constitution, dissolved the parliament and froze political action in the country. At that time, the prisons witnessed practice of torture and death of detainees. Some of them were tried on 19 counts with charges

of high treason and misuse of public money. Menderes and two other ministers were executed, while others were sent to prisons after external pressure.

2- On the contrary, the 1971 coup was staged by the army command, which sent a military memorandum on 12 March to President Cevdet Sunay, signed by the chief of staff and the heads of the infantry, air force, navy and gendarmerie forces demanding the resignation of the government, citing security unrest and clashes in universities. This was the second military intervention to take place in the Republic of Turkey, coming 11 years after its 1960 predecessor, and known as the "coup by memorandum".

Prior to this memorandum, a military coup had been planned by some officers led by Cemal Madanoğlu on March 9 but was thwarted by the army command. However, the memorandum of the Turkish armed forces was broadcasted (on 12 March 1971) on the Turkish Radio and Television Corporation (TRT), accusing the government and parliament of pushing the country into chaos, internal fighting and social and economic unrest, stressing the need for "the formation, within the context of democratic principles, of a strong and credible government, which will neutralize the current anarchical situation and which, inspired by Atatürk's views, will implement the reformist laws envisaged by the constitution", putting an end to the "anarchy, fratricidal strife, and social and economic unrest". If the demands were not met, the army would "exercise its constitutional duty" and take over power itself. Accordingly, Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel resigned after a three-hour meeting with his cabinet. After resignation of the government, a technocrat government was formed by MP Nihat Erim who ran the country until the 1973 elections.

- The (12 September) 1980 coup d'état was also carried out by the Turkish Armed Forces Command, headed by Chief of the General Staff General Kenan Evren, under pretexts such as political instability, economic crises, security incidents, and spread of politicians' assassinations, including former Prime Minister Nihat Erim, and attacks on the Alawites that left 105 people dead in 1978; and "demonstrations for the liberation of Jerusalem" organized by the National Salvation Party on 6 September 1980 after Israel had declared Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, demonstrations that the putschists considered an attempt to impose Islamic law. To create a pretext for a decisive intervention, the Turkish military allowed these conflicts to escalate; some say they actively adopted a strategy of tension. The violence abruptly stopped afterwards, and the coup was welcomed by some for restoring order. In total, 50 people were executed, 500,000 were arrested and hundreds died in prison.

On the other hand, developments indicated that there was a possible American role in this coup through encouraging and / or supporting it. One year before the 1980 coup in Turkey, an Islamic revolution erupted in Iran, and the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, which increased the need for a strong Turkish role alongside Washington by the putschists which adopted pro-American policies and enacted laws supportive to the US, including criminalization of criticizing the United States.

The Welfare Party led by Necmettin Erbakan won the 1995 parliamentary elections and formed a coalition government with Tansu Çiller's True Path Party in July 1996. Erbakan's first visits to Egypt, Libya and Nigeria, and some of his decisions and statements drew widespread criticism from secular circles in the country under the pretext of fear of "backwardness" or "fundamentalism".

- The 1997 military coup (28 February), also known in Turkey as the 'post-modern coup', the Turkish military command on a National Security Council meeting on 28 February 1997 issued a memorandum, including decisions affirming that secularism is the guarantee of democracy and law, and stressed the need to enforce secularist laws, watch schools belonging to Sufi / religious groups as well as Qur'an memorization institutes, prohibit and close all Sufi groups, and impose full control over the media. This memorandum initiated the process that precipitated the resignation of Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan of the Welfare Party, and the end of his coalition government. On 21 May 1997, the Turkish Prosecutor-General filed a lawsuit to ban the Welfare Party as "leading the country towards civil war".

The failed coup

With the ruling AK Party, Turkey achieved political stability, economic achievements and development projects that reflected on Turkey's economic indicators, foreign policy, and international standing through the rule of one party and formation of homogeneous governments; but that did not end the military's attempts to intervene in political life.

In 2007, after the AK Party's nomination of Abdullah Gül as President of the Republic and in parallel with demonstrations led by the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) under the name of "Republic Demonstrations", the Turkish General Staff released on its website on 27 April 2007 a controversial memorandum weighing in the Turkish presidential elections. This statement, published on TSK's official website regarding the Turkish presidential elections, read:

"The problem that emerged in the presidential election process is focused on arguments over secularism. Turkish Armed Forces are concerned about the recent

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situation. ... the Turkish Armed Forces are a party in those arguments, and absolute defender of secularism. Also, the Turkish Armed Forces is definitely opposed to those arguments and negative comments. It will display its attitude and action openly and clearly whenever it is necessary ... Those who are opposed to Great Leader Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's understanding 'How happy is the one who says I am a Turk' are enemies of the Republic of Turkey and will remain so. The Turkish Armed Forces maintain their sound determination to carry out their duties stemming from laws to protect the unchangeable characteristics of the Republic of Turkey. Their loyalty to this determination is absolute.”

Over the years that followed the military statement, several lawsuits were filed against military commanders, including those responsible for the 1980 and 1997 coups. High-ranking military officers, including former Chief of Staff Ilker Basbug, who was sentenced to life, before being released from prison for what were considered as fabricated evidence by Gülen’s FETO organization in these cases. These trials helped remove the halo of holiness of the military institution and strengthen the civil society institutions.

On July 15, 2016, Turkey defeated a military coup attempt against state institutions, including the government and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The attempt was carried out by Fethullah Gülen movement, designated as a terrorist organization by the Republic of Turkey and led by Fethullah Gülen, a Turkish cleric living in Pennsylvania, U.S., through a faction within the Turkish Armed Forces that organized themselves as the Peace at Home Council. During the coup, over 300 people were killed and more than 2,100 were injured. Many government buildings, including the Turkish Parliament and the Presidential Palace, were bombed from the air.

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One of the primary reasons that the coup failed was chaos among the plotters' ranks. Turkey's National Intelligence Organization (MIT) head Hakan Fidan discovered the coup plot, and the plotters were forced to execute the coup six hours ahead of schedule. One of the main organizers, General Semih Terzi, was shot dead by loyalist Sgt. Maj. Ömer Halisdemir at the onset, demoralizing and disrupting command and control of the rebels. These two incidents resulted in the coup being carried out in an uncoordinated manner. The highest ranking staff officers opposed the coup, and publicly ordered all personnel to return to their barracks. Acting outside the military chain of command, the rebels lacked the coordination and resources to achieve their goals. The conscripted soldiers that the rebels mobilized were uninformed of the true purpose of their mission, and became demoralized. Many surrendered rather than shoot demonstrators. The commander of the First Army in Istanbul, General Ümit Dündar, personally called Erdoğan to warn him of the plot, persuading him to evacuate his hotel ahead of the plotters, and helped to secure Istanbul for Erdoğan to land. The 15 July 2016 failed coup attempt radically differs from previous coups from several angles, including:

First, that the party that carried out the coup was not the Kemalist or nationalist trend within the Turkish military institution nor the army command, but the parallel entity or the Fethullah Gülen movement, known as FETO.

Second, the coup was violent and bloody compared to its predecessors, where 250 civilians were martyred and hundreds wounded, the President of the Republic was targeted, and the presidential palace, the parliament building and the headquarters of the Chief of Staff of the armed forces were all bombed.

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Third, it was the first time that the Turkish people and the political leadership challenged and confronted the coup in the street, including individuals, leaders and police and intelligence personnel.

As a result, the coup failed within a few hours unlike the previous four coups that had succeeded.

Also, among the most important factors that contributed to the failure of the coup attempt in 2016 were chaos and confusion among the plotters' ranks due to executing the coup six hours ahead of schedule, lack of approval of the command of the military institution, Erdogan's leadership of the government and the public that was prominent during that night, the mass mobilization in the street which directly faced the coup forces, and the resistance of the of the coup by the police and intelligence personnel and some military personnel, as well as the political and partisan consensus on rejection of the coup and standing against overthrowing the government by force.

These reactions were quite different from the previous coups, where there had not been any partisan or popular rejection of the coups. The subsequent repercussions of the failed coup, including the fight against the parallel organization or FETO, the restructuring of the military institution and the installation of the presidential system, led to a belief that Turkey had closed the door of coups completely and irreversibly.

Obstacles and risks

In the face of any future coup attempt in Turkey, there are five main obstacles that make any such attempt difficult and unsuccessful:

First, absence of excuses

The previous military coups posed as pretexts the existence of political obstruction, economic crises, severe community division, serious security incidents (which were

sometimes fabricated); and introduced themselves as the defender of the country against collapse and / or civil war. In the light of the political stability, especially after the approval of the presidential system, and the strong economy, despite some upheavals, we can say that any military coup attempt in current or similar circumstances lacks its main pretext.

Second, the high cost

The growing public awareness of the dangers of coups and the need to confront them to protect the democratic experiment, amid the wide-range popular participation in repelling the 2016 coup attempt despite the relatively large human cost indicates that any future coup would also face the Turkish street even if it had more power elements and was more organized and even closer to success. However, the human losses would be very high compared to the 2016 coup, prompting any party to reconsider this matter several times before embarking on such a coup attempt.

Third, the military reform

For decades, the Turkish Constitution mandated the responsibility of “protecting Turkish territory and the Republic of Turkey” to the military institutions in accordance with article 35, which was the pretext of the army to intervene for the protection of the “principles of the Republic”. The National Security Council was the instrument of the military to pressure governments with binding decisions, while the meetings of the Supreme Military Consultative Council were an opportunity to “clean up” the army of Islamists and opponents.

In 2013, the Turkish Parliament amended Article 35 of the Constitution restricting the mission of the military to exclusively protecting the country from any external threats. The composition of the National Security Council has also been modified gradually to

make civilian ministers the majority of its members, including the NSC Secretary General; and the NSC decisions have become advisory non-binding to the government. In a recent amendment, the structure of the Supreme Military Consultative Council included the President deputies and ministers of Finance and Education, although it mainly deals with promotion of military commanders. The process of “cleaning up” the military of the parallel organization helped to further restructure the Turkish military institution.

Fourth, civil control

The failed coup attempt has embarrassed the military institution and contributed to the decline of the street's trust in the military, making it weaker compared to the presidency and the government. The civilian majority of the National Security Council and the civilian presence in the Supreme Military Consultative Council also contributed to strengthening government control over the military institution.

In 2018, the army's chief of staff was linked to the Defense Ministry not the cabinet as it used to be. Former Chief of Staff Hulusi Akar was chosen as the first defense minister under the presidential system, in what could be considered a transitional phase to ease the sensitivity of the military institution. It is noteworthy that the presence of the Chief of Staff in internal events, foreign visits and reception of Turkish and foreign officials declined in favor of the Defense Minister after this step.

Fifth, Army culture

There is an effort that has been made, but not yet clear, to change the culture pervading among the personnel of the military institution. This may be closer to the culture of Turkish national-conservative citizens, in clear contrast to the former elitist Kemalist culture. Perhaps the entry of the Minister of Education specifically in the

structure of the Supreme Military Consultative Council is a clear signal of interest in the intellectual and cultural system within the military institution.

These developments that came after the failure of the 2016 coup attempt, have led to optimistic assessments of Turkey's transgression of the risk of military coups in the future.

However, there are still some contexts that make the risk of military coups in the future in Turkey likely, that requires maintaining efforts to prevent military coups as a priority of government policies, including:

1- The fact that the parallel entity is a clandestine organization and has worked for decades on infiltration and strengthening its presence within the State institutions, which means that eliminating it completely an uneasy job. This is evidenced by statements made by Turkish officials calling for the need to maintain the fight against FETO organization, amid the procrastination of the United States and a number of European countries in cooperation with the Turkish authorities, which suggests that they still bet on FETO for likely coup attempts in the future.

2- With the removal of the members of the parallel entity (FETO) from the military institution, and taking into consideration that the ruling AK Party did not establish a loyal trend within the military, the party was prompted to trade between existing competitors, which led to the return of the Kemalist and nationalist movements again to lead the military institution and occupy influential military positions.

3- It is difficult to change the intellectual system prevailing in a long-standing military establishment, such as the Turkish military institution, which dominated the country for decades within a period of no more than 16 years of rule, interrupted by several coup attempts. It is not easy for elected governments to completely control the

military institution which considers itself the founder of the Republic and entrusted to defend it and protect its principles.

4- Restoration of the image of the Turkish military institution after the failed coup attempt through the successful military operations abroad, such as the Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch operations in Syria as well as the bombing of the PKK camps in the Qandil mountains in northern Iraq.

Conclusion

Turkey has suffered over its history from several military coups and a large number of attempted coups and military interventions in political life. But the failed coup attempt in the summer of 2016 and the subsequent political, economic, military, security and social developments and repercussions suggest that the Turkish democratic experiment has benefitted so much and became much stronger in the face of any likely military coup attempt in the future.

But the country's bitter history of coups warns of making hasty conclusions on the impossibility of occurrence of military coups in the future, especially as the country is going through complex security and political conditions, especially with regard to the fight against terrorism and the military operations beyond national borders in addition to the financial crisis that Ankara experienced at the end of last year, from which the nation has not fully recovered.

Therefore, the main guarantees to completely block any coup attempt in the future are to deepen stability of the political system and reduce polarization in political life on the one hand and continue to "adapt" the military institution and frame it within its constitutionally mandated role on the other hand, which would achieve civilian-military balanced relations in Turkey.