

Turkey: Failed Coup and Implications for U.S. Policy

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On July 15-16, 2016, elements within the Turkish military tried, but failed, to seize political power from President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Prime Minister Binali Yildirim. The perpetrators [detained the military's top commanders](#), and declared (via Turkey's government broadcaster) that they had taken power, but failed in their efforts to seize Erdogan or other key leaders. Government officials used [various traditional and social media platforms](#) and [alerts from mosque loudspeakers](#) to rally Turkey's citizens in opposition to the plot.

Figure 1. President Erdogan on CNN Turk – July 16, 2016



Figure 2. Key Events Surrounding Failed Coup



Source: *Washington Post*

[Resistance](#) by security forces loyal to the government and civilians in key areas of Istanbul and Ankara succeeded in foiling the coup, though at least [104 rebels and 161 others were killed](#), and Turkey's parliament building in Ankara sustained damage from rebel airstrikes. The [leaders of Turkey's opposition parties](#) and [key military commanders](#) helped counter the coup attempt by publicly denouncing it.

As events were unfolding, [Secretary of State John Kerry](#) expressed his hope for "stability and peace and continuity." Later, the White House released a [statement](#) of U.S. support for Turkey's democratically elected government. A majority of voters elected Erdogan to a five-year term as president in August 2014, and the Justice and Development Party (AKP, which Erdogan co-founded) won its fourth parliamentary majority since 2002 in a November 2015 election.

U.S. civilian and military installations and personnel in Turkey were unharmed during the attempted putsch, but operations at Incirlik air base (currently being used for U.S.-led coalition airstrikes in Syria and Iraq against the Islamic State, or IS/ISIS/ISIL) were [temporarily disrupted](#) in connection with the events. [Elements of the Turkish air force](#) reportedly used Incirlik to support the coup plot. Turkey hosts various other U.S. and NATO military assets, including a [missile defense radar](#) in eastern Turkey, and [aircraft-deliverable tactical nuclear weapons](#) reportedly at Incirlik. The [Pentagon](#) said that the coup attempt came as a surprise to U.S. officials.

The failed coup and [Turkey's trajectory](#) in its aftermath could significantly impact U.S.-Turkey relations given Turkey's regional importance and membership in NATO. Secretary Kerry has [dismissed allegations](#) from some in Turkey about possible U.S. links to the coup attempt. Such allegations may partly stem from popular sensitivities about historical U.S. closeness to Turkey's military and [recent U.S.-Turkey differences](#) on domestic and foreign policy issues. U.S. officials had also [faced questions earlier in 2016](#) about alleged U.S. involvement in plots against Erdogan.

Additionally, Turkish officials have sought to link [Fethullah Gulen](#)—a formerly state-employed imam in Turkey who is now a permanent U.S. resident—to the coup plot. Gulen, whom Erdogan and the government have openly and vigorously opposed since late 2013, is the inspiration behind a multifaceted civil society movement with roots in Turkey. [Prime Minister Yildirim](#) stated on July 19 that Turkey has officially requested Gulen's extradition, and the

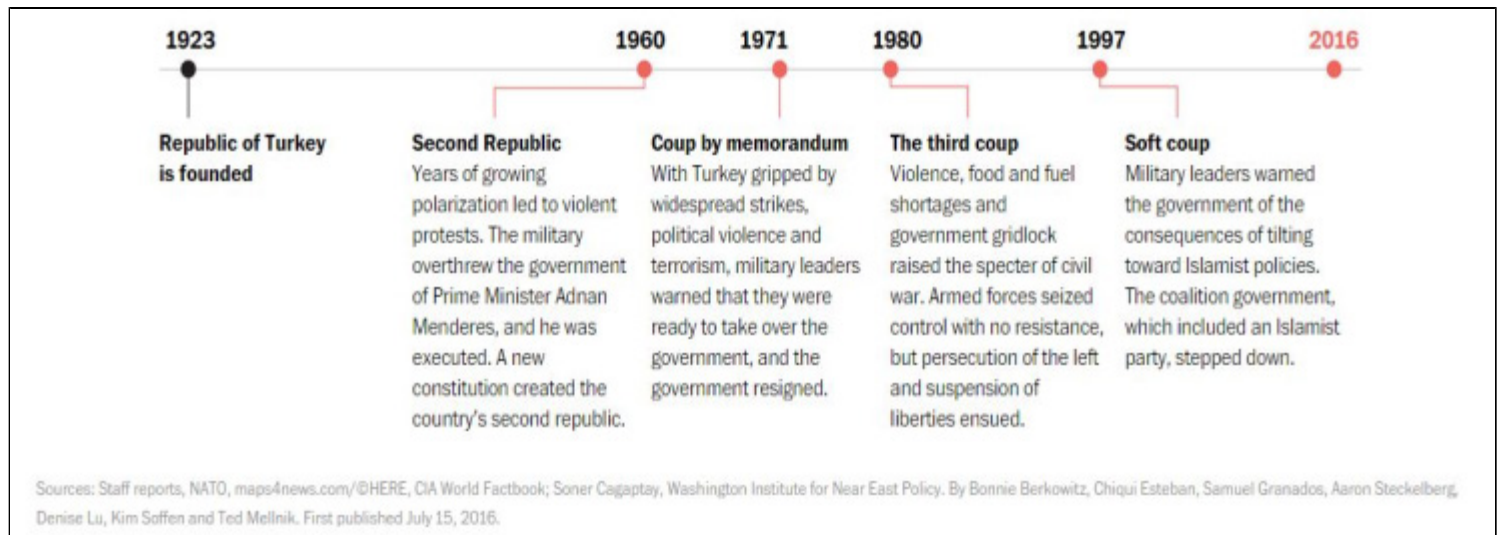
[White House press secretary](#) has said that the United States would evaluate the legal applicability and evidentiary merit of any formal request. In a [July 19 phone call](#) with Erdogan, President Obama said that the United States is "willing to provide appropriate assistance to Turkish authorities investigating the attempted coup" while urging that authorities conduct their investigation "in ways that reinforce public confidence in democratic institutions and the rule of law." [Gulen](#) strenuously denies involvement in the plot, [but has acknowledged](#) that he "could not rule out" involvement by some of his followers. [He](#) and [some others](#) claim that the government may have staged the putsch to justify consolidating power and weakening opponents.

Aftermath and Context

Since the failed coup, Turkey's government has [detained or dismissed tens of thousands](#) of personnel within its military, judiciary, civil service, and educational system. The coup attempt may have sought to thwart a [reportedly imminent purge](#) of some involved in the plot, and took place in a context in which Erdogan is seeking to [consolidate his presidential power](#) via constitutional amendment. Amid post-plot turmoil and an atmosphere of distrust, observers are speculating about a [possible intensification](#) of Turkish governmental measures that have reduced civil liberties and the independence of key institutional and media organs. [Secretary Kerry](#) warned on July 16 that a wide-ranging purge "would be a great challenge to [Erdogan's] relationship to Europe, to NATO and to all of us."

Media reports assert that during Erdogan's initial decade as head of government (he was prime minister from 2003 to 2014), adherents or sympathizers of [the Gulen movement worked with the government](#) to diminish the military's political power. [Many observers](#) had concluded in recent years that the military was unlikely to challenge civilian authority [as it routinely had in previous eras](#).

Figure 3. Past Turkish Domestic Military Interventions



Source: *Washington Post*

However, a proliferation of internal and external challenges has made Turkey more dependent on military force in [confronting threats and maintaining stability](#). Consequently, some speculation had surfaced about the [potential for renewed military intervention](#) in politics, while the military leadership issued a [March 2016 statement](#) insisting that it would not tolerate illegal action by those under its command.

Implications for U.S. Policy

Going forward, Turkey may face an even more complicated array of challenges than before the failed coup.

Internal Stability and Rule of Law. Turkey is dealing with fundamental questions regarding security, prosperity, and

civil liberties, including:

- conflict in its southeast and at its borders;
- [terrorist cells](#) linked to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) or the Islamic State;
- [nearly three million refugees and migrants](#) from Syria and elsewhere;
- [government repression](#); and
- safety and rule of law concerns that affect Turkey's [tourist sector](#) and [external investment](#).

Turkey may now have [less capability within its security forces](#) or justice sector to address or subdue such stresses and uncertainties, given that the post-plot crackdown has targeted many government personnel and exposed apparent [divisions within the military command structure](#).

Foreign Policy and U.S./NATO Relations. Issues of concern include:

- Turkey's [future role](#) in NATO, [U.S./NATO basing and operations](#) in Turkey, and NATO assistance (including [air defense batteries](#) and [AWACS aircraft](#)) to address Turkey's external threats;
- [Turkey-U.S. dynamics](#) involving anti-IS coalition operations and PKK-affiliated groups;
- Turkey's ability and willingness, in concert with other international actors, to [control cross-border flows](#) of refugees, migrants, and possible foreign fighters and terrorists; and
- diplomatic efforts to improve Turkey's regional profile and relations with [Israel](#), [Russia](#), [Syria](#), [Egypt](#), [Cyprus](#), and the [European Union](#).

For background information on Turkey and U.S.-Turkey relations, see CRS Report R44000, [Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations In Brief](#), by Jim Zanotti; and CRS Report R41368, [Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations](#), by Jim Zanotti.