

# An Ontological Reading of Turkey's AK Party – Gülen Movement Conflict

Written by Arslan Ayan

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ARSLAN AYAN, JUL 21 2019

Since one of the most bitter rivalries in the history of the republic of Turkey has turned bloody with a failed coup attempt on July 15, 2016, many scholars of political science from Turkey such as M. Hakan Yavuz (2018), Tuncay Kardas & Ali Balci (2019), Bayram Balci (2018), İhsan Yılmaz and Galiba Bashirow (2018) and a host of others have been caught up in a fruitful but also turbulent discussion about the dramatic reversals in the relations between Turkey's two prominent Islamic social forces, the ruling AKP government (AKP) and the Gülen Movement (GM). The debate, however, has mostly remained on material – or realist in IR terms — level of analysis for too long, such as the two actors' competition for power and control on the governance structures including the Turkish military and bureaucracy.[i] This article does not deny these material incentives were particularly important in motivating the GM-AKP conflict. In fact, the preponderance of the material interests seems to have catalysed the conflict excessively. However, drawing more on sociological readings of security and on the concept of Ontological Security (OST) in International Relations, I attempt to answer how and why Turkey's two ideologically similar forces turned into bitter enemies. In other words, why has Turkey's most prominent Sunni Islamic movement become the number one enemy of the ruling Erdogan regime that prides itself on its unique combination of a neo-Ottomanist rhetoric and Sunni-Islamic identity

The alliance that once existed between the AKP and the GM gradually turned into a source of anxiety in the post-2010 period because the actors began to fear an erosion in their self-identities as a source of distinctiveness. Put differently, the long-lasting unity of the two actors has in time turned into a threat to their sense of self, triggering a need for them to re-create the rhetoric of “us vs. them.” Consequently, the AKP responded with two basic strategies. In order to restore its self-identity and to highlight its distinctiveness; they narrowed the party's “conservative democrat” image down to an *ummah*-based Sunni Islamist organisation, merging the concept of “nation” and the concept of “Muslim” as one and the same. Secondly, the AKP elite increasingly demonized the GM for its increasing intimacy with the West, the United States in particular, while fueling an anti-Western, anti-Israel and nationalist populism at home. In response, the GM, perhaps unsurprisingly, leaned more towards a pro-Western discourse to reinvent its self-identity and distinctiveness, gradually adopted a discourse that demonizes political Islam and the AKP and encourage its followers to embark on *hijrah* (emigration) to different parts of the World.

This article is based on the assumption that the concept of security is actually more multifaceted than traditional IR theory suggests. In addition to material or physical security – often championed by neorealism, – actors also engage in ontological security seeking behavior in order to maintain self-identity and distinctiveness. Although OST scholars often disagree on how an actor acquires the sense of self in the first place, they jointly acknowledge that the everyday pursuit of ontological security by “engaging self-consciously in practices that reminds us of and reproduce who we feel ourselves to be” (Mitzen, Larson 2017, 4). Jennifer Mitzen, one of the initial constructors of the theory, defines ontological security as “not of the body but of the self, the subjective sense of who one is, which enables and motivates action and choice” (Mitzen 2006, 344). Mitzen's definition clearly implies a need for subjectivity blended with distinctiveness. An actor basically needs to experience oneself as a whole through a course of actions to consolidate his sense of self versus others. Darwich makes a similar point: “if self-identity is affirmed at the self-versus-others nexus, the ontological security is strongly linked to the idea of the distinctiveness of the self” (Darwich 2014, 8). Barnett and Adler's understanding of self-identity is not so different: “although there are many definitions of

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identity, most begin with the understanding of oneself in relationship to others” (Adler, Barnett 2006, 234). In other words, an erosion in the distinctiveness of the-self entails the emergence of ontological insecurity, which in turn triggers the actor’s need to redefine who he is by who he is not. When ontological insecurity emerges due to an erosion in distinctiveness of the self, the actor engages in process of restoration of the security through two strategies:

Firstly, actors tend to frame the other in a demonizing way to legitimize their own identity. [...] Secondly, actors are likely to bolster the old-self-other distinction and seek to generate a new and secure identity. Actors reinvent relationships with others by fostering new differences and distinctions in the discourse of their identity (Darwich, 10).

As will be illustrated in detail below, the AKP in the post-2010 period have step by step transformed the GM’s image from being a faith-based movement to “parallel structure” (state within a state) and finally to a terrorist organization. In a parallel development, the AKP’s image in the eyes of GM have gradually transformed from being a progressive political party to an authoritarian, neopatrimonialist, radical Islamist organization. In accordance with Darwich’s aforementioned theoretical framework, in order to reinvent its self- identity, the AKP leaned more towards political Islam, while fueling an anti-Western, nationalist populism in the post-2010 period, while demonizing the GM for its increasing intimacy with the West, the United States in particular. In response, the GM, perhaps unsurprisingly, leaned more towards a pro-Western discourse to reinvent its self-identity and distinctiveness, while encouraging its followers to embark on *hijrah* (emigration) from Turkey.

## Are they really similar? A Constructivist reading of the GM-AKP alliance – 2002 to 2010

It is not possible to talk about the GM and the AKP as monolithic sociological or political organizations. However, in the common usage, the label the Gulen movement is often used to refer to a transnational Islamic social movement heavily inspired and led by the religious teachings of a US-based Turkish cleric, Fethullah Gülen. Large majority of its followers are extraordinarily devoted to the movement’s leader, goals, and thus often willing to do whatever is necessary to achieve them. Similarly, even though the AKP is far from being a monolithic organization, it includes thousands, if not millions, of devoted party members as well as like-minded supporters in the police force, academia, bureaucracy and the media.

Although the AKP and the GM find their influence in different branches and traditions of Islamic activism in Turkey,[ii] they have certain significant similarities in common. First of all, the GM prides itself on representing the humanistic, tolerant, peaceful and inclusive tradition of Islam. Gulen himself in many platforms describes the organization as “a movement of people united around high human values, [...] whose basic principles stem from Islam’s universal values, such as love of the creation, sympathy for the fellow human, compassion, and altruism” (What is the Gülen Movement? 2019). Blending spirituality with the Western values, Sophia Pandya argues that the movement — at least in theory— offers and promotes “a different form of modernity, both in Turkey and abroad, in which the West is not the Great Satan, and spirituality is not marginalized” (Sophia Pandya, Nancy Gallagher 2012, 8). In Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi’s words, Gulen advocates a progressive interpretation of Islam “in which Muslims are able to totally engage the world without any fear of prejudice.” The embracement of this so-called progressive and open understanding of religion has provided the GM with a sense of self and distinctiveness for the decades during which the world arguably suffered from extremist, radical understanding of Islam as an opposition to fundamental western values, such as democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance.

The AKP was formed in the early 2000s by a group of “reformists” that parted ways with an Islamist religio-political movement called the National View Movement (NVM) — *Milli Görüş Hareketi* in Turkish. During the 90s, the NVM had pursued an Islamist political path with a strong willingness “introduce some religious norms and institutions in Turkish public life, reaching to campaigns to establish an Islamic state on some occasions,” (Köni 2018, 35). The ultimate goal of the movement was indeed to restore “the decisive role of Islam in Turkish society, to regard Islam as a national idea or a national identity of Turkey, and to make it the spiritual bond to achieve the cohesion of Turks” (Chen, Guo 2015, 2). Largely replacing its *Milli Gorus* identity with more progressive and reformist and tolerant understanding of Islam, the new AKP elite, akin to the GM, openly embraced the term “conservative democracy” that is in line with values such as democracy, human rights and rule of law (Yılmaz 2016, 155). However, despite their

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reformist, revisionist agendas, Islam, for both actors is a unifying factor. Fethullah Gulen and the GM indeed possess an Islamists feature, Ori Z. Soltes argues, because “he [Gulen] speaks from the deepest reaches of his own Muslim traditions, and his vision of his country, Turkey, is that it reclaims the Muslim identity that is endemic to the last nearly thousand years of its history and to its national soul” (Soltes 2013, 2). Similarly, rising from the conservative tradition of Turkey’s Ottoman past and its Islamic identity, Islam has a significant importance for the AKP elite. Indeed, the AKP, according to Mustafa Akyol, is mainly composed of Islamists and slightly less politicized religious conservatives as well as some “traditional center-right voters who care about economic benefits” (Farooq 2017). Consequently, even during the early 2000s during which the AKP’s secular, pro-EU and pro-Western policies were most evident, Turkey’s secularists feared that the AKP had “a hidden agenda to transform Turkey from a secular to an Islamic state” (Göl 2009, 796).

Third, both actors have far-reaching global ambitions. Turkey, in the minds of the AKP elites, is an heir to the Ottoman Empire, which makes it “Islam’s last fortress and the natural leader of a revival of Muslim civilization” (Tol 2019). As part of a search for an increased role in regional and global system, the AKP elites not only undertook many initiatives to become part of international institutions and increase Turkey’s visibility in global platforms (See Gök, Karadeniz 2018) but also engaged in a process of investment in countries from Latin America to sub-Saharan Africa, such as building mosques, education facilities, financing religious education, and providing humanitarian aid – especially to Somalia (Tol 2019). Even though its methods and organizational form is very different than the AKP, as one of world’s biggest Muslim networks, the GM’s global ambitions reflect similar patterns. With its hundreds of private schools, universities, hundreds of associations, affiliated businessmen, corporations, “over half a billion dollars in assets” as well a massive charter schools network with more than 1 to 8 million followers all around the world, the GM has a significant universalist feature. The ideal world in Gulen’s mind is the one in which all societies ultimately share one common goal: “to improve the world for all humans and also for the all non-human elements that make up the world” (Soltes, 2).

Fourth, both the AKP and the GM have an obvious agenda for the gradual, bottom-up Islamization of society through schools, education centers. The AKP carries out this project through public foundations such as the TÜRGEV and the Ensar Foundation and Islamic schools known as “imam-hatip.” Even though the number of these schools fell sharply due to Kemalist state policies and a postmodern coup on Feb. 28, 1997, their number rose to 1,961 in 2015 from 450 in 2002, according to a data shared by the Education Union (EğitimSen). The GM also have a similar policy of social engineering through education. In fact, it is safe to argue that Gulen started the movement with education activities in the early 1970s. In what began as a system of dormitory, living in the early 1970s, the early GM activists recruited Turkish youth via a system *ışık evleri* (lighthouses) and *sohbet* (Hendrick 2011, 74). This primitive system has in time turned into a massive educational network both in Turkey and across the world with hundreds of private schools, tens of universities, over 26,000 students, some 6000 teachers, hundreds of associations, as well a massive charter schools network including around the world (Gülay 2017, 43-46). In Gulen’s eyes, modern education is “central for Muslim reform and development” (Yavuz 2013, 92).

## Slippery Conundrum of Similarity: GM-AKP alliance as an anxiety producer

Although the AKP and the GM has their ideological foundations in different branches and understanding of Islam, they both have experienced significant ideological and practical modifications and thus convergence over the years. During the initial years in office, the AKP elite had moved away from its Islamist roots that denoted Islam as a source of political identity and action, into a similar ideological paradigm as the GM that prides itself on representing the humanistic, tolerant, peaceful and inclusive tradition of Islam. This ideological moderation has provided the AKP with a secure sense of self and sense of distinctiveness not only against the illiberal Kemalist secularist regime, but also against its controversial, much-debated Islamist roots. Unsurprisingly, the AKP then began to push through democratic reforms to fulfill the Copenhagen Criteria for an accession to the European Union (EU) (Sipahioğlu 2017, 57-58). The party elite’s embracement of such a process of moderation and pragmatic change over ideological objectives naturally accelerated its alignment with the GM against the secular state identity, known as the *Kemalist* ideology in Turkey. On the other hand, the GM has gradually soften its sharp tradition of abstention from politics and disassociation of any kinds of political Islam. The members of the GM increasingly tended to see the AKP elite, Erdogan in particular, as the sole political actor that could stand up to illiberal Kemalist regime. This increasing

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ideological convergence had provided the two actors with a secure sense of distinctiveness from “the rest,” leading them into a mutually beneficial cooperation in 2000s, “with the former’s political office reinforcing the latter’s social and bureaucratic power and vice versa” (Taş, 395). With the massive expansion of the GM and the AKP elites’ certain consolidation of power in the post-2010 period, the Turkish politics have become an arena largely dominated by these two major actors that shared very similar ideologies and identities. In the meantime, the ideological hegemony of Kemalism and its secularist taboos have eroded significantly, paving the way for a modification in the meaning of “the other.” In other words, with the visible withdrawal of the secular tradition from the social life and political arena in the post-2010 period, the two actors began to feel uncomfortable because their almost a decade-long relations with “each other” and “the other” were disrupted. This disruption unearthed the significant erosion in their own self-identities as a source of distinctiveness, triggering a mutual need for the re-creation of “us vs. them.” The OST predicts that when such an ontological insecurity emerges due to an erosion in distinctiveness of the self, the insecure victim engages in process of restoration of the security through two strategies (Darwich, 10):

The first step is that they go back in time to visit their constituent ideologies in an attempt to restore the old-self vs. other distinction and seek to a new, secure identity. In Darwich’s own words, an ontologically insecure actor “reinvents relationships with others by fostering new differences and distinctions in the discourse of their identity.” In the post-2010 period, such attempts indeed seem to have become a daily routine for the both sides. The AKP engaged in a process of reinvention of its identity and thus sense of self, and distinctiveness by narrowing its “conservative democrat” approach to political Islam, reintroducing the religion a source of political identity and action. Some Gülen-friendly scholars termed this critical turn as “Erdoganism,” which has four main dimensions: “electoral authoritarianism as the electoral system, neopatrimonialism as the economic system, populism as the political strategy and Islamism as the political ideology” (Yilmaz, Bashirov, 1812). Indeed, according to the Global Populism Database, which tracks the levels of populist discourse in the speeches of almost 140 leaders in Europe and the Americas, Erdogan is the most populist of any right-wing leader in the whole world since 2010: “The research shows how Erdogan has been transformed from a cautious reformist prime minister to an authoritarian president whose speeches are as populist as those of the late Venezuelan leader Hugo Chávez” (Guardian, 2019). It is safe to argue this so-called Erdoganist turn was largely an attempt for the AKP elite to forge a unique distinction from the GM. However, such an attempt required more than a self-rearrangement as the erosion in the self-identities of the two actors was too great. As will be discussed in detail below, the AKP elite as a follow-up strategy then went on fueling an anti-Western, anti-Israel and anti-GM discourse at home in order to create much needed “the other.”

In response this Erdoganist turn, the GM elites unsurprisingly leaned more towards a pro-Western and anti-Islamist and anti-AKP discourse to reinvent its self-identity and distinctiveness vis-à-vis the AKP. Particularly Fethullah Gulen as the leader of the movement personally led this process of what we define as the “Gülenist turn,” even when the movement’s material and populist interests did not demand it. Gulen took his very first concrete step during right after the Mavi Marmara incident in May 2010 when Israeli commandos killed 10 Turkish nationals on a ship which was en-route to Gaza to deliver humanitarian aid (Guilfoyle 2011, 180). In response to the AKP elites’ fierce support to the flotilla and heavy condemnation of the Israeli attack on Turkish nationals, the GM elites and GM-affiliated media outlets took a stance of appeasement towards Israel, criticizing the AKP government for allowing the ship to sail because it was obvious, Gulen himself argued, such a radical move would definitely face a violent military response from the Israeli side (Shively 2016, 197). “What I saw was not pretty, it was ugly,” Gülen told the Wall Street Journal in an exclusive interview on June 4, 2010, before adding that it was “a sign of defying authority [Israeli government] and will not lead to fruitful matters.” Even though such an appeasing stance strengthened the AKP elite’s hand in discrediting the GM’s popularity among large masses, Gulen held his ground on the issue.

The GM’s second move came during the Gezi Park protests in the summer of 2013. Gülen again accused the AKP elite of deepening the fault lines in Turkish society through a brutal police crackdown on the thousands of –secular or/and Kemalist — protesters and a hateful narrative that “stigmatized” the protestors. Even though these two major steps by Gulen drew strong reaction from the AKP side and triggered a confrontation, the GM elites continued to hold their critical ground even though the movement’s material interests did not demand it. The OST saw this coming: the GM’s need to reinvent a secure self-identity and distinctiveness vis-à-vis the AKP’s increasing Erdoganist turn demanded that it fight. Gulen’s statement in an exclusive *Politico* interview in September 2016 reveals the GM’s embracement of “irrationality” in order to restore the movement’s ontological security: “We have been facing their

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[the AKP] wrath for the last three years. This might be called the price of independence. It is a heavy price indeed but I don't have any regrets and I don't believe any of my friends have any regrets" (Toosi, 2019).

Secondly, the OST predicts that an ontologically insecure actor finds itself in a process of demonizing "the other" in order to legitimize its own identity (Darwich, 10). In line with this prediction, as of late 2013, the AKP elites have kicked off a widespread crackdown on the GM followers. They initially invented the term "parallel state" to refer to the members of the GM, especially those within the state bureaucracy, Turkish army and the police force. Erdogan in particular, in many platforms accused Gulenists of high treason, arguing that they were infiltrating in the Turkish army and the Turkish bureaucracy in order to seize the state power. According to a report by a Gulen-friendly Europe-based think tank, between 2013 and 2017, the AKP elites used at least 240 different derogatory concepts to describe the GM (Stockholm Center for Freedom, 2017).

During a 2014 meeting with the party officials, then-PM Erdogan emphasized the importance of the fight against the GM as it became an "unshakable mission for the AKP:"

If fighting against those committing treason is a 'witch hunt,' then yes, we carry out a witch hunt. [...] If we fail to do that, then it is us who are committing a treason against this country. [...] Everybody should know that the fight against the parallel structure is a mission of the state, not individuals. It is also our main policy (Anadolu News Agency, 2014).

The AKP's fight against the GM peaked with a failed 2016 coup attempt, which killed 249 people and wounded more than a thousand others. Erdogan accused the GM of masterminding and carrying out the attempt and thus initiated a widespread purge.[iii] According to the official data by the Turkish justice ministry, a total of 500,650 people have been investigated over real and alleged links to the GM since the failed coup attempt (Uludag 2019). As of March 2019, 30,947 Gulenists were held in prison while arrest warrants for another 22,000 at large have been issued (Uludag).

In response, the GM pursued a similar –relatively less successful— policy to delegitimize the AKP as well as demonizing political Islam and the Erdoganist turn. As of late 2013, the GM initially accused the AKP elites of corruption and obstructing a graft investigation. A major corruption investigation became public in Turkey in December 2013, with Turkish police arresting a group of people from the inner circle of the AKP and then-Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan on accusation of receiving bribes to facilitate transactions benefiting Iranian government. Some 50 high-ranking AKP officials, including Erdogan's son, Bilal Erdogan, the general manager of one of Turkey's largest banks, Halkbank, and an Iranian businessman named Reza Zarrab, were arrested in simultaneous raids on morning of December 13. Even though there seems to be no concrete evidence that the police chiefs who carried out the operations were directly linked to the GM, the operations were widely covered by the Gulen-affiliated newspapers and TV channels, such as Zaman, Today's Zaman, Bugün dailies, Samanyolu, Kanaltürk, Bugün TV stations. In fact, the chief editors and several reporters of the Today's Zaman daily wore T-shirts bearing the photo of the police chiefs who carried out the operations, even making them their profile pictures on Twitter. Although he claimed that these police chiefs had no link to the movement and that he "has never met these people in person," Fethullah Gulen himself also made it clear during a weekly sermon that operations were carried out to "catch the thief" (HerkulNagme 2013). The corruption scandal further deepened with the leakage of several audio recordings claiming to capture the voice of Erdogan instructing his son, Bilal, to hold out for a larger bribe on a business deal. Two anonymous Twitter accounts emerged as the primary source for the dissemination of audio recordings: @Haramzadeler ("Sons of Thieves") and @Bascalan ("The Prime Thief"). It is still not evident whether these accounts were managed by Gulen loyalists; however, the leaked conversations were heavily retweeted and distributed by hundreds, if not thousands of Gulen-friendly social media accounts. Today, it is widely believed in Turkey that the tapes were "leaked by Gulenist police officers who had apparently been wiretapping Erdogan and his close associates for some time" (Yeşil 2016, 117).

Through the lenses of the OST, the GM's open support for the corruption investigations was a conscious attempt to put a final nail in the coffin of the GM-AKP alliance in order to reinvent the rhetoric of "us vs. them." The movement's such irrational move to restore its ontological insecurity at the expense of material interests, quickly turned the

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alliance into an open conflict, with the AKP elite escalating and expanding the purge of the alleged Gulenists from many government bodies, while the GM, with its media outlets and thousands of members on the field, putting all of its efforts in discrediting the AKP as a legitimate ruling body. Unsurprisingly, the AKP elite initially casted the investigations as “a coup attempt” by the GM against an elected government and removed prosecutors and judges from the case, arrested all the involved police offices and the chiefs. The investigations were dropped and in March 2019, an İstanbul court handed down life sentences to 15 of the involved police chiefs on terror and coup charges.

## Conclusion

Ontological security theory is not capable of covering all the aspects of the long-debated GM-AKP conflict. Instead, drawing more on sociological readings of security in the field of contemporary security studies, I attempted to answer how, despite their identical similarities, the earlier alliance between the AKP and GM turned into a source of mutual anxiety. The alliance that once existed between the AKP and the GM has gradually turned into a mutual conflict in the post-2010 period because the actors began to fear an erosion in their self-identities as a source of distinctiveness. In other words, the long-lasting unity of the two actors has in time turned into a threat to their sense of self, triggering a need for them to re-create the rhetoric of “us vs. them.” In the post-2010 period, in order to restore its self-identity and to highlight its distinctiveness; the AKP elite leaned more towards an *ummah*-based expansionist politics in the region while fueling an anti-Western, nationalist populism at home, demonizing the GM for its increasing intimacy with the West, the United States in particular. In response, the GM leaned more towards a pro-Western discourse to reinvent its self-identity and distinctiveness, gradually adopt a discourse that demonizes political Islam and encourage its followers to embark on *hijrah* (emigration) to different parts of the World.

## Notes

[i] For instance, Hakan Yavuz argued that the alliance between the AKP and the GM has lost its *raison d'être* “once the kitchen had been cleared of other potential sources of resistance. They decided that there was not enough room for two chefs” (Yavuz 2018, 12). Balci and Kardas appealed to the help of concept of security dilemma in international relations in an attempt to make a sense of the GM-AKP conflict: “...even though the latter [Kemalists] had been bitterly involved in security competition for the control of the Turkish state and society between 2002 and 2011, only two competing social blocs were left in Turkish politics after 2011 — the AKP and the GM” (Kardaş, Balcı 2019, 20). Gulen-friendly scholars Yilmaz & Bashirov featured the AKP’s increasing authoritarianism and President Erdoğan’s ambition for a firm grip on power as the main source of conflict (Yilmaz, Bashirov 2018, 1821).

[ii] According to Taş, it is safe to categorize the distinction between the two actors as ‘political Islam’ for the AKP and ‘cultural Islam’ for the GM. “Like Nursi, Fethullah Gülen refrained from partisan politics and employed a gradualist approach focusing on a bottom-up Islamization of society. [...] While avoiding confrontation with the state, Gülen tended to disassociate himself from any kind of political Islam, including the National Outlook. In the 1990s, Turkish media promoted Gülen as a modern nationalist and moderate alternative to Necmettin Erbakan and his ummah-based political aspirations.” See Hakkı Taş, A history of Turkey’s AKP-Gülen conflict, *Mediterranean Politics* 23/3 (2018): 396.

[iii] The 2016 coup attempt and the GM’s alleged involvement is not in the scope of this paper. For a detailed discussion, conflicting theories and arguments about its involvement, see M. Hakan Yavuz, Bayram Balcı, *Turkey’s July 15th Coup What Happened and Why* (Utah Series in Middle East Studies, 2018). Also see Aslı Aydıntaşbaş, “The Good, the Bad and the Gülenists,” ECFR Essays, September 2016; and Dexter Filkins, “Turkey’s Thirty – Year Coup,” *The New Yorker*, October 17, 2016. Yıldırım Oğur, Ceren Kenar, “Who Was Behind the 15th July Coup In Turkey?” *Medium*, March 21, 2017. Tuncay Kardas, Ali Balci, “Understanding the July 2016 Military Coup: The Contemporary Security Dilemma in Turkey,” *DOMES*, 2019.

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