

**Testimony before the  
U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs  
Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia, and Emerging Threats**

**At a Hearing Titled**

***Turkey's Democratic Decline***

**by**

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## **Introduction**

Chairman Rohrabacher, Ranking Member Meeks, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today on Turkey's democratic decline.

It is fair to say that all the major political developments in Turkey in the last five years can be attributed to Recep Tayyip Erdogan's presidentialist aspirations. In 2014, he succeeded in becoming the first popularly elected president in modern Turkish history, with 52% of the votes. However, the current system is still a parliamentary system, in which, technically speaking, the prime minister runs the country as the executive. Previously as prime minister, and now as president, Erdogan has been leading a very determined campaign, promoting a regime where the president is an elected autocrat with unbridled executive power. A de facto "Turkish-style" presidential system is already in place, where Erdogan appoints and dismisses prime ministers, shapes the cabinet, and packs the courts and bureaucracy with sworn loyalists who are ready to take on political and social dissent, the media and civil society. The final step is to be a constitutional amendment that will set the new regime in stone.

Erdogan has a particular way of doing politics. He dominates the country's agenda. The pro-Erdogan media, whose owners have been financially rewarded by government contracts, disseminates that agenda with similar newspaper headlines and phony talk shows on TV. In fact, Erdogan's iron control of the media is key to understanding his political strategy of augmenting his image and undermining rivals and alternatives even from his own party. The mainstream Turkish media has been under fire, and has been forced to lay off thousands of journalists since 2013. In reality, there is no mainstream media left, only a few daring but small outlets for dissent. Independent media outlets are seized or censored, and social media is routinely blocked.

Turkey is a powerful Muslim nation, a NATO member, and a European Union candidate. Thus, Turkey's actions are very consequential for the immediate region, which is mired in sectarian conflict and is in the midst of the most serious humanitarian crisis in recent history. In the last year, Turkey's battle against ISIS alongside the United States has been overshadowed by the campaign against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and its affiliates in Northern Syria. Despite his efforts to obtain international legitimacy, targeting ISIS has had no significant domestic political benefits for Erdogan and the Justice and Development Party (AKP). Despite repeated bombings committed by ISIS in Turkey and the enormous security threats posed by domestic operatives, who allegedly number in the thousands, very few people have been arrested, and no one has been convicted of terrorism.

## **Persecution of the Gülen Movement**

An important casualty of Erdogan's political aspirations and Turkey's democratic decline is the community known as the Gülen (a.k.a. Hizmet) movement in Turkey. The movement has been subjected to political persecution for more than two years by the Turkish government. Erdogan publicly called for a "witch hunt," and arrests, threats, and harassment have now become routine for affiliates and sympathizers of the movement. The government has targeted the movement, especially since the outbreak of the corruption scandal in Turkey. According to Erdogan and his lieutenants, the allegations brought

forward by Istanbul prosecutors on December 17, 2013 were in fact an insidious attempt to topple the AKP government orchestrated by Gülen movement affiliates nested in the judiciary and police forces. The Gülen movement has vehemently denied these allegations, calling them baseless accusations serving to cover up the corruption. While the corruption cases were effectively nullified by legislation and executive interventions in the courts, the attacks on the Gülen movement have continued in full force.<sup>1</sup>

The Gülen movement is a faith-based network of individuals, organizations and institutions inspired by the ideas of Turkish Islamic scholar Fethullah Gülen, who is now residing in the United States. It subscribes to a moderate, Sufi version of Islam, along with emphasis on interfaith dialogue, which is considered to be an antidote to radicalism. The movement is known for its vast network of schools, dialogue and cultural centers, and charity organizations. The movement originated in Turkey in the 1970s and has increasingly become international. However, Turkey has always remained at the core of the network. In Turkey, the movement established high schools in every town, most of which became nationally ranked institutions. Graduates of these schools moved on to both the public and private sectors. Many joined the government bureaucracy. The movement also established influential media outlets in Turkey that included the largest daily newspaper and several TV and radio stations. Businessmen sympathizing with the movement established nationwide chambers of commerce that actively sought new markets around the world. The network showed noticeable efficiency, a cosmopolitan spirit despite its faith-based origins, and astounding dynamism, defying the traditionally introverted and subdued culture of Turkish conservatism.

However, the movement quickly overreached itself in Turkey. The sheer size of the network exposed it to the ill intentions of those who sought influence and leverage. Some appeared to have a false sense of power. A penchant for high politics in some circles seemingly undermined the message of tolerance and inclusion that characterizes the larger movement. The movement media has been, and still is, an ardent supporter of democratization, demilitarization of politics, and European Union membership; however, this has sometimes alienated the foes of the AKP government, which in better days was pursuing those very same objectives. The reputation and impartiality of the media affiliated with the Gülen movement were tainted when they underemphasized irregularities and misconduct during the coup trials of military officers, journalists, and academics. For this reason, political and ideological critics of the AKP government also turned against the Gülen movement. Before the recent clash, the movement media had been accused of “carrying the water” for Erdogan.

The clash between the AKP government and the Gülen movement was initially portrayed as a “power struggle,” “a tug of war.” This was true to the extent that the movement was believed to have considerable political influence in Turkey. The truth actually mirrored what had happened to all of Erdogan’s former allies, liberals and democrats, some of whom were among the AKP founders: They were taken advantage of in the process of consolidating power. Following the corruption scandal, the AKP government quickly passed a series of laws in the guise of fighting the “parallel structure” in the state that essentially revoked

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<sup>1</sup> Reza Zarrab, a Turkish-Iranian trader and the central figure in the corruption scandal in Turkey, was arrested in March 2016 in the United States for conspiring to evade U.S. sanctions against Iran, money laundering and fraud. The case, which corroborates December 17 allegations that Zarrab had paid bribes to ministers for his operations, continues as of this writing: U.S. v. Reza Zarrab, 15-cr-867, U.S. District Court, Southern District of New York (Manhattan).

separation of powers, suspended the rule of law, and restricted the rights and freedoms of everyone. In the end, both pro- and anti-Gülen people filled the very same prison for daring to dissent and question authority.

The Gülen movement in Turkey now faces blanket persecution. According to the state news agency (AA), as of July 2016, as many as 4,444 individuals have been detained; 982 have been sent to jail, and the rest released on probation. Just in the month of June, 433 individuals were detained and 160 were sent to jail. The detainees are from all walks of life and include businessmen, doctors, teachers, journalists, academics, philanthropists and even housewives. In addition, the government is taking over private high schools, colleges, and charity organizations that were established by movement participants. Businesses that have financially supported those initiatives are seized on a daily basis. Many have had to flee the country to avoid detention. The remaining hundreds of thousands of individuals – ordinary citizens dedicated to education, charity, and service and unrelated to the so-called “power struggle” – are awaiting their fate. The movement-affiliated media has been subjected to a “violent and illegal takeover”<sup>2</sup>, including the highly circulated *Zaman* and *Bugün* newspapers and several TV stations, resulting in the firing of thousands.

## A Judicial Travesty

An annual report recently published by the U.S. Department of State, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2015 (Turkey)*, vividly describes how the Turkish courts had to bow to political pressure:<sup>3</sup>

The law provides for an independent judiciary, but the judiciary remained subject to government influence, particularly from the executive branch. Judges who ruled against prosecuting high-level members of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) on corruption charges in 2014 were subsequently promoted to more senior positions, while prosecutors and one judge who had conducted the initial investigation into allegations of corruption were indicted during the year.<sup>4</sup>

As a result, people in the Gülen movement and other dissidents do not have a chance to get a fair trial, despite very serious accusations leveled against them:

Legal professionals reported that peace courts created legal confusion due to unclear hierarchy and authority. The courts in December 2014, for example, ordered the arrest of Samanyolu Broadcasting Company CEO Hidayet Karaca and other members of the media as well as 33 police officers with alleged ties to Fethullah Gülen, a Muslim cleric accused of operating a clandestine network within the executive and judicial branches with a goal of overthrowing the government. After a higher-level court ruled on April 26 that detainees should be released, the Istanbul chief public prosecutor stated the higher court’s decision was null and void because another peace court had simultaneously ruled for the continuation of

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<sup>2</sup> *European Parliament Resolution on the 2015 Report on Turkey* (April 2016)  
[<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+TA+P8-TA-2016-0133+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN>]

<sup>3</sup> *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2015 (Turkey)*, U.S. Department of State (April 2016)  
[<http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/253121.pdf>]

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* p. 16

their detention. The defendants were indicted on September 17, and the case continued at year's end.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the widespread incrimination efforts by government officials and pro-government media, no indictments have been brought so far against the Gülen movement due to lack of credible evidence.

Prosecutions of journalists, judges, prosecutors, and police for membership of an alleged "Fethullah Gülen Terrorist Organization" were ongoing at time of writing, although there is no evidence to date that the Gülen movement has engaged in violence or other activities that could reasonably be described as terrorism.<sup>6</sup>

The AKP government in 2015 continued efforts to purge the police and judiciary of alleged supporters of the Gülen movement. During 2015, prosecutors, judges, and police officers with perceived links to the Gülen movement were jailed and charged with plotting against the government and membership of a terrorist organization. The main evidence being cited against judges and prosecutors at time of writing was decisions taken in the course of their professional duties rather than any evidence of criminal activity.<sup>7</sup>

But lack of evidence of criminal activity did not prevent the government from designating the Gülen movement as a terrorist organization that is trying to overthrow the government. This move allows the government to implement harsher antiterrorism laws for Gülen movement cases:

The HRA asserted there were hundreds of political prisoners from across the political spectrum, including journalists, political party officials, academics, and students. The government stated that these individuals were charged with being members of, or assisting, terrorist organizations...Authorities also used the antiterror laws during the year to detain individuals and seize assets, including media companies, of individuals alleged to be associated with the Gülen movement, designated by the government during the year as the Fethullah Gülen Terrorist Organization.<sup>8</sup>

Antiterrorism laws are used to detain Gülen movement individuals and seize their assets. Regular donations to Gülen movement nonprofits and charity groups are considered to be financing a terrorist group. Consequently, ordinary citizens are arrested for supporting these organizations.

The Turkish government continues to harass the Gülen movement outside Turkey. Foreign governments are pressured to shut down schools and other institutions affiliated with the movement in their countries. The Turkish government also launched a litigation campaign against movement affiliates in the United States. Most recently, a U.S. federal judge dismissed a lawsuit alleging that Fethullah Gülen orchestrated human rights abuses in Turkey, ruling that the plaintiffs "offer only circumstantial and tenuous allegations of a connection between Gülen's domestic conduct and the violations of plaintiffs' rights in Turkey".<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p.17

<sup>6</sup> *World Report 2016*, Human Rights Watch (2015)

[[https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/world\\_report\\_download/wr2016\\_web.pdf](https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/world_report_download/wr2016_web.pdf)], p. 581

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. 582

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Department of State, p. 19-20

<sup>9</sup> *Bunyamin Ates et al v. Muhammed Fethullah Gülen et al*, 15-cv-02354, U.S. District Court, Middle District of Pennsylvania.

## **Conclusion**

Turkey's democracy has never been perfect, but it has been a bright spot in the Middle East. However, recent years have seen a substantial decline in democratic institutions, the rule of law, freedom of the press, and freedom of speech, and increasing intolerance toward dissent. One casualty of the deteriorating political climate is the Gülen movement, a faith-based network. Once an ardent supporter of Erdogan's democratization and EU-oriented agenda, the movement has now been outlawed and subjected to blanket persecution. The fate of the Gülen movement is a harbinger of things to come for all who dare to dissent in this new political environment.

Thank you.