10 years since the Turkish military coup attempt targeting Erdo?an

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Ten years have passed since the military coup attempt of July 15, 2016, which aimed to overthrow Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdo?an's government. As the Erdo?an government marks the anniversary with "The Will is Ours, the Victory is Ours" events celebrating it as a "triumph of democracy," the real lessons of that night and of the decade that followed lie entirely outside the official narrative.

Erdo?an's "triumph of democracy" rhetoric is refuted by the political coup his government is mounting against the elected representatives of the Kemalist Republican People's Party (CHP)—which emerged as the largest party in the 2024 local elections—and by the unprecedented erosion of democratic rights. As Erdo?an seeks to hold down through repression the social inequality and class tensions that have grown even sharper than a decade ago, Özgür Özel, the elected leader of the CHP that claims to be his "democratic rival," meanwhile appeals to the very same imperialist powers that have sanctioned Erdo?an's crackdown, while warning of a social explosion. The United States and European leaders—who were accused a decade ago of being behind the coup attempt—were welcomed with a red-carpet reception just a week ago at the NATO summit in Ankara, as hundreds of people who oppose war, genocide, and NATO intrigues were unlawfully detained.

According to the indictments, more than 8,600 soldiers took direct part in the coup attempt, roughly 3,000 of them enlisted soldiers and military cadets who did not know what they were doing. In the subsequent purge, 40 percent of the generals were removed. A team was dispatched to seize Erdo?an in Marmaris but failed. Erdo?an's call, through the media, for the population to take to the streets against the coup was a critical turning point in its defeat. Yet the appeal to the masses subsequently and deliberately avoided targeting the imperialist-capitalist machinery behind the coup—a machinery of which Erdo?an, though discarded by it for the time being, was an important part.

The coup officers used more than 200 armored vehicles, dozens of tanks, helicopters and F-16s. The Turkish Parliament, the Presidential Complex, the Special Operations Department and TÜRKSAT satellite company were bombed by warplanes. According to official figures, 287 people were killed, 253 of them while resisting the coup. Incirlik Base, used jointly by US-NATO, was used to refuel the coup jets in mid-air; and when the attempt collapsed, the Turkish commander tried to take refuge at the US headquarters on the base.

After the coup was defeated, more than 125,000 public employees were dismissed, tens of thousands were arrested, and hundreds of associations, media outlets and unions were shut down. Having defeated the coup attempt, Erdo?an used it as the basis for a counter-offensive to build a presidential dictatorship in which he crushed all of his opponents. The purges and arrests targeted not only the coup-plotters but also leftists, Kurdish politicians and the workers' movement.

Immediately after the coup, Labor Minister Süleyman Soylu declared that "the United States is behind the coup," while Erdo?an attributed it to a "mastermind" at work since 1960. This was a reference to the undeniable role the United States had played in previous military coups, above all that of September 12, 1980. The fact that tens of thousands took to the streets during the coup attempt, and that the overwhelming majority of the population did not support the coup, was bound up with the fact that these bloody coups remain vivid in the consciousness of the working masses.

The official narrative, however, was quickly narrowed to a framework focused entirely on the US-based Islamist preacher Fethullah Gülen and his organization; no effort was made in the trials to expose the hand of the US and NATO; any withdrawal from NATO or seizure of US-NATO bases and interests in Türkiye was out of the question. Adil Öksüz, alleged to be Gülen's right-hand man, who was captured at the Ak?nc? Air Base near Ankara on July 16, was released on July 18 and vanished. Berlin allegedly declined to confirm or deny claims that he is in Germany.

That these matters were all swept under the carpet by Ankara is the political expression of the Turkish bourgeoisie's powerful orientation to restabilize its military-strategic alliance with the US and NATO.

Gülen was a US and CIA asset. He came out of the Cold War-era, CIA-linked "Associations for the Struggle Against Communism" founded after the Second World War. In the 1990s he established a network of Islamic schools not only in Türkiye, but also in the former Soviet Turkic republics aligned with the US strategy of influence. From the Justice and Development Party's (AKP) rise to power in 2002 he served as a bridge between Erdo?an and Washington. Among those who wrote letters endorsing Gülen's 2008 green card application were former CIA National Intelligence Council vice chairman Graham E. Fuller, former CIA official George Fidas and former US Ambassador to Türkiye Morton Abramowitz.

It would be more than merely naive to assert that such a coup attempt—in so critical a NATO ally, situated where Asia meets Europe and the Mediterranean meets the Black Sea, central to an American strategy directed against Russia and Iran and pursuing full domination of the Middle East—was organized or launched independently of elements within the American military and intelligence apparatus. After the coup, Washington rejected the Erdo?an government's persistent efforts to secure Gülen's extradition. Soylu stated that the failure to act on the Interpol requests pointed to international involvement in the coup.

The responses of NATO's principal powers during the coup made clear that, even if they did not directly organize it, they turned a blind eye to it. US Secretary of State John Kerry's first official comment was an evasive one that did not condemn the coup and merely expressed the hope for "stability, peace and continuity" in Türkiye. Washington and Berlin declared their support for Erdo?an's "elected government" only after it had become clear that the coup would fail.

There was no sign that these powers would have greeted the coup's success with displeasure. In the days after the coup, the American and German political and media establishment, rather than condemning the coup attempt and its plotters, focused on condemning Erdo?an's

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suppression of them, hypocritically emphasizing their "democratic rights." On July 18, the *Washington Post* reported Kerry's remarks at a press conference, saying, "NATO will be scrutinizing Turkey in coming days to ensure that it fulfills the alliance's requirement that members adhere to democratic governance."

General Joseph Votel, head of the US Central Command that directs US military operations in the Middle East, said that the purge within the army was "something to be very, very concerned about." Erdogan charged him with supporting the coup, saying, "The US general stands on the coup plotters' side with his words. He disclosed himself via his statements…"

The coup was the product not merely of a power struggle between Erdo?an and Gülen, but of the deepening crisis of the global capitalist system. Before the coup, Ankara had entered into sharp conflict with the US and its other NATO allies over fundamental geopolitical questions. In 2013, when the administration of US President Barack Obama gave full backing to the military coup in Egypt against the elected Islamist president, Mohamed Mursi of the Muslim Brotherhood, Erdo?an sharply condemned it.

In the regime-change war launched in Syria in 2011, in which Ankara was deeply involved, Washington's growing reliance on Kurdish nationalist militias in place of its Islamist proxies was seen as a major threat by the Turkish bourgeoisie and state: the emergence of a US-backed Kurdish enclave on the southern border could produce similar consequences in Türkiye, home to the largest Kurdish population. The Erdo?an government responded by ending its ongoing negotiations with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Ankara's Islamist proxies in Syria were backed against the US-supported Kurdish forces, and a violent crackdown was launched against elected Kurdish politicians at home. This conflict in Syria could allow Iran and Russia, Washington's real targets, to increase their influence in the country and across the region. Indeed, after the coup attempt Ankara established a tripartite mechanism with Iran and Russia in Syria and placed the goal of suppressing the Kurdish movement ahead of its effort to topple the Damascus regime. While NATO leaders awaited the outcome of the coup attempt, the leaders of Iran and Russia were among the first to condemn it.

After Moscow intervened in the war to defend the regime of President Bashar al-Assad in Syria, Türkiye's downing of a Russian aircraft on the border in November 2015 brought the two countries to the brink of war. In June 2016 Erdo?an sent a letter of apology to Putin, turning toward rapprochement with Moscow and toward a settlement in Syria outside Washington's control.

The threat that the largest army on NATO's southern flank would shift toward an alliance with Moscow was unacceptable to the imperialist powers. Just eight days before the coup, on July 8, 2016, the NATO summit in Warsaw devoted its central focus to escalating the confrontation with Russia. Barely two years had passed since the anti-Russian, far-right coup of 2014 in Kiev, and the NATO powers were increasingly moving to provoke a war with Russia through Ukraine.

All these conflicts arose from the fact that the US-led imperialist aggression unleashed after the Stalinist bureaucracy dissolved the Soviet Union in 1991 was drawing Türkiye into its vortex. The Turkish bourgeoisie had been complicit, in pursuit of its own interests, in the aggression of the US and its allies against Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and Syria and in NATO's eastward expansion targeting Russia and was being forced to confront the consequences.

After the coup was suppressed, Erdo?an escalated the drive to crush the Kurdish movement in Türkiye and Syria; direct military operations were launched into Syria and the country's northwest was brought under control. This was a move directly against US policy.

Tensions persisted in the years after the coup. In response to Ankara's purchase of S-400 air defense systems from Moscow, the CAATSA sanctions were imposed on Türkiye during Donald Trump's first term. Without obtaining Gülen's extradition, Erdo?an ultimately released Pastor Andrew Brunson—who had been arrested and accused of involvement in the coup—under pressure from Trump in 2018. Gülen died in Pennsylvania in 2024, still under US protection. Relations between Ankara and Washington continued to fluctuate under Joseph Biden as well. But Trump's return to the White House in January 2025 marked a turning point. What was at issue was not that Trump regretted the sanctions and threats of his first term against Erdo?an, but that Türkiye had turned toward a policy far more closely aligned with US aggression against Russia and Iran.

The regime-change war in Syria succeeded in December 2024 through an operation spearheaded by Islamist proxies backed by the Erdo?an government, toppling Assad and dealing a heavy blow to the influence of Iran and Russia in the region. As Ankara increasingly abandoned its balancing policy with Moscow, the Black Sea became an arena for Ukraine's NATO-backed attacks on Russian military and commercial assets. The NATO summit held in Ankara in July 2026 glorified both rearmament and Ukraine's growing strikes deep into Russia.

Today, Türkiye under Erdo?an is also seen as indispensable to the US war against Iran and to its drive for full domination of the Middle East; despite its growing rivalry and conflict with Israel, Ankara participates in Trump's "Board of Peace" for Gaza. Türkiye is considered vital to US aggression aimed at China and its major economic projects such as the Belt and Road.

Ten years after the July 15 coup attempt, the international geopolitical and class tensions that gave rise to it have grown sharper than ever. In the United States, the center of world imperialism, Trump's failed coup of January 6, 2021 was the sharpest expression of the collapse of democratic forms of rule globally. Trump's return to the White House in 2025 was made possible only because the Democrats, far from prosecuting and jailing him, cleared his path. Both coup attempts have proven once again that no faction within the bourgeoisie can consistently defend democratic rights or oppose imperialism.

As Leon Trotsky explained in his Theory of Permanent Revolution, in this epoch of imperialist war and the world socialist revolution, these tasks can only be accomplished through the working class's seizure of power and on an international scale. It is based on this perspective that the Sosyalist E?itlik Partisi (Socialist Equality Party), Turkish section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, was founded on the basis of a relentless political struggle aimed at mobilizing the working class against both the imperialist powers and the Erdo?an regime and the bourgeois opposition.

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