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ERDOGAN

TYRKIAS NYE SULTAN



Erdogan. The Making of Turkey's Strongman

by Nilas Johnsen

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TEARS FOR TURKEY

(pp. 7-15)

Tears for Turkey

Six coffins, draped in the crimson flag of Turkey, are on display in the quadrangular courtyard outside the Fatih Mosque in Istanbul. Family members come together at the front of the square, placing one hand on the caskets. Women lay their heads on lids of the caskets and weep. Some of the men lift a fist towards the sky and lovingly chant the names of the dead. It is the 17th of July 2016, and those being buried are among the latest martyrs of Turkey. One day and two nights earlier, during a dramatic coup attempt, more than 270 people had lost their lives. At the funerals the Turkish government honor those who died in the struggle against the coup. In the midst of tight security, where the armed guards carry automatic weapons and the police have blocked the roads with armored vehicles, several hundred people have forced their way into the fortified square. The majority are not relatives of the deceased but have come to catch a glimpse of the man for whom they gave their lives. When the Imam confirms the rumor that President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is due to attend, the crowd breaks into jubilation. The zealous exuberantly yell out "God is Great".

I am positioned at the front of the coffins, where a group of journalists have been assigned to stand in three narrow rows. All off a sudden a security guard abruptly brushes me aside, and Erdogan and his entourage pass right in front of me, to take up their center stage position by the caskets. The President's facial expression might be cut from stone, but during the prayer his tears flow freely, while he lifts his hands in front of him. When the Imam has concluded, the microphone is passed on to Erdogan. He turns toward the crowd slowly and with all eyes on him he meticulously wipes his tears away. In a booming voice he makes a solemn promise that the victims did not die in vain, and that they will be avenged in the most severe way. "We demand the death penalty", shout the crowd. "You will be heard", Erdogan replies.

Rewind 36 hours: At ten pm on Friday the 15th of July soldiers and tanks are deployed on the bridges over the strait of Bosphorus, that divides the Asian and the European parts of Istanbul. In the capital of Ankara shots can be heard from within the General Staff headquarters. Fighter jets break the sound barrier as they descend on the two cities, creating a sonic boom that scares the citizens into thinking they are being bombarded. Thirteen minutes past midnight armed soldiers force the news anchor on the state broadcaster TRT to read an announcement: A group calling itself "The Committee of Peace at Home" proclaim that the government has been toppled in order to restore "democratic, secular and law-based rule". The Turks are told that the Military is behind the operation, and that a curfew has been enforced.

But less than fifteen minutes later president Erdogan enters into the conflict in dramatic fashion. He calls the news anchor at the private TV-channel CNN Türk, and using the mobile application FaceTime, allowing the viewers to both see and hear him, he denounces the coup on live TV.

"Good evening", a seemingly calm Erdogan begins. "This is an attempt from a minority group in the army, but outside the chain of command ... the ones responsible will be made to pay

a heavy price for taking the nations planes, tanks and cannons and turning them on the people”, he declares.

Erdogan is on the run from the coup plotters and makes the call from his private jet. He tells his listeners that the coup soldiers belong to a criminal faction within the armed forces but assures the viewers that the attempt will be thwarted. He implores his followers to defy the curfew. “I have this message: Take to the streets and give them your answer”, the president insists in a commanding tone. In reality the coup attempt is over there and then.

During the night scores of Erdogan-supporters flock to public buildings in Ankara, to the bridges across the Bosphorus, and to the two airports in Istanbul. There they make a stand against the coup soldiers, at the expense of their lives for several. Gunfights break out in multiple locations, but the heavily armed special police force, loyal to the Turkish leader, defeat the wavering young soldiers. The coup attempt is disintegrating, and it turns out that the majority of the military are not a part of the plan but are deeply engaged in the fight against it.

In the middle of the night a bomb is dropped on the Parliament, where politicians from the ruling AK Party are holding an emergency meeting. Several policemen and security guards sustain injuries, but there are no fatalities. A commando unit from the Special Forces attack a luxury resort in the holiday town of Marmaris on The Aegean Coast, where Erdogan and his family had spent the last couple of days, but by now the president is long since gone.

At dawn the soldiers on the bridges of Istanbul surrender. Many of them are terrified cadets in their late teens who believed they were taking part in an anti-terror exercise. They strip off their uniforms and abandon their posts in their underwear, with their hands above their heads. The police have to fire shots in the air to prevent the mob from lynching them. After making his escape, Erdogan lands at Atatürk airport, where he holds a press conference in which he takes the world by surprise when he calls the coup attempt “a gift from God”. His reasoning is that because his enemies have shown face, they can be rounded up and punished. He lays all blame on the network of the religious leader Fethullah Gülen, a 75-year-old recluse living in exile in the US. Erdogan makes a pledge to purge all Gülen-followers, whom he labels as terrorists and accuses of attempting to create a “parallel state”. As the next day breaks the coup attempt has been resoundingly defeated and a state of emergency is declared. Mass arrests and dismissals are enforced with immediate effect. The lists were drawn up long before the coup, and Erdogan’s opponents are apprehended by the thousands. The extensive purge is directed at the army, the judiciary and the bureaucracy. Erdogan’s AK Party seek to gain complete control of the Turkish state, an ongoing struggle ever since they won their first election in 2002. And this time nobody can stop them.

The following night huge crowds take to the streets to celebrate the failure of the coup attempt. Erdogan’s religious and conservative voter base take the charge, congregating at the symbolic Taksim Square in Istanbul, which three years previously had been the epicentre of a massive wave of discontent and protest against Erdogan’s rule. But now banners with Erdogan’s portrait are being waved and the music from his election campaigns is played at a deafening volume. Everyone that I speak to on that night express their blind faith in Erdogan. In liberal districts, where the support for Erdogan is low, supporters of the president race through the streets, honking their horns and holding flags out their car windows, as if they have just won a football match.

The next morning, when I see Erdogan holding his teary-eyed speech of vengeance at the funeral in Fatih, it is crystal clear that the coup attempt that intended to topple him, has left him stronger than ever.

This book tells the tale of Erdogan's Turkey. The first part describes his ascent to power, part two recounts the years during which Erdogan's rule took an increasingly authoritarian turn, and part three examines the coup attempt and the subsequent purge. It has been written with love and respect for this vibrant and intriguing country, yet it is steeped in a growing sadness for the situation in Turkey.

When the Norwegian newspaper VG sent me to Istanbul to open a new Middle East office in 2016, Turkey was chosen mainly as a convenient base. The wars in neighboring Iraq and Syria was to be my main assignment. But it did not turn out that way. 2016 was the year that Turkey was the dominant story coming out of the region, due to an internal war in the Kurdish regions, a wave of terror attacks, and the refugee crisis between Turkey and the EU. And then the bloody, chaotic and confusing coup attempt in the middle of the summer. A horrific year that ended with a mass killing at a nightclub in Istanbul, where a terrorist from ISIS shot and killed 39 people on New Year's Eve.

Turkish society is far more complex and captivating than I had imagined. From Europe we tend to view Turkey as oriental and Islamic, but from the Arab world it is considered secular and Western. Seen from within, the Turkish identity is marked by contrast and antagonism. And yet you can find the same fiery patriotism among cosmopolites in the cities and conservatives in the countryside. Immersing myself in this country, and especially in the metropolis of Istanbul, sharpened my senses. From the first instance I felt familiar and estranged at the same time. It feels as if there is some magical element in that hazy mist arising from the Bosphorus, making every challenge more unnerving and every pleasure more delightful. It felt like falling in love at first, and yet it quickly became clear that I had arrived in a country where roughly half the population lived under a constant shroud of heartbreak. Most of my new acquaintances seemed paralyzed by powerlessness and were fearful of the future. The same apathy and tristesse can be found in the literature, art and what little remain of the free press.

A few weeks prior to the coup attempt, a Turkish friend and neighbor came calling. He looked with interest at a magazine on foreign affairs, and asked me to translate the cover, which read Syria, The Country that Got Lost. "Soon you'll be able to write the same article from here, and you can call it Turkey, The Country that Got Lost", he replied with a look of dismay. Terror, a deep-running political struggle and a growing economic crisis had caused my neighbor, and many other Turks, to fear a collapse into chaos.

I registered alarming levels of discord and conflict in the society that surrounded me, but I still believed that the time of coups had come to pass in Turkey. Ever since his Islamic party gained power in 2002, Erdogan had outmaneuvered his opponents one by one. All indications were that Erdogan had already succeeded in reigning in the generals. That is why the coup attempt came as such a shock. And even though the bloodshed and conflict only lasted for one night, Turkey will be marked by that night for a long time to come. Two and a half years after the coup attempt, 140.000 people have been dismissed from their jobs, half a million people have been detained, and 85.000 remain in arrest. The scope of Erdogan's purge is staggering, especially when you consider that a mere 9000 soldiers participated in the actual coup attempt.

The accused mastermind behind the coup plot, Fethullah Gülen, has categorically denied the charge. Gülen, Erdogan's ally until a falling-out in 2013 caused a power-struggle between the two, claims instead that president himself orchestrated the coup attempt as an excuse to increase his own power. The Turkish opposition also talk of a "controlled coup". Such claims fill Erdogan with rage. He labels the accusations as treachery towards the Turkish state. The backdrop of the coup has become increasingly disputed, but the Turkish press has been so efficiently gagged that opposing arguments hardly reach the public. The unity that was visible in the days following the 15th of July, has been blown away. A referendum on increased presidential powers, held in the

spring of 2017, proved that the Turks are divided down the middle: Half of them love Erdogan and are certain he is taking them on a path to glory; the other half loathe him and are losing their faith in the future.

Erdogan is the boy from a deprived family, whom despite his religious schooling and background from political Islam, has managed to rise to the top in the strictly secular Turkey. He has faced barrier upon barrier on his path from an impoverished neighbourhood in Istanbul to the extravagant presidential palace in Ankara. Turkey's secular elite, the Constitutional Court and the military leadership have all tried in vain to stop him. Every obstacle he has had to overcome, has given him increased influence.

When Erdogan initially swept the old power structure aside in Turkey, it was seen as proof that Islam and democracy could go hand-in-hand. Authoritarian traits in the Turkish "deep state" establishment, and the frequent military encroachments on democracy, had long concerned the West. Erdogan was rooted for when he weakened Turkey's military guardians. He said all the right things and was compared to Christian Democrats in Europe. Erdogan talked about liberalizing the justice sector, strengthening human rights, and gaining membership in the EU. During his first years in power, Erdogan and his government were considered a beacon of hope for the Middle East.

But after 17 years of Erdogan-rule nobody still feels that the rest of the region should look to Turkey to learn about democracy. The election campaign ahead of the 2017 referendum was held under State of Emergency rule, with the absence of free press. The opposition claimed the result was tainted by fraud, and Erdogan's victory was adjudged "not democratic" by the European election observers. The subsequent presidential election was moved forward by 18 months and held in the summer of 2018, when the country was still under a State of Emergency. Erdogan won by a narrow majority after an election campaign deemed as "not free and fair". The Turkish government dismissed the report from the international observers out of hand.

Erdogan has a twisted view on majority rule, and once said that "democracy is like a train, when you reach your desired station, you disembark". He has complete control of the Turkish media, and almost all debate is centered on presidential initiatives. His charisma is captivating, but his message alarming. Erdogan loves to romanticize Turkish grandeur during the Ottoman Empire, but although he pursues an aggressive foreign policy, unrestricted power within domestic borders remains his main goal.

Many European analysts see Erdogan as an obstinate and rigid leader, but I see a pragmatic opportunist with an amazing ability to turn the tide. Erdogan crafts political gain from every setback and manipulates his followers into believing his warped perception of reality. The Turkish President is in many ways comparable to Russia's Vladimir Putin, but I would argue that the latter is the copy, and that Erdogan, with a political career dating back to his teens, is the original among the new authoritarians. His nationalism, populism and blatant distortion of the truth may draw a parallel to Donald Trump of the US, but again: Erdogan set the pace.

Erdogan is an increasingly despotic leader, with the second largest army in the NATO, running a G20-economy in a country with an all-important strategic position where the East meets the West. Although the coup attempt did not erupt into a prolonged spiral of violence, the situation remains precarious. The Turkish historian Soner Cagaptay draws up three scenarios for Turkey in the post-coup era: The first is that Erdogan continues his polarizing policies, sending a crisis-stricken Turkey into an even deeper schisma; the second is that Erdogan becomes a full-scale authoritarian, forcing his will upon the nation; and the third is that the deep divide in the country results in civil war. I consider scenario one and two to be the most likely, but a chat with the renowned Turkish scholar Behlül Özkan puts scenario three - internal war among the Turks - in a chilling perspective: "Imagine what would happen if an armed conflict breaks out and eighty

million Turks situated on the threshold of Europe become refugees. If Turkey collapses in civil strife and mayhem, it would make Syria look like child's play”.

European leaders have begun to wake up and are increasingly alarmed at Erdogan's iron-grip on power. But mild warnings are wasted on the Turkish leader. Human rights violations are deemed necessary tools in Turkey's war in terror. Erdogan repeatedly threatens to break ties with the EU. A full membership is now miles away. The trust between Turkey and the United States has been worn thin. The US Department of Justice refuses to comply with the Turkish demand to extradite the coup-accused Fethullah Gülen. In Syria the two NATO-allies have long been on a collision course, as the American military supports Kurdish militias that Turkey are at war with. The Trump-administration has threatened Turkey with a trade war, a move that almost drove the Turkish economy into full meltdown in the autumn of 2018. Turkey's relationship with the West is worse than it has been for decades. At the same time Erdogan has made overtures to Putin's Russia, and the two men form an ever-closer alliance.

And just as Erdogan's opponents feared, he has succeeded in an extensive power-grab. The Constitution has been changed in the controversial referendum of 2017, giving Erdogan near full control of the executive, the legislative and the judiciary. The increased authority has made him into the most powerful Turkish president ever. After winning the election in 2018, he has secured his dominion until 2023, when he can run for another five years. There is already talk of another amendment to the constitution, allowing him even one more term, which would result in Erdogan ruling the country until he turns 79 in 2033.

Under Erdogan Turkey has fallen under one-man-rule, his critics warn. “I don't care if the West call me a dictator”, Erdogan replies. “My only concern is what my own People think”.

A MAN OF THE PEOPLE

(pp. 18-32)

At first glance, there is little to indicate that the small mountain town of Güneysu, located at the end of a narrow valley that extends inward from the coast of the Black Sea, should have any kind of prominent place in Turkish history. Yet in the precipitous slopes, where dense groves of dark green tea trees grow, there is a cluster of houses where the country's most powerful person has his roots.

Recep Tayyip Erdogan was born February 26, 1954 in the metropolis of Istanbul, but his parents, Ahmet and Tenzile, were from Güneysu, which is in the Rize province of the Black Sea. In Turkey, the place your parents come from is considered to be your hometown, and Erdogan spent much of his childhood in Güneysu.

Along the road to Erdogan's family's hometown there are pictures of the president every ten meters. The Black Sea is quiet on this autumn morning, just over a year after the attempted coup. I've come to see the region Erdogan refers to as his emotional birthplace

Over the last decade, the Rize district has been bolstered by major government investments, but when Erdogan was a boy, the area was considerably behind the times. A meager fishery and a few small farms were the most important sources of income until around 1940.

Then, the cultivation of tea was introduced, and “Rize tea” put the region on the map. With its humid climate, Güneysu was perfect for tea production, but even though the Turks drink tea in large quantities, the farmers earn very little. The Rize region has been characterized by depopulation for several generations. Most of Erdogan’s relatives from Güneysu have settled in other cities, but a scarce few still live there, Ismail Erdogan, a second cousin of the president, tells me.

“Around 40 members of the Erdogan family come from this village. We’re spread across the whole country in search of better living conditions,” Ismail tells me as he guides me around the village. He himself holds a political office for Erdogan’s party, the AKP, as a so-called *mukhtar*, a kind of mayor for one of the villages in Güneysu.

Ismail tells me that his famous relative is named after his grandparents Recep and Tayyip, and that his middle name – Tayyip – is what most Turks call him. When Erdogan talks about himself in the third person – something which he does quite often – he also calls himself “Tayyip Erdogan” without using Recep. Both grandparents died before Erdogan was born. Güneysu in the 1950s and 60s hosted a herd of cousins and second cousins who gathered in the summer, and young Erdogan used to spend all his vacations in Güneysu.

“Tayyip spent every summer with us when he was a kid. We were the same age, but he was a bit more mature than I was. He liked to impress people and be the one to take control. And he was so eloquent. He would always use new, difficult words he’d learned in the city. We all looked up to him,” Ismail tells me when I ask what the president was like as a child.

Another one of the president’s similarly-aged second cousins, Saban Erdogan, is in the process of renovating one of the family’s houses while visiting Güneysu. Saban tells me that his second cousin was good at sports, very competitive and almost always among the best. As a child, Erdogan enjoyed going on excursions and loved bathing in the stream, Saban tells me. “But Tayyip was a little different. He was a serious boy. He wasn’t as wild and playful as the rest of us.”

Ismail proudly shows me pictures from when Erdogan visited and sat on the very same terrace we are as we drink Turkish coffee with foam on the top and a thick layer of grounds at the bottom of the cup. The two second cousins’ family resemblance to Erdogan is visible, but not striking. Nevertheless, both relatives emphasize how much they resemble the president.

Ismail’s voice is gruff, perhaps even a bit severe, as his relative’s often is when he holds political speeches. Saban is jocular and has kind eyes, a character trait Erdogan likes to exhibit in meetings with his voters. In the West, we often see the “stern” version of Erdogan, while Turkish TV viewers occasionally see an Erdogan with a twinkle in his eye and a characteristic, hiccuping laughter.

Erdogan often brings up his childhood in the Rize province. He wants to appear as a man of the people, with a background from a conservative part of Turkey where traditional religious values are still maintained. The coastal areas by the Black Sea are known for their particularly strong sense of national pride. Being able to demonstrate powerful patriotism seems to be a prerequisite for being a successful politician in Turkey, which is another reason why Erdogan emphasizes his connection with Güneysu.

In the yard between the family's houses there is a simple grave where Erdogan's grandfather Tayyip is buried. He was one of the first in the family to establish himself here, and the two second cousins proudly show me the tombstone. However, when I ask where this Tayyip Erdogan came from originally, they are elusive. "No one knows," Saban answers. They're likely so vague because Erdogan's origins are contentious. In spite of the fact that the family goes back at least three generations in today's Turkey, it's a sore point that the president has a family tree that extends across national borders during a time when Turkish nationalism is steadily gaining.

In 2003, Erdogan himself stated that his family emigrated to the Rize province from Georgia, but in a TV interview in 2014, he denied any affiliation with the neighboring country. "You wouldn't believe the things they have said about me. They have said I am Georgian... forgive me for saying this... even much uglier things, they have even called me an Armenian, but I am Turkish," he says of his family's background. An investigation has been conducted, and based on a linguistic assessment and public records from the end of the Ottoman Empire, Erdogan has been proven to be an ethnic Turk. However, like much of the president's background, the sources are unclear, and there are many different versions of where the family actually came from. The most accurate version seems to be that his family are ethnic Turks who escaped from what is present-day Georgia when the Russian Empire conquered the area from the Ottoman sultan in 1878.

The house Erdogan vacationed in as a child is located on a small hilltop overlooking the valley below. A banner with a picture of Erdogan hangs on the wall, but otherwise it doesn't differ from any of the other houses. The family's homes are worn down and dilapidated. Erdogan can justifiably say he comes from simple origins.

Narrow roads criss-cross the fields, but until recently you had to carry the tea on your back to the market, his relatives tell me. They thank the village's "great son" for the ever-better times they're seeing. Saban says that Erdogan himself helped harvest tea when he was visiting because his father wanted to show him that hard work was important. At that time, the inhabitants of Güneysu were poor, but their solidarity was strong, he explains.

"We tend to say that the person who doesn't participate in the work during the day doesn't get bread in the evening. We help each other and respect kinship. These are values that Tayyip took with him from here," says Saban.

At the very least, these are values that Erdogan himself touches on from his upbringing. In a letter that is hung up in the local office of Erdogan's AKP party in the center of Güneysu, the president explains that he always carries memories of the Rize province with him. "The most important thing about the people from this area is their consideration for one another. They are generous people who protect their fellow citizens. Those of us who come from the Rize province never forget where we came from," writes Erdogan.

The president has recently built a vacation home for himself in the mountain village, made of dark wood in the classic style of the Ottoman period, complete with police guards in the driveway. From here, Erdogan can look down into the city center, where an enormous placard of himself marks the entrance to the square. While I'm visiting Güneysu, a new road up to the mountain town is about to be completed along with a new gas pipeline that will ensure that all

houses get gas for cooking. Güneysu has also recently gotten its own hospital, and a faculty from the university in the city of Rize has even moved up here. Both are named after Erdogan.

At the AKP's office, there are pictures showing how much change the area has undergone since Erdogan came into power. In the fifteen-year-old black and white photos, Güneysu looks like a village in the 1950s. In the newer, color photos, Erdogan and local politicians pose next to construction projects that have made the town more modern. Voters in the area clearly understand they should appreciate this development, as in the last elections, Erdogan's AKP has received between eighty and ninety percent of the votes here. And yet – this hasn't been enough to satisfy the president.

“He thinks ninety percent at the last elections wasn't sufficient. Erdogan requires me to work to get one hundred percent support since this is his hometown,” says local AKP leader Mehmet Akif Karsi.

The local politician says this in all earnesty while he smilingly serves me potent black tea in a tulip-shaped glass. Karsi enthusiastically tells me about how unique Erdogan is as a person. Then, he cheerfully explains that people from this region get their temperament from the Black Sea: “We're easily angered and make great waves. But just as quickly, we are calm as a flat sea.”

People from this part of the country are known throughout Turkey as having an irascible disposition, and perhaps this regional feature can explain Erdogan's at times fierce temperament. If he hasn't inherited his anger from the region, though, he might have it in his blood. The president's father, Ahmet, was a hothead who enforced strict discipline. In a book about Erdogan's upbringing, it says that he had to kiss his father's feet in order to pacify him. In one case, Ahmet apparently strung his son up by the arms as punishment for having cursed. Ismail Erdogan vividly remembers the violent lectures his second cousin was subjected to as a child. “His father was the family tyrant, a true dictator,” Ismail tells me and laughs shortly.

Erdogan's opponents find great pleasure in how much he was beaten as a child, and believe the discipline can explain Erdogan's authoritarian governance. Erdogan acknowledges that his upbringing was characterized by his father's strictness. “Our father was very authoritarian. If you said a bad word, you had to pay a high price,” Erdogan has said.

Ahmet Erdogan was the grandson of an imam and is described as very religious. The inhabitants along this part of the Black Sea coast converted to Islam later than the rest of Turkey, and they practice their beliefs with the determined passion you find in new converts. Erdogan's view of Islam is more political, and was shaped during his schooling and studies in Istanbul, but even during his childhood he was already receiving religious education. During summer vacation, Ahmet sent his son to receive lessons from the imam in Güneysu. Erdogan showed great skill in learning verses from the Quran by heart. His relatives say that he was often in the mosque while they were out playing.

There's no saying if such stories of religious piety have been shaped by how Erdogan now wants to appear, but in the mountains about Güneysu, he has at the very least paid homage to his childhood faith with a spectacular construction: At the end of an impassable road that meanders up to a mountain peak 1100 meters above sea level, Erdogan has built a mosque in white marble with views all the way to the coast.

While Erdogan's roots can be found in Güneysu on the Black Sea, there is another area even more closely associated with Turkey's president: the Kasimpasa district of Istanbul. Erdogan lived here throughout most of his childhood and adolescence, and countless articles on Erdogan's background bring up the fact that he grew up on "the rough streets of Kasimpasa". The term *kasimpasali* used to refer to the hooligans who allegedly come from the district describes the classic Turkish macho man – someone who doesn't let themselves get picked on without striking back – hard.

During the last century of the Ottoman Empire, Kasimpasa was an important port, but when Erdogan was a boy in the 1950s and 60s, it was a worn-out industrial site. Many people who came from conservative areas in Turkey lived here after having moved to Istanbul to escape rural poverty. In the city, they constituted a subclass. Erdogan has a brother four years his junior and a sister young by eleven years. His father worked as a ferryman and his mother stayed at home. Erdogan has, among other things, said that his family's economic situation did not even allow for the purchase of a bicycle. He has also stated that the family didn't go hungry, but only because their mother was so creative in the kitchen and the neighbors so generous. "In my time, everyone in the neighborhood was closely acquainted. We stuck together, and the solidarity was strong," Erdogan has said about the district.

Kasimpasa is part of the Beyoğlu district, located on the north side of the Golden Horn, a narrow fjord that extends inwards where the Bosphorus meets the Marmara Sea. Opposite this strait is "the historic peninsula", which formed the heart of ancient Constantinople. Beyoğlu is the heart of today's Istanbul. The district houses the Galata harbor area, the vibrant Pera, the Istiklal shopping street and the bohemian Cihangir district. At the upper end towers Taksim Square with the statue of father of the nation Atatürk. At the bottom of the hollow is Kasimpasa.

Erdogan grew up in poverty, surrounded by others' prosperity. He often speaks with contempt for the western Turks, those who "drink expensive whiskey and have a view of the Bosphorus". Kasimpasa has no beautiful view. The water in the Golden Horn was quite polluted when Erdogan was a boy and still smells of decay. On the Turkish Monopoly board, Erdogan's old neighborhood is the "property" with the lowest value. The neighborhood's strongest feature is that those who live there feel isolated from the middle class in the district's rich areas. This is clear both in an economical and cultural sense, but mostly in its religious affiliation. While secular Turks dominate the affluent neighborhoods, the residents of Kasimpasa are religious and conservative.

The strong bond with Islam that the family brought with them from Güneysu was strengthened during Erdogan's upbringing in Istanbul. Crucial in that respect was his father's choice of school for his son.

In 1965, Ahmet Erdogan transferred his eleven-year-old son from the public school in Kasimpasa to an Islamic school on the other side of the Golden Horn. In one of the very few documentaries that Erdogan himself contributes to, he mentions this change of school as "the turning point in my life". Erdogan proudly speaks about the decision being made after he'd made an impression during religion classes at the state primary school.

“The school principal was the one who taught us religion, and one day he asked if someone could lead the class in prayer. I raised my hand and went forward. The rector laid a newspaper on the floor, but I pointed out that it would be improper to pray on it. Instead, I used a tablecloth as a prayer rug while I performed the prayer in front of the rest of the class.”

After this, Erdogan got the nickname *hoca*, which means “religious teacher”. The principal of the state school was religious himself, and felt that a boy with such abilities wouldn’t be best served by secular education. He sought out Erdogan’s father and persuaded him to send young Erdogan to an Islamic school.

The Islamic school, a so-called İmam Hatip school, is in the Balat neighborhood of the Fatih district, one of Istanbul’s most conservative areas. When I visit the school to ask about what Erdogan was like as a student, the principal and vice principal proudly show me around the building. They serve Turkish coffee and smilingly tell me that they can’t be named without having written permission from the Ministry of Education in Ankara – but they can certainly tell me a few anecdotes.

“Erdogan was able to memorize long religious and national romantic poems by heart and became known as one of the school’s most talented reciters. He represented the school in competitions, which he won,” the vice principal explains.

A childhood friend tells me that Erdogan used to have a Turkish flag tucked beneath his shirt when he performed patriotic poems, which he would then flourish for dramatic effect. Erdogan himself has commented on such poetry competitions as good training for his political activities, as the participation “gave me the courage to speak in front of a large audience”. Erdogan was also active in the school’s debate club, but his grades were only average, including in the religious subjects. He was the best in gym, where he got top marks.

The fact that Erdogan was sent to an Islamic school would ultimately have a considerable impact on his religious and political awakening. İmam Hatip schools have a large element of religious teaching based on the Quran, but aren’t the same as “pure” Quran schools in Arab countries. They are an institution specific to Turkey, created to give the state control over the education of imams and prayer leaders (*hatip*). İmam Hatip schools replaced the religious *madrassas*, Islamic schools that were widespread for centuries under the Ottoman Sultanate, and which were shut down by force during the secularization of Turkey.

The status of the İmam Hatip schools has changed in line with the political upheavals in Turkey. They have been closed down and devalued by secular leaders and then rekindled under more conservative governments. However, it was only under Erdogan’s rule that students from the İmam Hatip schools are considered to be fully equal to students from the secular schools. Erdogan made the decision as prime minister and the proposal was adopted without having been discussed in parliament in advance. The management of his old school praises this decision. They explain that Erdogan’s change in admissions rules for universities has given their students the same opportunities as others. “And the fact that Erdogan himself was a student here is quite motivating for those we teach now. It shows how far you can come with schooling from here,” the vice principal elaborates.

While the İmam Hatip school in Balat is just a short ferry ride across the strait from Erdogan’s childhood home in Kasimpasa, he was enrolled as a boarding student, possibly to save

money on the family food budget; room and board were free at the Islamic school. When Erdogan was a student, the school was modest. Today, after having been refurbished with funds from one of Erdogan's supporters, it is a splendid five-storey building with beautiful views from the rooftop terrace. The school has around 570 male pupils, but only a hundred of these follow the vocational education to become imams and prayer leaders. All students receive compulsory education in the Quran and Islamic law.

When the bell rings for recess, there are a few verses from a catchy fanfare that Erdogan has used in his election campaign. In the entrance area, there are pictures from the celebration after the failed coup attempt. Several of them show how Erdogan was honored. The president himself was present when his old school had its opening ceremony in autumn of 2017, and the school is now named after Erdogan.

"I remember when I left Kasimpasa and came across the Golden Horn to go to school here. I was excited and proud. This school was the only one of its kind when I started here, but it has provided education to successful people from all walks of life in the community. Mayors, prime ministers and presidents have all been schooled here," said Erdogan, referring to himself during his speech at the opening.

The fact that Erdogan has elevated the status of religious schools offends Turks who support the secular opposition, but is a popular choice among the president's conservative voters. When I mention the controversy around the Islamic schools, the principal of Erdogan's old school passionately comes to the defense of the education he offers.

"Many believe that we are just teaching students about Islam. That's wrong. Social studies and the sciences get the most attention. Moreover, there's no clash of interests between Islam and the other school subjects. On the contrary, the Quran encourages us to study science," the principal explains.

"This was also not a Quran school of the Arabic type when Erdogan was a student here. At that time, they also had math, history and languages. And unlike the Quran schools, sports have always been a part of the education here," he continues, and goes to fetch something he wants to show me.

It's a photo of the Imam Hatip school's football team in the year 1971-1972. At the back to the left, a head taller than his teammates, a broad-shouldered Erdogan directs a confident gaze at the photographer.

Football was Erdogan's obsession throughout his childhood, something he plays upon heavily in political contexts. When critics of the referendum in 2017 claimed that support from 51 percent of the population should not be enough to change the constitution, Erdogan responded by referencing his background as a football player: "It's a victory or a loss that matters. 1-0 means just as much as 5-0," he said to put an end to the conversation.

The Turks' football craze is far more intense than the meager 38th position they currently hold in the FIFA rankings might suggest. Almost without exception, one of the first things I'm asked about here is my opinion on Turkish football, and most Turks mention "John Carew, Besiktas" and "Norwegian salmon" as the two things they associate with Norway.

The myth of Erdogan's history as a football player is therefore something he can earn political capital on. Many believe the story is exaggerated, but the TV clips from an exhibition

match ahead of the 2014 presidential election show that the then-60-year-old still had his technique and knack for scoring intact. In just fifteen minutes, Erdogan had scored a hat trick to the jubilation of the crowd – albeit against what you might call a somewhat “friendly” line of defense.

It was already tough enough when Erdogan played against childhood friend Ismail Buyukacar at the district level in Kasimpasa at the end of the 1960s. Ismail was a right back and weighed 55 kilos, while “Tayyip Bey” (Mr. Tayyip), as his friend calls him, was bony, 20 centimeters taller and 15 kilos heavier.

“He was tough in 1-on-1s; his physicality and shooting were his greatest strength. It was painful to play against him, but I made it hard for him, too,” Ismail says proudly when I meet him in his office in a dilapidated building near the port of Istanbul.

When Erdogan played for the local teams in Kasimpasa as a teenager, such matches were an event, and shopkeepers in the neighborhood even closed up to come and watch. In his late teens, while Erdogan was also active on his school team, Ismail and Erdogan played together on the team Camialti Spor in 1971 and 1972.

“It was a joy to play on the same team as Tayyip. We’d been friends since we were twelve. He was always a leader. When we were kids, he always took control and made sure to gather enough players that we could play in the park.”

Erdogan could have had the opportunity to try his luck as a professional football player. Prominent club Fenerbahçe, the club he himself supports, apparently invited him to try out. Some of Erdogan’s critics claims he never received such an offer, and that the whole thing is made up – but Erdogan himself has recounted the story, adding that it was his strict father who put an end to his professional dreams. His father wanted his son to focus on work and studies, so Erdogan hid his football shoes in the coal cellar and kept his hobby a secret.

“Tayyip Bey wasn’t allowed to start on Fenerbahçe. Our fathers didn’t support us playing football. Even when we were kids, they thought it was nonsense that we wore out our shoes playing such a game. We both grew up in poor and conservative families,” says Ismail.

Ismail ended up playing pro in the Turkish top division for six years. He retired to become an accountant, a profession he still has. Erdogan continued his football career by playing for the corporate team of the municipal transport company in Istanbul (IETT). In 1976, the team won Istanbul’s local league, with Erdogan as the captain.

Erdogan was brought into the transport company to strengthen the company team, but in line with the rules for amateur football, he was a regular employee. In the off season he had to work in the company’s canteen, where he sat at the cash register and became well acquainted with the bus drivers. The many stories that Erdogan played professional football are thus an exaggeration – but technically not a complete falsehood.

Despite the fact that a football career never quite took off for Erdogan, two books have been written praising him as a football player. Erdogan also appears on broadcasts on TV to talk about his passion for the sport. In an interview that was aired in the fall of 2017, Erdogan voiced a comparison between football and politics, and mentioned the trophies he’d won with the corporate team as “a highlight of my life”. In the interview, he also reminisces about how he

played with a ball made of rolled paper waste when he was a little boy, and boasted that he only once in the span of fifteen years got a red card, and that was for arguing with the ref.

In another interview, Erdogan acknowledges that it was probably sinful that, as a Muslim, he played in such short shorts when he was young – but this must have been said with a touch of humor, since he also played the exhibition match as a 60-year-old prime minister in shorts, albeit a slightly longer version than the style of the 1970s.

Erdogan put his football shoes on the shelf for good in 1980, but has made several appearances in which he has lended prestige to his old football buddies.

“I’ve seen Erdogan many times since he became a politician. We kept in touch when he was prime minister. Now that he’s president, it’s not suitable to contact him. But the fact that a childhood friend Kasimpasa runs the whole country makes me proud,” says Ismail.

As an adult, Erdogan stayed in Kasimpasa up to the 1990s, when he had his breakthrough as a politician. It was in this district that he became known as *adam gibi adam*, or “a real man”. As a politician, he has often returned to Kasimpasa with the press in tow. During such trips, he enjoys visiting hairdresser Yasar Ayhan, something that has made Ayhan’s little salon into a favorite haunt for inquisitive journalists. “Erdogan has a real commitment to this district and to us Turkish workers. We trust that he wants the best for Turkey,” Ayhan declares, showing me a picture of himself and the president.

Mustafa Konar, another football mate who played with Erdogan in Kasimpasa as a teen, describes him as a person with intense charisma. “Tayyip was also a youth politician at that time. He organized debates and meetings and he could convince anyone who listened to him,” Konar tells me in the local tearoom, where the men have gathered to play cards and chainsmoke. Konar thinks Erdogan is the only person who can lead Turkey, and believes it’s a good thing that he exhibits authoritarian traits. “We need a strong leader, and Tayyip has his heart in the right place,” he explains. When I ask about the president’s football skills, he is more reserved. “Average technique, but big and strong,” is his assessment.

Erdogan’s neighbor of many years, Sadiya Yosma, still lives in the apartment one floor below where Erdogan lived. She welcomes me with a smile when I drop in unannounced and proudly shows her collection of posters from Erdogan’s campaigns. With impassioned eyes, she tells me about how Erdogan once washed the stairwell for the whole apartment because his wife, who normally did it, was sick. “He is a great leader, and I’d be willing to die for him. Almost the whole neighborhood feels the same way,” she tells me.

As a politician, Erdogan is a populist who plays on his supporters’ emotional strings. Despite his elevated status as president, Erdogan still manages to make his voters identify with him. His affiliation with both Güneysu and Kasimpasa strengthens his credibility as a “man of the people”, and his background in the national sport of football strengthens his image as a tough guy. Both parts were utilized in his election campaigns and are frequently brought up in government-friendly media.

However, it was probably the experience of being a student at the İmam Hatip school in Balat that shaped Erdogan most in his childhood. That’s where he got his political views on

religion, and it was also where his anger towards Turkey's secular elite grew. During the years when Erdogan went to school, students at Imam Hatip schools could qualify for a job at public mortuaries, where they were assigned the task of ritual washing of the dead before burials. This was something that secular Turks often referred to in a derogatory fashion. Erdogan has mentioned several times that people would often bully him by saying that he was going to "end up washing bodies". When he tells the story today, it's with a tone of furious revenge in his voice. This aggression was noticeable in Erdogan's speech at his old school in the fall of 2017.

"Those of us who went to Islamic school were looked down upon and ridiculed," the president said. "But now we're the ones running the country," he added.

A MARRIAGE OF CONVENIENCE

(pp. 129-138)

On August 15th, 1995, a wedding party is held at a luxury hotel in Istanbul and the whole nation is watching closely. The bride is 19-year-old Esra Elbirlik, dressed in a tight-fitting white wedding dress with a nervous smile on her face. The bridegroom is four years her elder – tall, lanky and with a powerful underbite – and sometimes looks shy and even embarrassed. He is the great son of Turkey, "the bull of the Bosphorus," the football hero Hakan Sukur.

The two had met the year before, and Sukur had been so smitten that he struggled to concentrate on the pitch – to the Turks' great despair. When Esra and her family rejected the star's first advances, none other than the country's then-prime minister Tansu Çiller stepped in on Sukur's behalf. In an attempt to increase her own popularity, she organized a meeting between the families, and what was later labeled as a "marriage of convenience" was agreed upon. The Turkish gossip magazines were besides themselves with excitement, and the marriage was broadcast on television. Happiness was short-lived, however, and in a public and heated divorce, the couple split up after just four months.

But the most interesting thing about the video clips from the wedding party wasn't the bride and groom. Sukur's witness – what we might call a best man – was mysterious Islamic leader Fethullah Gülen. Clad in a double-breasted, light gray suit, he takes a seat at one end of the table when the wedding vows are to be made. At the opposite end, dressed in a purple judge's coat, is the person who will perform the wedding ceremony: Istanbul's then-mayor, Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Today, Fethullah Gülen has been designated as enemy of the state number one after having been blamed for the failed coup attempt against Erdogan in July 2016 that cost at least 270 people their lives over the course of one bloody evening. Gülen's hundreds of thousands of followers have become pariahs in Turkey. Erdogan's government has placed Gülen at the top of Turkey's most wanted and he despises being reminded of the fact that he had depended on Gülen's network for maintaining power for several years. Therefore, it is almost impossible to find photos of Erdogan together with Gülen; the few that were available have been removed from the archives. However, there are a number of video clips, including the one from Hakan Sukur's wedding.

In the video from the wedding, Erdogan uses a special honorary title when he refers to Gülen. On two occasions, he calls Gülen “*hoca-efendi*”, something that can be translated roughly as “master teacher”. There is another video clip on YouTube compiled from various news stories in which Erdogan and the rest of the AKP leadership repeatedly refer to Gülen in this reverent fashion.

While Erdogan and the AKP don’t like to talk about it, they actually had a very close partnership with Gülen’s network for over ten years after coming to power in 2002. The AKP lacked the manpower to fill jobs in the government and bureaucracy and used Gülen’s professionally trained followers to replace the secular elite – while the Gülen movement lacked a political party and used the AKP to reach a more powerful position.

Fatma Bostan Ünsal, one of the founders of the AKP and an active member in the party until the summer of 2016, tells me that the cooperation between the Gülen movement was well known. It was something everyone knew about – but that wasn’t spoken about.

“The AKP needed the Gülenists because when we came to power, the secular elite had long been in full control of the military, the bureaucracy and the justice sector. These institutions had repeatedly shown that they had the real power in Turkey. Over time, the Gülenists had gotten their followers on the inside, so the AKP needed them. The Gülenists needed the AKP because they didn’t have their own political faction,” she says in an interview in Ankara.

“The collaboration was never confirmed in written agreements or discussed in political meetings, but it was no secret.”

In 2008, the prestigious foreign magazines *Foreign Policy* and *Prospect* conducted a web-based selection of the world’s one hundred most influential intellectuals. To the editorial staff’s great surprise, the relatively unknown Turkish imam Fethullah Gülen was a clear winner, with over half a million votes. At first, the magazines thought there had been some kind of hacking, but found out that Gülen had gotten the votes fairly. When they looked into the numbers more deeply, they discovered that a media campaign in Turkey had led to a wave of votes in Gülen’s favor from supporters all over the world.

Gülen’s surprising victory was presented with an interview with the imam himself in a series of articles about his movement and a separate case about how the Gülenists had managed to coup the poll.

“I’ve never wanted to be something important in the world. I’m just a humble servant of God and a humble member of mankind,” Gülen says in the interview with *Foreign Policy*.

Gülen was born in 1941 in eastern Anatolia, near the border with Iran and Armenia. He was educated and state-approved as an imam in 1959. Gülen was inspired by Sufism, a mystical branch of Islam in which the relationship between master and disciple is of great importance. He himself was a supporter of the Nur movement, which means “light”, and which was formed by a prominent Islamic Sufi master, Said Nursi.

Gülen himself claims that he is not a Sufi master, but he has nonetheless found millions of loyal disciples across the world. This started with the fact that Gülen’s lectures on Islam in the coastal city of İzmir attracted an ever-increasing fan base in the 1970s.

In 1976, Gülen opened his first student dormitory, where residents received religious instruction. Gülen's teachings emphasized the combination of knowledge about Islam with Western education. The dormitories spread, and in the 1980s were supplemented with schools inspired by Gülen's teachings. Of particular importance were the so-called "cram schools" – *dershane*, as they are called in Turkish – which prepared students for the entrance examination required to attend university in Turkey. Gülen followers were encouraged to pursue higher education and apply for jobs within the state bureaucracy.

One of Gülen's mantras is that his followers should "build schools, not mosques." His movement thus grew tremendously. Over the next few decades, millions of Turks attended schools run by Gülenites. These were private, but the tuition fees were lower than at the Turkish elite schools, and promising students from poor families could get their expenses covered. The Gülen schools were called "beacons". Younger students were supervised by *abi* (big brothers) or *abla* (big sisters). The leaders of Gülen's movement were called imams, even though they didn't have the official vocational training required in Turkey. The school network has been a source of both income and recruitment for the movement, and the most talented from this network constituted what Gülen referred to as his "golden generation".

The Gülen schools spread outside of the Turkish borders and into Central Asia, Africa and eventually to Europe and the United States. Already by the late 1990s, the Gülen movement had schools in over eighty countries – a figure that has doubled today. At its high point, the Gülen movement has had over 300 schools in Turkey and more than a thousand worldwide. Over 150 schools in the United States are associated with the movement.

The Gülen schools abroad are almost always run by a Turk. In non-Muslim countries, Islamic learning is not a distinct part of the education, but education about Turkish culture, on the other hand, has a prominent role, especially in countries in Central Asia with Turkish-speaking minority groups. The Gülen schools organized a competition in Turkish folk dance and singing called the "Turkish Olympics" in which students from all over the world participated.

In addition to applying for jobs in the Turkish bureaucracy, Gülen's supporters established themselves in the private sector. One of the principles was that members should pay between ten and thirty percent of their income to the movement. This was used to invest in more and more sectors. Gülen's supporters built up one of Turkey's largest media companies, starting with the newspaper *Zaman* and the TV station *Samanyolu*. The Gülen movement ran the Islamic bank *Bank Asya* and had its own business organization called *Tuskon*. It also ran a charitable organization that built hospitals and contributed emergency relief in Palestinian areas and in the Muslim countries in Africa.

From his start as an imam in İzmir, Gülen had become one of Turkey's most powerful men by the end of the 1990s, boasting a global network of followers. The schools, media and economic institutions that the Gülen movement owned have had a major impact, but its greatest resource was its large number of loyal disciples. Since there is no official organization, there is no exact number of Gülen's followers. Estimates range between 200,000 and 5 million in Turkey alone. When the movement was at its most powerful around 2010, a calculation concluded that they controlled assets worth at least \$25 billion – but I have also seen estimates twice as high.

In Turkey, Gülen followers are usually called Gülenists, while the name *fethullaci* was used to refer to them before. Officially, the movement is called *Hizmet*, which means “service” in Turkish. In their own publications, gülenists often refer to themselves simply as *cemaat* – “the movement”.

Gülen’s movement itself states that it represents a moderate interpretation of Islam, and that its aim is to promote such a vision through education. But the fear that Gülen’s followers were actually being trained to “take over the state from the inside” reaches far back in Turkey. Gülen had to repeatedly respond to charges of attempting to promote an “inner Islamization” of Turkey. The first accusation came after the coup in 1971, when he was imprisoned for seven months. After the 1980 coup, he was arrested once again. He was quickly released and maintained a low profile for many years. When he was imprisoned once more in 1986, he had managed to secure strong political ties and avoided conviction.

In 1999, Gülen appeared to have been exposed. A secret video recording in which he gives instructions to his closest followers was leaked to the Turkish state channel TRT. What Gülen says in the recording was deeply disturbing:

“You must move in the arteries of the system without anyone noticing your existence until you reach all the power center. [...] You must wait until such time as you have gotten all the state power, until you have brought to your side all the power of the constitutional institutions in Turkey,” Gülen says. He then instructs his listeners to keep this message strictly secret. “The secret is your slave, but you become its slave if you disclose it,” he concludes.

When the recording was released, Gülen was traveling in the United States, allegedly for medical treatment. He denied that he had encouraged someone to take over the state. He claimed that the video clip had been tampered with and that the statements were taken out of context. The Turkish state was not convinced, however, and initiated an investigation. In the autumn of 2000, while Gülen was still in the United States, a serious indictment was brought upon him. Gülen was indicted for conspiracy against the secular state and referred to as “Turkey’s strongest and most effective Islamic fundamentalist”, a man who “camouflages his own methods with a democratic and moderate image.”

In the indictment, Gülen’s schools were referred to as “centers for brainwashing Turkish youth with the intent of forming an Islamic state”. The Turkish army commander stated that thousands of Gülen’s supporters had come into important positions in the bureaucracy in which they “work on a daily basis with the goal of taking over the state and have spread everywhere”.

Such accusations against Gülen were therefore well known when Erdogan came into power. Two different sources have told me that Erdogan’s old mentor Necmettin Erbakan warned him against trusting Gülen. However, pragmatic and power-seeking as he always was, Erdogan chose to enter into a cooperation with the Gülenists.

Erdogan’s AKP already had a large support base among the working class and the poor in rural areas. The Gülen network had significant influence on the provincial middle class. A “marriage of convenience” between the AKP and the Gülen network seemed to be an undeniable win-win situation. On the surface, the two movements had similar ideologies: a desire for a society with a greater element of Islam (in which both claimed to take a moderate interpretation), a market-driven economy, and the goal of full membership in the EU.

The Gülen network in no way kept the cooperation a secret. On the contrary, it was something the movement boasted about. During conferences in the West, Gülen's influence on Turkish authorities was used in sales pitches. One such conference was even held in the House of Lords of the British Parliament in London, where "Gülen's political role in Turkey through his influence on the AKP government" was mentioned in the invitation.

A text published on one of the Gülen movement's websites, *Hizmet Movement News Portal*, writes that, when the AKP came into power in 2002, the party needed qualified labor and that "the movements faithful" took this job in line with the education and training their leader had given them. The text describes how members of the movement filled roles in the bureaucracy, justice sector, security sector and military. "They sacrificed a lot and worked hard to get these state positions. They used these positions to serve God, the homeland and the nation," it reads. A number of writers associated with the Gülen movement have highlighted a desire to "move the Turkish state in a better direction". It was no secret that the movement was working towards a more Islamic Turkey and that it sought power and influence by placing its people within the state apparatus.

Erdogan and the AKP leadership were initially quite happy with having these seemingly like-minded Gülenists positioned on the inside. Rather than working against the Gülenists, the AKP government helped them. From 2002 onwards, government-employed Gülenists also received more promotions than their secular colleagues.

Although the AKP didn't have the same need to brag about the cooperation, you almost exclusively find praise about Gülen during the AKP's first decade in power. In one TV interview, for example, Erdogan expresses the hope that "Allah must preserve the health of the master teacher," before gives thanks for "help from the other side of the sea", referring to Gülen.

Gülen remained in the United States after the so-called "health trip" at the end of the 1990s. His stay in America was primarily a self-imposed exile in order to avoid criminal prosecution following the 2000 indictment, which he still had hanging over him. Erdogan and other AKP leaders repeatedly argued that Gülen should come back to Turkey, and in 2008 he was finally acquitted of the charge of conspiracy against the Turkish state. At that time, however, he had already worked long enough to secure permanent residency in the United States.

In his efforts to obtain a US residence permit, Gülen received support from surprising sources. Among those who wrote letters to the authorities about Gülen's unique pedagogical skills was former CIA chief in Turkey, Graham Fuller. When this later became known, it only further strengthened Turkish theories that the Gülen movement had served as a tool for the CIA, which they alleged used Gülen schools to deploy agents in Central Asia and Africa. Fuller has denied that the CIA had such a hidden agenda, but is still an open supporter of Gülen.

From his American base, a gated complex with armed guards in the Poconos Mountains of Pennsylvania, Gülen manages his network through indirect control. In the interview with *Foreign Policy* in 2008, Gülen claimed that his only role in the movement's educational operations is to "propose and encourage the opening of schools". He denies that there is a centralized organization. "I reject terms like Gülenism and Gülenists. I'm just an author who held sermons among the people. I have no direct influence over any person or activity. It is unthinkable that I can exert power over anyone," Gülen claims.

Gülen is not listed as the owner of any of the movement's schools, banks or media outlets. However, it is clear from the 23 different websites that front the Gülen movement that he is its undisputed leader. He is honored with complete devotion in a way that bears clear similarities to religious sects, and the Gülen movement is often called a cult due to the devotion of his followers. In his own statements about the movement, which he consistently refers to as *Hizmet*, you can read between the lines that he is the movement's leader. Gülen's lawyers used his leadership role in the school network as a basis for seeking residence in the United States as a pedagogue. Statements from a wide range of current and former Gülenists vehemently deny that Gülen himself is at the top of a hierarchically structured network in which blind loyalty up the system is one of the most distinctive features.

What is unveiled about the movement suggests that distinct cells report upwards and that the leaders then report back to Gülen. The network is described as comprising of three circles: sympathizers, followers, employees. The innermost circle consists of only a few people, led by Gülen himself.

AKP veteran Nabi Avcı, who was an advisor to Erdogan from 2002 to 2011, claims that from the beginning, the Gülen movement "masked its intentions" and manipulated itself into the political center by appearing to be an organization that primarily promoted education.

"All parents in Turkey want to offer their children better opportunities through education, and Gülen's movement impressed people with its school work in Turkey and in countries across the world. They were polite and good at speaking about themselves. I know that Erdogan was skeptical the whole time, but you can't base politics on intuition. For a long time, they managed to hide their true goals, and they fooled many parties, not just AKP," Avcı says.

However, Avcı told me this in the spring of 2018 – at a time when the AKP had cut all ties with Gülen. Erdogan exhibited no sign of this alleged skepticism of the Gülen movement during his first years in power. In the decade that followed the AKP election victory in 2002, several AKP heads traveled to the United States to get an audience with Gülen. As late as spring 2013, Erdogan expressed wanting to have a good relationship with Gülen's movement. In May of that same year, Erdogan was traveling in the United States and sent his then Deputy Prime Minister Bülent Arınç to visit Gülen.

"We have a relationship characterized by brotherhood and friendship, based on our common past. It was a meeting that was held to remove negative rumors and speculation. We wanted to meet them, and they said yes," Erdogan confirmed to Turkish media at the time.

Prior to the Turkish presidential election in 2018, the opposition's candidate claimed that Erdogan himself had been in the United States to request Gülen's support just before the AKP was founded in 2001. Erdogan replied with a denial and a lawsuit, and further details about the alleged trip have never come to light. What started out as a marriage of convenience between Erdogan and Gülen's respective Islamic movements has become one of the most sensitive issues in present-day Turkey.

WHAT DID ERDOGAN KNOW?

(pp. 234-249)

At the end of September 2016, a messenger rang my doorbell. I hadn't ordered anything and hadn't given my address to anyone I knew in Turkey, so I was a bit surprised to get a package. "Information for foreign journalists", it read on the outside.

It was the from Turkish press directorate, with whom I'd registered to get a press pass. Inside was a gift box wrapped in black velvet that contained a piece of marble. The stone had fallen from the wall of the Turkish parliament when it was bombed during the coup attempt. The gift bore similarities to pieces of stone from the Berlin Wall, which were sold as souvenirs after the fall of the East German communist regime in 1989.

The package also contained pamphlets with official information about the coup attempt. The thickest was 120 A4-pages and was called "July 15 Coup Attempt In Turkey and People's Victory". It contains a detailed timeline of the events during the failed coup attempt, photos from that night and portraits of those who perished. Twenty of the photos show President Erdogan. This has been published by the president's press office.

A similar magazine was published by the state news bureau, Anadolu. It contains much of the same information, but also the names and photos of all of the primary suspected officers. This was several months before they were brought to court, but their guilt was already established without the slightest reservation. Both pamphlets also contain important pieces of evidence that would later be presented in court, including an interrogation with an officer who makes a detailed confession. The interrogation would substantiate that it was the Gülen network that was behind the attempted coup.

Such an attempt to ensure premature judgment via the press would have been, to put it mildly, unexpected in a western democracy. In Turkey, however, much of this information was already known due to leaks to local media. The country's authorities had taken on the task of gathering information, translating it to English and delivering it to the doorstep of foreign journalists. More than anything, the package told me how great a need Turkey had to get their official version of the coup attempt out in the open. The objective was to eliminate the impression that was in the process of taking hold – namely, that the rulers had known about the coup attempt in advance.

While the coup attempt was taking place, a peculiar image began circulating in social media in Turkey. It shows Erdogan's smiling face, edited into a body dressed in a tuxedo in which both hands are holding onto an Oscar statuette. The message was simple: The coup attempt was an act.

The accused Fethullah Gülen quickly claimed that he had had nothing to do with the coup. Although the majority of Turks are skeptical of Gülen, there was a significant proportion who believed Gülen's claim that Erdogan had planned the coup attempt himself to create a pretense in order to tighten his grip on power. The fact that Erdogan had a list of who was to be arrested ready in advance and called the coup attempt "a gift from God" helped fortify the impression that something was amiss. Just two days after the coup attempt, during an interview with CNN, Erdogan was confronted with the claim that he had orchestrated the coup himself.

“Im sorry, but this is just misinformation. How could someone plan such a thing? How could anyone with good conscience allow so many civilian lives to be lost? No, it’s unthinkable. Tayyip Erdogan and his friends and colleagues are the first to distance ourselves from such means. It’s quite the opposite; we’ve always put the people’s lives ahead of our own,” said Erdogan, who often refers to himself in the third person and the plural.

But the suspicion didn’t dissipate. During the following year, these kinds of theories moved from beyond the subculture and into the Turkish parliament. Opposition leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu from Atatürk’s old party, CHP, was among those who began calling the events a “controlled coup”. His claim is that the government had had enough information to stop the coup attempt, but deliberately let it happen in order to be able to strike back. Other politicians from the CHP have gone even further, insinuating that Erdogan may have even *provoked* the coup attempt.

Erdogan has forcefully countered such claims: “Calling this event a controlled coup is truly terrible. The country is being subjected to an operation designed to destroy the state, and then the opposition leader speaks about a controlled coup. It’s shameful to say such a thing,” he raged. The president has stood behind the same explanation from the beginning: It was the followers of Fethullah Gülen who planned and carried out the coup, he claims.

In the package I received, there are long excerpts of one of the most important pieces of evidence of the alleged link between the coup and the Gülen network – the interrogation of Lieutenant Colonel Levent Türkkan.

As the interrogation has been recounted by Turkish authorities, Türkkan gave a full confession in which he states that Gülen’s followers in the military were the perpetrators behind the coup attempt. The highly ranked officer was adjutant to General Hulusi Akar, army commander and leader of the Turkish General Staff. Previously, Türkkan had been adjutant to the previous army commander.

In the interrogation, Türkkan explains that the Gülen network helped him reach this high position, with the purpose of him spying on Turkey’s top military leaders. He says that, for a long time, he had a recorder in the office of the former army commander in the General Staff’s headquarters. Türkkan says that he gave the recordings of the army chief’s secret conversations to his superior in the Gülen network.

Türkkan says he comes from a poor family and was recruited through one of Gülen’s schools. He was aided by his “older brothers” in the movement, who helped him cheat on the admissions exam for the staff school. He estimates that as many as 60 to 70 percent of the new recruits in the 1990s had backgrounds from Gülen schools.

Türkkan also says he learned about the coup attempt the day before, and that the information he’d received was that the president, prime minister and army commander would be arrested, and the coup carried out at 3am on the night of July 16th.

When the coup attempt failed, Türkkan surrendered and was arrested by the police. He says that he regrets what he did, and that up until the coup he had believed that “the Gülen movement was working on God’s behalf”, and that Gülen himself had divine qualities. “Before that, I’d never thought that the Gülen movement had treacherous intentions, but now I have

realized what kind of people are a part of it. They are bloodthirsty. I've never met Fethullah Gülen, but this applies to him as well," Türkkan says.

Türkkan's alleged confession came just a few days after the coup attempt was quashed. The state news agency was the first to publish parts of the written confession, with Türkkan's signature at the bottom. He says the following: "Yes, I am a part of the parallel structure, I belong to the Gülen network, and after becoming adjutant at the General Staff, I began executing orders from the network."

According to the report from the interrogation, Türkkan was certain that he would be able to convince Chief of Staff Hulusi Akar to support the coup attempt, but explains that this failed. That is why Türkkan and the other officers kept Akar trapped in his office when the coup attempt was initiated. Akar himself has recounted that these officers entered his office to force him to cooperate, and that they tried to strangle him with a belt when he refused. When Akar wouldn't sign the coup leaders' statement, he was transported from the military headquarters and held captive until the next morning.

Parts of Türkkan's confession therefore also correspond with what Turkey's military leader has said himself. However, it is still quite problematic that the findings of such an interrogation are sent to the press before they are presented in court. The most disturbing thing was a picture that was sent alongside the leak from the interrogation: Here, Türkkan is shown with a battered and bloody face, and bruises all over his body. He has a large bandage around his waist and bandaged hands, and it even looks like some of his fingers have been broken.

Amnesty International's Turkish representative, Andrew Gardner, told me that he was informed that the interrogation was conducted without Türkkan having a lawyer present, which meant that it was in direct conflict with Turkish law. Amnesty pointed out that Türkkan's opportunity to get a fair trial was diminished after the alleged confession was discussed in Turkish media. Gardner was deeply concerned about the picture of the bloody officer.

"This officer was not arrested on the street by a mob, but in a public building, and without him resisting arrest. The injuries you see in the photos therefore suggest that he may have been subjected to torture," Gardner concluded.

Türkkan and several of the other officers who made confessions have later said in court that they were pressured, threatened and tortured. Many of the confessions have since been withdrawn. Türkkan has changed much of his statement and said that he was "in a terrible state" when he first made the confession. However, this has received little attention in the Turkish press and has not yet had any legal significance. His first interrogation is still used as the prosecution's primary evidence.

Other arrested officers have also been shown with visible injuries. General Akin Oztürk, former commander of the Air Force and member of Turkey's military council, has the highest ranking of all the defendants. He was photographed with a black eye, cuts and a bloody nose. A terrifying picture that was taken several days after the coup attempt shows hundreds of soldiers sitting crammed together wearing only their underwear, their hands tied behind their backs. Several of them have visible injuries. This picture was taken in the police horse stable, which is part of the police sports facility in Ankara. Extensive use of torture during interrogations was reported here.

Amnesty International put out a report that showed that prisoners were held in so-called “stress positions” for up to 48 hours. Injured people were denied medical attention, and others were beaten by the police. Several witnesses say they saw army officers being subjected to sexual assault by being raped with police batons.

Just to clarify: Turkey has signed the European Convention on Human Rights. Torture is a violation of international law and is obviously strictly prohibited – including under Turkish law. Turkish authorities have categorically denied that torture was used on arrested soldiers.

Erdogan himself has commented on the images of the wounded coup-makers and explained why so many of the arrested appear to have been beaten up: “Mass fights broke out when police were trying to arrest these soldiers, which led to many of them being injured,” the president explained.

2800 soldiers were arrested right after the coup attempt. These allegedly participated in the actual fighting. The number arrested from the military rapidly rose to close to 9,000. Considering that the Turkish army has 350,000 active soldiers and just as many in reserve, the number of coup participants was somewhat low. The Turkish General Staff has concluded that the coup attempt was initiated by a small fraction of just 1.5 percent of the military.

It was primarily officers in the middle of the military ladder who had operative roles. They were majors, colonels and lieutenants who lead the coup-makers to bridges, airports and squares. However, there are also many generals who are being charged, accused of having managed the coup attempt from military bases across the country. Turkey has 400 officers with the ranking of general. Of these, more than a third – 163 generals – are alleged to have participated in the coup attempt.

During the trials, these numbers have been questioned. What many believe is that even generals who weren’t active coup participants – but who are perceived as being critical of Erdogan – have been made into scapegoats. Several of the generals who have been charged as accomplices in the coup attempt were resistant to Erdogan’s desire to pursue more proactive politics in Syria, among other things.

“The numbers aren’t going up. So many generals, and yet so few operational soldiers – and they only used a fraction of the equipment available to the Turkish military. It seems like a strange coup attempt of limited scope,” lawyer Oktay Huduti points out.

He is defending his own father, General Adem Huduti, who, with four stars, has the second highest ranking of the defendants. Huduti has been found not guilty of belonging to the Gülen movement, but the general was still sentenced to 15 years in prison as an accomplice. The verdict concludes that he didn’t do enough to prevent the coup; the prosecution has accused him of waiting to see which way things went instead of opposing the coup officers.

“My father chose to negotiate so that the situation could be settled without any serious incidents in his camp. He’s very happy that no one lost their lives there,” Oktay says when I meet him at his office in Istanbul.

The prosecution wanted give General Huduti three life sentences, but since the judges gave him a milder punishment, his son felt like it was safe to meet me. He is one of the few defense attorneys who are willing to comment under his full name.

“My father had operative responsibility for Turkey’s other army, which patrols the entire border area with Iraq and Syria. He had 120,000 men under his command. These soldiers weren’t called upon during the coup attempt. If that had happened, the results would likely have been quite different,” he points out.

The low number of operative soldiers is one of several amateurish aspects of the coup attempt. Another aspect that has military experts scratching their heads is that the coup attempt happened in the evening. The Turks were accustomed to military coups taking place in the middle of the night so that political leaders could be imprisoned and a curfew instituted before they woke up. This was the case in both 1960 and 1980. This coup attempt broke with everything the Turks had learned to expect from a military takeover.

If the coup had taken place in the middle of the night, then fewer of Erdogan’s supporters would have been able to take to the streets. The crowds made a considerable contribution in demotivating the coup soldiers. Young soldiers have said this under questioning, and you can even see it in video clips from the night of the coup. Text messages extracted from confiscated phones show that coup officers had to pressure shoulders to shoot at civilians. “I repeat, shoot at the crowd to scatter it,” writes one of the alleged leaders. A major sent a message to other officers that he himself had shot at the crowd: “10-15 people have been eliminated, we cannot stop the drive,” he writes in the message thread. Later, the same officer writes: “Break, burn, show no mercy.”

Other reports, however, show that several of the officers were reluctant. “People are trying to get the police to arrest us. Should we open fire? There’s too many of them,” a lieutenant colonel writes. “If we open fire, we can take out three or five of them, but we can’t stop them,” he continues.

In the interrogation of Levent Türkkan – which is primary evidence for the authorities – he says that the original plan was for the coup attempt to begin at 3am. The fact that they started a highly visible operation on a heavily trafficked bridge in the country’s largest city at 10pm on a Friday night is strange.

I’ve heard two possible explanations from a source with insight into the investigation: One is that the coup-makers feared they were about to be revealed, and therefore accelerated their plans. The other is that the government had gained insight into what was going to happen and manipulated the coup officers to send the cadets out onto the bridge several hours before the plan. Thus, the coup was incited at a less favorable time for those who were behind it. A third possibility is of course that the coup-makers underestimated how loyal Erdogan’s supporters really are.

The most amateur aspect was that Erdogan himself was not taken by the coup-makers. Catching or killing the sitting leader is considered to be “rule number one” for a military coup. Erdogan has said the following about how he escaped: “On July 15th, I was with my family. We were on a five-day vacation in Marmaris. At ten o’clock that evening, I received the news that

something was happening in Istanbul, Ankara and other places. Then, we decided to leave [...] If I'd stayed ten or fifteen minutes longer, I would have been killed or captured.”

In the days following the coup, sources claimed that Erdogan left the hotel 44 minutes before the attack by coup soldiers – that is to say, considerably longer than the fifteen minutes the president mentions, but still very dramatic. But in the official timeline of events during the night of the coup that was later issued by Turkish authorities, completely different times are given. It states the following: “00:01: President Recep Tayyip Erdogan leaves Marmaris to go to Atatürk International Airport in Istanbul.” In the same overview, it says that the attack on Erdogan’s hotel happened over four hours later: “04:42: Helicopters open fire on the hotel in Marmaris where president Erdogan had been staying before he left around midnight.”

Erdogan still maintains the version in which he was a hair’s-breadth away from death, but then he is either talking about a different attack or the official timeline has incorrect information. But I have the times from three written sources as communicated by Turkish authorities.

Another strange point that was leaked to the press in the days after the coup was that an F16 aircraft with a coup-maker at the controls had had Erdogan’s private jet in its sights. The fighter plane may have even locked its weapon systems in to fire. If this were the case, you have to wonder why it wasn’t shot down. This has been explained by the fact that Erdogan’s pilot tricked the coup-maker into believing that the president’s jet was a regularly scheduled flight from Turkish Airlines.

Information from Flight Radar 24, a service that logs aircraft movements, shows that Erdogan’s jet circled south of Istanbul before it landed. That there were fighter jets controlled by coup-makers in the same airspace is a fact, but it’s unclear exactly how close they were. Another report, which was leaked by a government-friendly newspaper, claimed that the fighter jet couldn’t attack because it was about to run out of fuel.

This is how Erdogan describes the drama on board the plane as it circled over Istanbul: “I asked the pilot how long we could stay in the air, and he answered three to four hours. When we landed in Istanbul, the F16 aircraft flew over us – very low and faster than the speed of sound. It makes a supersonic bang that can be mistaken for bombing. The sounds are very similar. We had 10,000 supporters waiting for us at the airport. Under these circumstances, we made it and had the first contact with the people.”

As described in the book’s introduction, the coup-makers took control of the state news channel TRT. They forced the news anchor to read a statement explaining that the military had taken control, and that a curfew had been implemented. However, TRT is not among Turkey’s most popular channels, and even one of the cabinet members is said to have joked that “no one watches TRT anyway” when he heard about the coup attempt. Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım, who was also not arrested by the coup-makers, called the private channel NTV and denied that the government had been deposed. It was of great importance that Yıldırım communicated the message that the coup attempt was occurring outside of the military’s normal line of command. He had already said this at 23:05.

The station CNN Türk, which Erdogan reached an hour and a half later, is also a privately owned channel. “We wanted to involve the media in what happened. The national broadcast didn’t reach people’s homes, so we switched to Plan B for the media. We used our mobile

phones and went directly on private channels via the phones. That's how I encouraged people to take to the streets," Erdogan has explained.

Shortly after this crucial moment, the coup-makers attempted to take over the premises at CNN Türk – but only a small group of young soldiers showed up, and when they were told that the broadcast wouldn't be turned off, they took them at their word. The studio was evacuated, but the broadcasts continued to reach the people. Journalist Nevsin Mengü has later described what happened: "These young soldiers only had fear in their eyes and showed no sign of resoluteness whatsoever."

The coup-makers only managed to limit – but not shut off entirely – internet access. Some cell towers were destroyed, but most Turks had access to both phones and internet. Social media thus became an important platform. Prime Minister Yıldırım sent Twitter messages like mad. As it became clear that the coup attempt would fail, leading opposition politicians also took to social media with their condemnations.

In order for a coup attempt to be successful, it is vital to take control quickly. Even in just the first few hours, it was already clear that the coup-makers had lost their drive. Before Erdogan even appeared on TV, there was already the impression that the coup was about to collapse. The fact that the coup-makers didn't take control of the media, the mobile network and the internet helped seal their fate.

One very interesting aspect to keep in mind is at what time the authorities learned about the coup attempt. Erdogan said he didn't know anything until the soldiers appeared on the Bosphorus Bridge at 10 o'clock on the evening of July 15th, but a few days after the night of the coup – in the wake of harsh criticism of intelligence and military leadership for not having prevented the attempt – a much earlier time was mentioned.

The Turkish General Staff issued a document in which the coup-makers were established as "criminal traitors" and that stated that the army's "true song" could be found among "the overwhelming majority" that fought off the coup attempt. Here, it also says that the military's three highest-rated generals, including head of the General Staff Hulusi Akar, were notified by the National Intelligence Organization (MIT) at four in the afternoon – that is, six hours before the coup attempt was initiated.

Hulusi Akar was arrested in his office during the coup attempt. If he had been notified hours in advance, it seems odd that he would have chosen to stay there until the coup-makers attacked.

In the army document, it says that Akar "evaluated the information and sent out all necessary warnings and orders against this despicable and pitiful attempt". In court, however, Akar has explained that he reacted with shock and disbelief when the coup officers entered his office.

From a source who has insight into the prosecution's documents, I've learned that the person who conveyed the information about the coup to Akar was chief of intelligence Hakan Fidan, one of Erdogan's most trusted men. Turkish intelligence had been notified by an officer who was supposed to participate in the coup – but who got cold feet. This person subsequently submitted an anonymized explanation and is cited in legal documents with their initials, O.K.

This source is also said to have delivered a detailed plan for the coup at 2:30pm on Friday, July 15th – that is, seven and a half hours before the coup soldiers overtook the bridge over the Bosphorus Strait. Intelligence chief Hakan Fidan first notified the General Staff over phone around four o'clock in the afternoon, and then went to the military's headquarters around six in the evening.

After meeting with Hulusi Akar, Fidan returned to his own office. This is quite remarkable, since during the coup attempt, the intelligence building was also attacked. If Fidan had been aware of the plan for the coup attempt in advance, he was taking a considerable risk.

It's also very strange – in fact, almost unbelievable – that both Akar and Fidan knew about the coup attempt but didn't warn President Erdogan. I haven't been able to find any explanation for this.

In the early morning hours on Saturday, July 16th, when the coup attempt was struck down, questions were raised about the conduct of both Chief of the General Staff Hulusi Akar and Head of MIT Hakan Fidan. Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım was among those who said he would demand answers from them – but the criticism of the two men stopped when Erdogan came to their defense. “You don't change horses in the middle of a race,” he said, ending the discussion.

Hulusi Akar got the job as Chief of the General Staff just one year before the coup, and already had a close relationship with Erdogan. For many years, he had had strong ties to the Turkish Islamist movement, which was unusual for Turkish officers.

After being captured during the coup, Akar was transported to Akıncı Air Base. The base is located in a rural area on the outskirts of Ankara and was the coup-makers' command center. Here, Akar, according to several testimonies, seemed to be calm. Among other things, he is said to have stated that “all precautions have been taken”, which was perceived as him having implemented preventive measures against the coup attempt.

Akar claims that they tried to persuade him to speak directly to Fethullah Gülen on the phone. “We can put you in touch with our leader, Fethullah Gülen,” one of the coup officers allegedly said. However, Akar says he refused to speak with the Islamic sect leader in the United States. This explanation is the only thing that points to Gülen himself being directly involved.

Some of the defendants have suggested that Akar also considered taking part in the coup attempt, but that he withdrew when he realized it would fail. One of the lawsuits argues that Akar told a helicopter pilot that “we should have waited, we were in too much of a hurry”. Akar has vehemently denied this. He has said in court that he cursed out the officers who told him to support the coup attempt. “What the hell are you talking about, are you insane? Don't do this. I refuse to have anything to do with this,” is what Akar says his first reaction was.

A few weeks after the coup attempt, Akar issued a statement suggesting that he had known several days in advance that there was a danger of a coup attempt. He has said that the General Staff was preparing to remove hundreds of officers after tips from MIT, and that these officers could therefore – without warning – commit a “desperate act”.

I received the same explanation in a written report as well: “On July 11th, just four days before the coup, the National Intelligence Organization (MIT) gave the General Staff a list of 600 military officers who were under suspicion. The plan was that these should be removed

during the annual meeting of the senior military council, which was to be held on August 1st. Since they foresaw a major operation against them, the Gülenists initiated their desperate plan on July 15th.”

The incredibly sensitive information about the planned “purge” also became widely known when the newspaper Sabah published an article about the case on July 12th, three days before the coup attempt. Sabah is a mouthpiece for the Erdogan government – plain and simple. The newspaper’s angle was that Gülenists should be removed from the army once and for all during the forthcoming meeting of the military council. Either Sabah had gotten a real scoop – or the case had been planted, possibly to push officers from the Gülen movement to make such a “desperate act”.

To summarize: Chief of the General Staff Hulusi Akar was warned of the possibility of a major coup four days in advance, and six hours before the coup attempt began, he was warned about concrete plans for an imminent coup. And both of these warnings came from chief of intelligence Hakan Fidan.

To make things even more conspiratorial, I will mention another meeting between Hulusi Akar and Hakan Fidan: Two days before the coup attempt – July 14th – Fidan was present during the graduation ceremony for the Turkish special forces. The fact that Fidan was president at the ceremony itself isn’t particularly remarkable, but the fact that he stayed for a several hours-long meeting with Hulusi Akar is referred to as “unusual and interesting” by a source with close ties to the Turkish military.

Fidan is contentious in Turkey. The intelligence chief was heavily involved in the previously mentioned scandal about the trucks full of weapons that were sent to Syria, and it was Fidan who led the secret and controversial peace talks with PKK in Oslo. In 2014, a new troubling case involving Fidan came to the surface when a recording was leaked by police investigators with ties to the Gülen network. In it, Fidan says he can send intelligence agents into Syria and get them to fire rockets against Turkey – so that the attack could be used as a pretense for a ground operation in Syria. However, Fidan was also able to finagle his way out of this scandal.

When Fidan wanted to leave MIT in 2015 to become a parliamentarian for the AKP, Erdogan himself intervened to force his spy-chief back to work. Erdogan has referred to Fidan as his “guardian of secrets”.

Today, Hakan Fidan is still regarded as one of Erdogan’s closest allies and sits safely in the position of Head of MIT Hulusi Akar also survived the criticism he faced after the coup attempt. In the summer of 2018, Akar moved even closer to the center of power when Erdogan made him Turkey’s new Minister of Defense.

That Erdogan might have orchestrated the coup is a conspiracy theory. It’s not impossible, but it seems quite unlikely. There’s plenty of evidence that the coup attempt – despite its amateur execution – was a true attack on the Turkish state power. At the same time, however, there is quite a bit of circumstantial evidence that supports the Turkish opposition’s claim that it was a “controlled coup”. I believe Erdogan was aware that a coup was planned, but felt confident that it would fail and therefore let it happen. This is at least a plausible explanation.

It seems entirely unlikely that military leader Hulusi Akar and intelligence chief Hakan Fidan did not warn Erdogan when they learned of the danger of a coup attempt. These two are probably the only ones who can answer how much Erdogan knew. The parliamentary commission that is investigating the coup attempt wished to summon Akar and Fidan as witnesses, but with Erdogan's blessing, the two have been exempted from going to the commission's hearings. "Since Hulusi Akar and Hakan Fidan will not testify, there is little reason to believe that the commission will offer us any kind of good answer. We'll probably never know for sure what Erdogan knew about the coup attempt," concludes a long-standing politician who has recently left the AKP.

At the very least, Erdogan was right in saying that the coup attempt was "a gift from God", for it has given him free rein to purge his opponents and take full control of power in Turkey.

AT DINNER WITH ERDOGAN

(pp. 353-368)

For almost three years, I waited hopefully to get an interview with Erdogan. The only response I got was that my application had been received. The president seldom does interviews, and clearly a Norwegian newspaper wasn't important enough. However, after having closely followed Erdogan throughout the election campaign ahead of the disputed referendum in 2017, I got some consolation, in the form of an exclusive invitation: dinner with Erdogan.

At least – it seemed this was the case at first glance. However, it soon became clear that this was merely a PR tour, and that the "exclusive guests" from the press were enough to fill an entire bus. The dinner we were invited to was *iftar*, which is the traditional meal that is consumed when fast breaks at sunset. The session itself took place in a small town near the Syrian border. It was clear that Erdogan had chosen a place where he could be certain he'd receive a warm welcome: an enormous placard thanked the citizens for having voted 96.8% percent *yes* in the referendum.

Ramadan, the Muslim month of fasting, fell in June that year, and it was very hot, but people had nonetheless come from near and far to catch a glimpse of Erdogan. It was so crowded that the press bus managed to end up behind Erdogan's procession. By the time we had passed the security check, the fast was already broken, and it was too late to get to our table. Instead, we were taken to the table at the very front, where we could see that Erdogan's plate also stood untouched.

Suddenly, the president appeared among us, and although I knew exactly what kind of leader he is, I pushed forward and stretched out my hand. The handshake was followed by a brief and rather meaningless conversation: He welcomed me, I thanked him respectfully, and he followed up by saying that he unfortunately couldn't give any interviews, nor could we take any pictures together. From a journalist's perspective, it was miles away from a scoop, but Erdogan's charisma was so strong that I lived in that delusion for a few minutes before I pulled myself

together. From the wide smiles of the others who were shaking hands with him, I understood that I wasn't alone in having let myself be dazzled by the brief meeting with this powerful man.

Erdogan is a man with regular routines. He gets up between five and five thirty in the morning – depending on when sunrise is – to make the first prayer of the day. Then, he walks on the treadmill for an hour while he lifts weights. He eats a light breakfast, since he is diabetic. He reads newspapers, but only those that are favorably disposed to his governance. He watches the morning news on TV, but only on Turkish channels, since he can't speak English. Nevertheless, he still wants to know about what the outside world is saying about him, and has translations from foreign newspapers read aloud by his assistants.

At eight, he meets his personal advisor and they go through the day's plans. Erdogan maintains a busy schedule, often until as late as midnight, and wants to control every tiny detail. He carries a notebook in which he is constantly writing. Throughout the day, he receives ministers, party members and diplomats. If he isn't traveling, the meetings are held in the palace in Ankara. Erdogan's closest advisors and the government's cabinet members are never in doubt as to who has the last word in a discussion; Erdogan is known for having a raging temperament if he is contradicted. Those in his innermost circle know well what it means to end up in a conflict with Erdogan – and avoid it at all costs.

A fascinating article in the German *Der Spiegel*, written in collaboration with investigative journalists in the Black Sea, contains many of the details I have mentioned above. Turkish media have made similar descriptions. However, even if the glance behind the curtain is tantalizing, it doesn't say very much about Erdogan as a person. Despite the fact that the president holds almost daily speeches, makes regular public appearances and has been in the media spotlight for almost 30 years, little is known about Erdogan as a private individual.

From childhood friends, relatives and neighbors, I've been told that Erdogan always had a strong inner drive, even as a young boy – to earn his own pocket money, be the best on the football field and memorize poetry and Quran verses by heart. A drive to succeed, a need to stand out from the crowd and the urge to get away from the poverty of Kasimpasa – he has taken all of this with him into adulthood. As a politician, his haste to take first place and his burning desire to stake out a new course for Turkey has brought him to where he is today. On the way there, his gift of speech have been a trademark. He has also been good at managing money; Erdogan is not only Turkey's most powerful, but also one of the nation's richest.

From what I've read, I know that he is a devoted family man who confides closely in his wife Emine, and who has involved his children in both private and public companies. As mentioned, however, his son-in-law, Berat Albayrak, is his closest ally in Turkey's political regime. Erdogan seems to be happy always having a right hand man, but these are replaced if they become too independent. As described, this was precisely the fate of both Abdullah Gül and Ahmet Davutoglu, and it will be exciting to see how long Albayrak stays in Erdogan's favor, and whether he will actually become the heir many think he is.

A former advisor on Erdogan's press team tells me that the president is extremely skilled at remembering details about everyone he meets, something which he uses to create an intimate atmosphere that gives him an advantage. "After greeting someone, he might suddenly ask how

things are going with the person's spouse and mention him or her by first name. You start feeling like you know him, and are immediately positively inclined, and forget what you were really going to ask about. Erdogan has an aura that makes you feel like you're talking to your father. At the same time, he's very emotional and can change his mind in the blink of an eye. If he sees something on TV that he gets upset about, he may change political course or cancel long-scheduled meetings. He may become furious and rage at people who make mistakes, but he is still charismatic when it happens," the source explains.

One example was after the mining accident in Soma in May 2014, when 301 people lost their lives. Erdogan and his advisers were supposed to meet the grieving community, but were met with fierce protests about the government not having made sure the mine was safe enough. It ended with scuffle between Erdogan's security guards and protestors, and Erdogan himself entered the crowd and apparently struck a young man who got too close. This created fury in Turkish media, but during the next election, Erdogan's AKP had increased its support in Soma. "Erdogan showed that he is a strong leader, and we Turks love that. It's like a kind of Stockholm syndrome," says the former advisor.

Erdogan has 25 personal advisors. One of the most highly profiled is Yasin Aktay, who is quoted several places in this book. He gave me an hour and a half-long interview at his office in Ankara. Aktay was a founder when the AKP was established, and his role is "advisor to the president of the AKP's parliamentary group".

After answering questions about the many conflicts that have been raised here – largely denying that the Turkish government has done anything wrong, or by blaming the West, or most preferably the Gülen network – I asked the advisor to tell me a bit about his own relationship with Erdogan. As expected, it was nothing less than a tribute. Like most others in the AKP leadership, Aktay is a great admirer of his boss. He hopes and believes that we are still only halfway through the story of Erdogan's Turkey.

"Erdogan has won election after election. It's not a given that he can hold power until 2028, but of course that's what I want. I'm very, very optimistic. Erdogan is a very strong leader for Turkey. The strongest leader we've ever had," he says, wrinkling his forehead to show he's serious.

On the wall behind him is an enormous portrait of Erdogan next to a painting of Atatürk. I ask Aktay if Erdogan is now stronger than the "father of modern Turkey" was. Then, he has to take a short rhetorical pause.

"No one can compare to Atatürk. He didn't come to power democratically, but via the military. In the time *after* Atatürk, you could say that Erdogan has been the strongest leader. Erdogan has strengthened the democratic infrastructure in Turkey. Whatever you hear about dictatorships or anything like that – forget it, it's propaganda."

The advisor points out that the military can no longer overrule elected representatives, that the justice sector is no longer a state within the state, and that the "bureaucratic elite" can no longer renew themselves through nepotism. Then, Aktay lists what Erdogan and the AKP are most proud of: "More democracy, a strengthened economy, internal stability and increased international respect for Turkey."

As politely as I can, I try to argue that many believe that it's quite the opposite in reality; that Turkey's democracy has been weakened, that the economy is in deep crisis, that the country is characterized by internal division and that 15 years of Erdogan's government has not resulted in any increased respect, but rather has weakened Turkey's international reputation. Aktay simply wrinkles his forehead even deeper, shakes his head and dismisses all such arguments as lies and deception.

We obviously have different perspective, he says. Although Erdogan's Turkey is a falling star in the Western Hemisphere, it looks different from the East. Erdogan and his advisor are looking in a direction different from the one secular leaders before them did. Turkey's new leadership does not long for recognition from the West, but is rather turning its gaze southwards and eastwards. They view a Turkey as a Muslim country that Africa and Asia admire. While Aktay explains his view of the world to me, a delegation from Sudan is patiently waiting in the corridor outside his office.

Aktay also doesn't want to hear that Turkey's position in the Middle East is vulnerable. The advisor looks past the leadership of Arab countries like Egypt and Saudi Arabia. He looks at the people, the "Arabic street", where Erdogan is clearly popular. Erdogan is *ummitliderli* – leader of the Muslim community, *umma*. This is how the AKP politician sees it.

"If you go to Arabic countries, you can see that Erdogan is more well-loved than their own leaders. That's a fact. Some are envious that he has this role. Erdogan doesn't have an agenda to become a leader in the Muslim world, but he takes responsibility for something no one else is, and that makes him a leader. There is much injustice in the Muslim world. The reason is that there is a gaping hole in the leadership of the Muslim *umma*. The leadership is given to Erdogan through the responsibility he assumes."

If Erdogan truly is a unifying leader of the Muslim world, then it is because he has roots in the Islamist movement and leads an Islamic party, I suggest. But the advisor stands firmly behind his party program and believes the party should really be compared to Christian Democrats in Europe instead.

"When we were formed, we said that the AKP wasn't an Islamist party. We can say that individuals can be Islamists, and many civilian groups can be, but the AKP's agenda is not Islamization. In Turkey, 99% of people are Muslim, so we don't have to be an Islamic party."

At this point, the wrinkle in his forehead is so deep that it's casting a shadow. I feel that my allotted time is coming to an end, but ask him how important religion is in Erdogan's personal life, since the president increasingly emphasizes the importance of Islam in Turkish society. This question finally gets the advisor to relax his shoulders and bare his teeth in a huge grin.

"He's quite devout. Very, very devout and genuinely pious. He believes in God and in the Prophet. He deeply admires the Prophet. The Prophet Muhammad is his ideal. The Prophet was the best in politics as well. The Prophet is the best role model for all Muslims. The Quran defines it that way. As a leader, Erdogan obviously tries to follow this role model. He follows the advice of the Prophet."

When I point out that many in the West, and in Turkey, for that matter, call Erdogan a “new sultan”, the advisor resumes his concerned facial expression, wrinkling his forehead once again, and starts out on a new, long explanation.

“The comparison with a sultan is not made with good intentions. It is used because you look at the Ottoman sultans from a western point of view, so it has a negative association. But if it were done from a positive perspective – that the sultans were good – then no one would be getting angry about it. I believe that the Ottoman sultans were good people who led good societies. But we don’t want to use the wrong time period for effect. They were sultans, and now we have a republic. The sultans came to power through succession, while the president of Turkey came to power by winning elections. So Erdogan is not a sultan, but he is a very, very strong leader.”

Calling Erdogan a sultan can be quite dangerous in Turkey. A leading opposition politician had to flee from the country after having had his immunity taken away and being charged with presidential insults for having referred to Erdogan as a “kind of sultan”.

However, the fact that Erdogan is referred to as a sultan in the West – in headlines in newspaper articles and books, including in the subtitle of this book – is not just a cheap tabloid trick. First of all, the parallel is applicable: Just like the sultans, Erdogan wants to have all the power in society; just like the sultans, he wants to expand the influence of Turks on the region; and just like the sultans, he uses Islam to lead the population. Of course, Erdogan hasn’t inherited his power, but he has to an extreme degree made himself and those close to him into a dynasty. It looks like he’ll be sitting in power for 25 years – longer than most of the Ottoman sultans.

Secondly, Erdogan himself speaks without hesitation about the Ottoman Empire as the Turks’ heyday. “Just as our former state formations are a continuation of each other, the Turkish republic is also a continuation of the Ottoman Empire. Some people insistently try to start this country's history from 1923. Some unrelentingly try to break us from our roots and ancient values,” Erdogan said before the 2018 elections.

Erdogan’s campaigns were fronted with a lavish ad that told the Turkish people’s history, starting with their appearance on the Anatolian steppes as a nomadic people. Mighty sultans like the founder of the empire, Osman, Mehmet the Conqueror of Istanbul and Süleyman the Magnificent are all mentioned. After a brief glimpse of Atatürk’s shadow, the ad continues to Erdogan and his “mega projects”. Throughout the ad, Erdogan is reading aloud a national-romantic poem in his suggestive voice.

Erdogan’s focus on the sultans is in conflict with the legacy of Atatürk. The father of the country made the Ottoman Empire out to be reactionary, and before Erdogan came to power, this view was widespread. In today’s Turkey, the sultanate is hailed. Interest in Ottoman language, food and culture is increasing. Large parts of the Turkish population sit down in front of their TVs to watch docudramas about the powerful sultans. These productions have far and away eclipsed regular Turkish soap operas, which previously focused on secular Turks and their Western lifestyles.

The most famous historical drama is “The Magnificent Century”, which is about the sultan Süleyman the Magnificent. Erdogan’s favorite series is reportedly “*Payitaht: Abdülhamid*”, a series about sultan Abdulhamid II. Abdulhamid is also the sultan that Erdogan mentions most often in his speeches, and while there are some similarities between the two men, it’s a somewhat strange choice.

Abdulhamid was the last sultan to have executive power. He was also known for being a paranoid and reactionary leader who was in constant conflict with his generals and the parliament. Abdulhamid introduced pan-Islamism as the ideology of the multiethnic empire and used his position as *kalif*, or religious leader, in a more active way than previous sultans. He stood for a strict interpretation of Islam and tightened regulations around serving alcohol, among other things. He ruled during bloody wars in the Balkans and massacres of Christian minorities.

Abdulhamid was keen on developing modern infrastructure, such as railways, but introduced the censorship of books about Western philosophy and attempted – in vain – to stop the political modernization of the Ottoman Empire. Erdogan’s favorite sultan was deposed in a coup that in many ways could be seen as a precursor to the formation of Atatürk’s republic in 1923.

When the centenary of Abdulhamid’s death was observed in February 2018, Erdogan held a speech about his new role model in which he refers to Abdulhamid as one of the “most important, most visionary, and most strategic” thinkers of the past 150 years.

Erdogan is in good company when he draws these elaborate historic parallels. In both France and England, parties on the far right try to remind the electorate of the days of glory when the two countries were the world’s foremost colonial powers. In Russia, Putin plays on symbols from both the old Tsarist and from the heyday of the Soviet Union. And in the United States, Donald Trump raves about “making America great again”.

Erdogan promises to “recreate a magnificent Turkey” by referring to the Turkish nation’s great days of yore. In this way, his rhetoric is reminiscent of the nationalism that is emerging on the far right in the West. While western right-wing populists use Islam as a bogeyman, the Islamist populist Erdogan uses the West in the same way.

To create a new Turkey shaped in his own image, Erdogan must signal a break with what preceded him. The challenge is that the story of Atatürk’s secular republic is a tale that the Turks are immensely proud of. The centenary of Atatürk’s Republic that will be marked in 2023 happens to coincide with the next presidential election. By that time, Erdogan will have had another five years to shape the country.

Despite Erdogan’s anti-Western rhetoric and romanticization of the Ottoman Empire, he doesn’t want to break Turkey’s anchorage to the West, a Western diplomat who has had political meetings with Erdogan believes.

“Erdogan is moving the country in a more Islamic direction, but trade agreements, the EU application and NATO membership form strong links to the West. For Erdogan, the economy is the greatest challenge, so the relationship with both the EU and the US is very important,” says the diplomat, who speaks under the promise of anonymity.

He says that during a long political conversation with Erdogan, he was impressed by how detailed the Turkish president's knowledge was about the various topics they discussed. Like others who have met him, he felt Erdogan's personal charisma, and says that you "immediately notice Erdogan's presence when he enters a room".

"He's a thoroughbred politician who is respected through his position, but also because he is well-prepared and knows exactly what he wants to achieve. He has proven over time to be energetic and to have the ability to follow through. He's good at reading his voters and is a politician who no one in Turkey can compete with," the diplomat explains.

He says that many Western diplomats in Ankara are discouraged by the Turkish opposition, which is divided and unable to challenge Erdogan. He also tells me that the West's concern for the weakening of democracy and human rights is well known to Turkish rulers, who don't particularly care about it. Although many conflicts with Western countries are happening at the same time, the cooperation behind the scenes is better than you might think, he tells me. "Erdogan is first and foremost a pragmatist," he concludes.

I can agree with the last description. Erdogan's years in power are marked by a great willingness to change political course and – as described in several places in this book – an almost inconceivable ability to turn defeat into victory. Without being pragmatic, he wouldn't have been able to gather all this power.

When the AKP won its first election in 2002, the challenges were immense. It is no small feat that Erdogan has managed to loosen the tight grip of the Turkish military and the bureaucratic elite on the state's power. The fact that he got EU negotiations started will continue to be significant, even though these are now in full swing. One might say something similar about the strong economic growth: Although this "miracle" is struggling as of autumn of 2018, Turkey is still safely placed among the G20 countries as one of the world's largest economies.

But I feel it's the way all of this has been achieved that shows what kind of leader Erdogan is. To pinion the generals, he worked with the controversial Gülen movement. Erdogan must have known exactly what kinds of dishonest methods were being used in the judicial oversight processes such as "Operation Swallow" and the "Ergenekon" cases. I don't believe for one second that Erdogan was fooled by the Gülenists. He saw a shortcut to more power and utilized it for what it was worth.

He introduced political reforms based on the EU application, but used the reforms to strengthen the AKP's grip on power. With regards to the Kurdish minority, he sought a peaceful solution, but only as long as it gave him support amongst Kurdish voters. As it became more profitable to pander to Turkish nationalists, Erdogan showed his populist side once again and turned his back on the Kurds.

In his economic policy, Erdogan has chosen easy-to-use solutions to accelerate growth as quickly as possible. By arranging for aggressive development with borrowed funds, Erdogan gained momentum on his "mega projects", which he was then able to show to the people as proof that he'd built up the country. But the growth in prosperity has to a large extent found its way into the Erdogan family's pockets. Although only a fraction of the accusations are authentic, Erdogan is guilty of corruption of the most serious kind.

In his foreign policy, he has carelessly burned bridges because he has always found that he is able to rebuild them. Erdogan has realized that Turkey's strategic position allows him to jump first in one direction and then in another. He manages to land softly time and again. For Erdogan, foreign policy is mostly about collecting arguments that he can use in domestic politics. The anti-Western outbursts he makes aren't primarily a reaction to actual conflicts with the West, but rather a consequence of him seeing that it hits home with his core voters.

Erdogan's use of Islam as a political instrument is certainly grounded in his strong personal faith, but it was his political background from the Islamist movement that taught him how powerful a political means it is to use Islam to reap loyalty. Erdogan has pandered to those who felt like their religion wasn't being respected, but to truly win their favor he has cultivated divisions in Turkish society by distinguishing between the true believers and the secular. Erdogan is only concerned with securing the majority. If he reaches 51 percent, the meaning of the other 49 percent of the population is of little significance.

I believe Erdogan knew about the imminent danger of a coup attempt in the summer of 2016, but that he was confident it wouldn't succeed. The aggressive staff cleansing that followed was planned in advance. During the two years of a state of emergency, he has imprisoned political opponents and critical journalists. During the same period, he has held two very controversial elections so that he now has nearly overarching power. To win the polls, Erdogan has conjured up internal, external and imaginary enemies. He has played on the Turks' fear in the aftermath of the wave of terror that could primarily be attributed to his own mistakes against the Kurdish militia and Islamic extremists.

In my eyes, Erdogan's greatest achievement is that he has provided a more equal distribution of benefits. He has strengthened the school and health services and lifted millions of Turks out of poverty. When considering the conditions of Erdogan's Turkey, you can't forget that the secular elite who previously ruled Turkey treated the conservative majority as a subclass and discriminated against the religious. The class divide concerned both economics and religion, and Erdogan has corrected this imbalance.

In today's Turkey, however, it is inappropriate to talk about a distinction between the oppressed "black Turks" and privileged "white Turks". The majority – both the secular in the big cities and the religious in rural areas – belong to the middle class. What should worry Erdogan is the growing population of urban poor. However, he is too busy cultivating friendships with a new class of super-rich industrialists and entrepreneurial magnates who are loyal as long as they can get lucrative government contracts.

I think overall, Erdogan's government has been a disaster for Turkey. Hopefully he gets a political opponent who manages to defeat him in a free and fair election, but at the moment this seems unlikely. The opposition is sidelined with a broken back and its supporters are apathetic. Young and well-educated Turks no longer see a future here. Those who get the opportunity are leaving Turkey in a brain drain of alarming scale.

The development in Erdogan's Turkey is also discouraging for Europe – not just because Turkey is an ally through NATO and an important trading partner, but primarily because Turkey could have been a wonderful addition to the European community. As long as Erdogan remains in power, that possibility is out of the question. At the same time, we Europeans are shutting

ourselves behind our prejudices and closed borders so that the distance is unfortunately growing even greater.

Erdogan is not a dictator – or at least not what we usually associate with a dictator. However, there are many dictatorial features about his authoritarian governance. As this book has shown, his opponents are oppressed, the press is gagged and the elections are manipulated. But Erdogan undoubtedly has the support of a significant proportion of Turks. He has probably secured the 51 percent he needs to stay in power for at least another ten years.

Erdogan is also no democrat, though. The premise of a well-functioning democracy – the principle of power-sharing – is a thing of the past in today's Turkey. It was naive to believe that Erdogan could ever be a true democrat. He said several times early in his career that democracy is not a goal, but a means. Now that he has reached that goal, he has no need for the means any longer.

There is so much more I could have written about in a book about Turkey – like how the vibrant myriad of life has fascinated and puzzled me from the first night I got lost in the streets of Istanbul. About the food, which makes my mouth water just thinking about it. About how my heart beats a bit faster each time I cross the Bosphorus Strait between the European and Asian sides of the city as the sunset colors the hazy sky pink and the Marmara Sea forms an azure mirror of the city's domes, minarets and skyscrapers. Or the joy I feel each time I go to a new city in Turkey and hear the proud residents tell me exactly why this city is not only the best in Turkey, but the best in the world.

I could have written a book about the Turkish academics, artists and authors who have held the courage of their convictions in spite of the risks involved. Or about the Turks I have come to know who are some of the warmest, most polite and most welcoming people you could imagine. Or how those I don't know personally, but whom I walk past in my neighborhood each day, put their hand to their hearts and greet me when I pass, giving me the feeling of being one of them. About how my three years here in Turkey have filled me with memories I can live with for the rest of my life. I would have liked to write such a book.

Unfortunately, memories of a different nature overshadow everything else. The strongest impression I take home is how Erdogan's reign is turning Turkey upside down. It's frightening to experience how quickly a society can change. How free speech is disintegrating and being replaced by mistrust. How faith in the future becomes discouragement. How my Turkish friends don't dare say what they believe and can no longer live the way they want. It's eerie to see how many Turks feel like powerless strangers in their own country.

I still maintain the hope that Erdogan will come to his senses and loosen his iron grip on Turkish society, but the work I've done on this book has given me little grounds to be optimistic. During Erdogan's fifteen years as Turkey's leader, his desire for power has only increased. If he can continue this way for ten more years, I fear that the last remnant of the life-affirming and exuberant diversity that previously characterized Turkey will be replaced by an isolated, anxious and divided society. A society in which half of the population longingly looks back at the times before Erdogan.

Of all my memories from Turkey, Erdogan himself remains the strongest. A politician so calculating that he is always several steps ahead of us trying to understand him. A leader who, in his unscrupulous pursuit of power and wealth, is in the process of tearing down everything he had built up before. A man who is the ultimate example of the fact that power corrupts, and that absolute power corrupts absolutely.