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TENSIONS AT HOME, TENSIONS ABROAD: The Turkey-EU-diaspora impasse

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The AKP-Gülenist conflict following the coup attempt in Turkey is turning into a Turco-Turkish feud in the diaspora in Europe. Meanwhile, the AKP government has been gathering intelligence on Gülenist networks in European countries via diplomats or imams; Germany and Austria have launched investigations into Turkish intelligence operations on their soil in response; Bert Koenders, the Dutch Foreign Minister, has expressed the Netherlands' concern about the "long arm" of President Erdoğan; and the conflict between AKP supporters and the Gülenists in the diaspora has never been this intense.

This conflict has no end in sight. The Kurdish diaspora in Europe has shown how much influence a conflict-driven group can have on domestic politics as well as bilateral relations. The question is whether Gülenists abroad will emerge as yet another source of polarity in the diaspora, a matter of domestic security to the host country and a third party to Turkey-Europe relations. In any case, it is possible for European countries to minimize the damage at a domestic and bilateral level by learning from previous experiences.

Why does this conflict matter to Europe? Size, presence and durability are the main parameters. Though there is no exact data on numbers, Germany alone hosts more than 3 million Turks, followed by around one million in France and half a million in the Netherlands; and during the 2015 elections, the AKP received more than 50 percent of the votes from the Turkish electorate in these respective countries. The AKP government has always been popular among and enjoyed vast support from a majority of diaspora Turks in Europe. It has been successful at mobilizing its voter base in Europe as was the case when the diaspora mobilized against the coup attempt, part of them stigmatizing and targeting the Gülenists.

The Gülen movement, on the other hand, has been actively present in Europe for more than two decades. While there are no official statistics, [sources](#) claim Germany hosts around 100,000 Gülenists, more than 100 learning centres, 30 schools and 10 dialogue centres in addition to other European countries hosting an established but smaller network of schools, dialogue centres and think tanks. That the Gülen movement has a wide reach among the Turkish diaspora in Europe is not news. The ongoing crackdown on the movement in Turkey makes it unlikely for those

with clear links to the movement in the diaspora and those seeking asylum in Europe to willingly return to their homeland anytime soon. The issue of asylum and extradition of the Gülenists in itself is a source of bilateral dispute. In addition, this also means that the Gülen movement will devote its energy on developing its networks and relations wherever it is still visible and functional.

Conflict-generated diasporas have a large capacity to impact relations between their home and host countries through lobbying, transnational activism or various other ways; Turkey and Europe have experienced this first-hand through the Kurdish diaspora in Europe. The decades-long proactive effort of the Kurdish diaspora to influence politics and diplomacy between Turkey and Europe through the Kurdish question is evident of how diasporas are capable of acting as a third party in an existing bilateral relationship. The Kurdish case also shows that the experiences of the conflict that unite a diaspora are not only perpetuated, but also become transnational through social diffusion.

While the Kurdish diaspora in Europe has never been unified and cohesive, all groups within the diaspora are politicized around the Kurdish question. They have successfully made use of the political opportunity structures in both the host countries and European Union institutions to the fullest to lobby for recognition as an inseparable party to Turkey-Europe relations. The extent of access to political opportunity structures it provides makes Europe a perfect hub for lobbying, particularly for moderate and non-violent groups and in the framework of human rights and freedoms. The ostensibly moderate and non-violent image in the eyes of many Europeans, and the selective emphasis on the purge and victimisation rhetoric vis-à-vis the aftermath of the coup attempt make the Gülenists in Europe a likely candidate to become another third party to Turkey-Europe relations.

This is not to say that the Gülenists in Europe will necessarily emerge as a separate diaspora to lobby for its own or against Turkey's interest, let alone following parallel patterns to those of the Kurdish diaspora. A small shift in Europe's current attitude vis-à-vis the Gülenists or a shift in Turkey's behaviour could change the flow of events. If this conflict keeps up its current pace, however, it will become increasingly central to shaping the diaspora Gülenists' political identity in the longer term and how they position themselves against their home country, Turkey.

What implications does this have on European states and institutions? For one, it will be politically fatiguing, both at the domestic and bilateral level. The AKP government has already shown its dedication to, if not obsession with eradicating the Gülen movement, and has not held back from resorting to various channels to extend this goal abroad –be it through diplomatic, legal or covert actions, social mobilization or propaganda. The formation of a conflict-driven opposition lobby group will leave European states, especially those hosting a large and politically heterogeneous Turkish community with a sizeable Gülenist presence, exposed to the spill-over effect of this conflict. The spill-over can lead to more bilateral disputes, e.g. due to a persistent attempt of the AKP government to target Gülen networks in Europe or mobilise its supporters in the diaspora to this end. It can also turn the conflict into a matter of domestic security for the host country, if any of the parties to this imported conflict ever resort to violence or radicalise.

Europe has a strong interest in avoiding a full spill-over of this conflict in the diaspora. Managing this conflict and its spill-over effects with minimal damage will also mean minimizing its impact on European countries, at a domestic, bilateral and multilateral level. Being ready to face this prospect through drawing on former experiences, particularly the Kurdish case, might save Europe from being entrenched in yet another imported conflict.