

The Sledgehammer Coup Plan and the Case of Çetin Doğan

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March 4, 2010

On February 26th, retired Turkish four-star general Çetin Doğan was placed under arrest and imprisoned after having been in custody for four days. He was charged with being the leader of an elaborate coup attempt, said to be planned during 2002-2003, to topple Turkey's conservative-Islamist government. Since last week scores of other former military officers have been arrested as well as part of the same investigation.

The charges originate from a trove of documents obtained by and published in the Turkish daily *Taraf*. The documents include several types of material:

- i. voice recordings from a three-day war simulation workshop held at the headquarters of the 1st Army, then headed by Gen. Doğan, on March 5-7, 2003;
- ii. a written document dated December 2002, purportedly prepared by Çetin Doğan, that outlines plans for a military coup, code-named Sledgehammer;
- iii. documents that allege plans by the Turkish military to shoot down one of their own fighter jets and blow up two mosques during Friday prayers, apparently with the goal of pressuring parliament to declare martial law;
- iv. names of cabinet members to be installed after the coup;
- v. a document on the economic strategy to be followed by the new government;
- vi. two lists of journalists (one naming those to be arrested and the other naming those the military planned to cooperate with);

Among these documents, the only ones of uncontested veracity are those that pertain directly to the March 2003 simulation workshop (i). The rest have not been independently verified. Their provenance and authenticity remain unclear.

We are convinced that the charges against Çetin Doğan are ludicrous and unfounded. None of the material published by *Taraf* and subsequently used by the prosecutors provide evidence of a sort that would stand in a court of law on his alleged leadership of or complicity in a coup. As his daughter and son-in-law, we also know that Çetin Doğan would never plan or participate in the illegal activities of the so-called Sledgehammer Operation that have been attributed to him.

What is the evidence?

Taraf and subsequently the Turkish prosecutors have bundled together the documents and recordings from a legitimate war-game workshop (i), which no-one denies took place, with other material describing criminal acts (ii-vi), the authorship and truthfulness of which are very much in doubt. None of these recordings (from i) make actual reference to the plans in (ii)-(vi). While Çetin Doğan was a key participant in the war-game

workshop (i), the only thing that links him to the second set of material is an 11-page document (ii) that has not been independently authenticated and would have been easy to forge.

This document, the “Sledgehammer Action Plan,” is a Word document with Çetin Doğan’s name typed at the bottom (as the “Sledgehammer Martial Law Commander”). It is not signed. An expertise report was apparently prepared for the prosecutors by the Turkish equivalent of the National Science Foundation (TÜBİTAK), confirming the authenticity of the CDs which contain the plan. The prosecutors have refused to show Çetin Doğan and his lawyers this expertise report from TÜBİTAK. They have not made any public statements on this expertise report—how it was carried out and what it says exactly. It is not clear how the authenticity of a document which was delivered to *Taraf* on a CD was (or can) be determined. Meanwhile, the military prosecutor’s office, which is carrying out its own separate investigation, has stated that it was unable to authenticate this document and the others relating to the Sledgehammer plan.¹

Turkish law requires “cause for strong suspicion of crime” before a defendant can be jailed pending trial. Nonetheless, despite the absence of any real evidence, the court has acceded to the prosecutors’ request that Çetin Doğan be arrested and placed in jail.

The March 2003 workshop

The authenticity of the March 2003 war-game workshop is not in question. The then-chief of general staff, retired General Hilmi Özkök, has stated that the workshop was carried out under his orders. Prior to his arrest, Çetin Doğan appeared on several TV talk-shows and publicly acknowledged that the voice on the recordings released by *Taraf* is his. He also explained that the workshop was an ordinary war-game exercise carried out to test the military’s preparedness in the face of possible future threats. He denied any knowledge of or connection to the Sledgehammer plan.

The recordings released from the March 2003 workshop (i) revolve around the army’s likely responses to a hypothetical internal insurrection led by religious fundamentalists and instigated by a (hypothetical, again) military conflict with Greece. Çetin Doğan stated that this was a simulation scenario, in keeping with usual practice in such war-game exercises, unrelated to current events or the current government. (The AK Party, under the leadership of current prime minister Tayyip Erdoğan,² had recently come to power in the general elections of November 2002.) There is nothing in the recordings

¹ This last fact has been repeatedly misreported in the Turkish, with many papers and TV channels claiming that the military prosecutors have authenticated the documents. In response, the military prosecutors issued a clarification, which has been roundly ignored.

² Tayyip Erdoğan himself, having been barred, did not stand in the November 2002 elections. His second in command Abdullah Gül became Prime Minister upon AK Party’s electoral victory. Erdoğan won his seat in the Parliament in a by-election on March 9, 2003 and subsequently assumed the premiership.

released by *Taraf*, or that has come to light subsequently, that contradicts Çetin Doğan's statements.³

General background

We have no idea how or why the documents in ii-vi were produced, bundled together, and then delivered to *Taraf*. We are confident that the truth about these documents will eventually come out.

We do however want to point out to those unfamiliar with recent Turkish politics an important reason why Çetin Doğan's name would have been a natural candidate to place at the center of an alleged plot against the AK Party government. Çetin Doğan is a well-known and outspoken opponent of Islamic fundamentalism. He is a strong defender of secular values and of the secular foundation of the Turkish Republic.

As a Lt. General he was appointed to lead a working group within the military in 1996-1997 which produced a declaration that accused the government at the time—a coalition between the predecessor of today's AK Party and a center-right party—of failure to uphold the secular laws of the Republic. On February 28, 1997, the declaration—which some have called an ultimatum—was presented to the government in a meeting of the National Security Council.⁴ Several years later in December 2002 he had pointed words on the same subject for Abdullah Gül, AK Party's newly elected prime minister, in another official meeting bringing the top brass together with the government. Gül is today the President of the Republic.

In 2007, then-President Ahmet Necdet Sezer appointed Çetin Doğan, now retired, to the chairmanship of the board of trustees of the Ahmet Yesevi University, a joint Turkish-Kazakh educational institution. Doğan drew the ire of Islamists by removing practices at the university which he found incompatible with secular higher education (such as including questions on Koranic verses on the entrance examination). When Abdullah Gül became president in March 2008, he removed Çetin Doğan from the position.

In recent years Çetin Doğan has not been active in public life, but he did continue to write a column in a Turkish periodical where he took positions sharply critical of Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan and the AK Party.

³ The segment in the recordings that received the most play in the Turkish media is the closing statement by Çetin Doğan. In this segment Gen. Doğan says that he will ask the chief of the landed forces to present the government, if necessary, with an ultimatum to establish a government of national unity in order to handle the domestic fundamentalist insurgency. He immediately adds, however, that his words should not be misunderstood and that this course of action is not something he plans to do presently but a solution he would propose "under the scenario being considered" in the workshop.

⁴ The National Security Council is a long-standing body that holds periodic meetings between the top military brass and the president and the leading members of the government.

A media feeding frenzy

The arrests of scores of military officers (mostly retired but some still active) undertaken in connection with the alleged Sledgehammer coup plot has produced a feeding frenzy for the media in Turkey. The spread of lies and misinformation by major dailies and other media has made it practically impossible for even well-informed citizens to discriminate between fact and fiction.⁵ Journalists who expressed skepticism on the veracity of the plot have been targeted as *putschists* and intimidated. Most surprising to us, many liberal democrats in the country—some of whom we count among our friends—have loudly endorsed the prosecutors’ activities in the interests of the de-militarization and democratization of political life in Turkey. Unfortunately, the confusion has spread to international media and some respected publications as well.⁶

Let us be clear that we are against military coups of all kind and do not support any of the coups that have taken place in Turkey in the past. We believe in a democracy in which the military does not play a political role. We also believe however that the cause of democracy and human rights is not well served by vendettas and witch hunts which violate the very principles behind that cause.

We have started a blog (in Turkish) that discusses these and other matters pertaining to Çetin Doğan’s case (<http://cdogangercekler.wordpress.com/>). We hope this short piece and the blog will help illuminate the facts until justice is finally done in a court of law.

⁵ Some examples: Many newspapers spread the false report that Cetin Dogan was preparing to flee the country for Mexico just before he was apprehended. Other reports stated that Dogan admitted the coup plot before changing his mind and recanting. A number of articles have claimed that Dani Rodrik, his son-in-law, failed to undertake his military service in the Turkish army. There has been more than a touch of anti-semitism in the articles in the Islamist media (Dani Rodrik is Jewish).

⁶ For example, The Economist magazine wrote: “Cetin Dogan, a retired general said to have masterminded Sledgehammer, insists to prosecutors that it was no more than a “simulation exercise”—*even though it foresaw the creation of a “caretaker” government with the names of real people*” (emphasis added, see http://www.economist.com/world/europe/displaystory.cfm?story_id=15581048). In truth, the simulation exercise did contemplate a “government of national unity,” as revealed in the recordings (i) mentioned in an earlier footnote, but there was no mention in the simulation of the names of real people. The cabinet list in question is a separate document (iv) whose authenticity has been rejected by Cetin Dogan (as well as the military top brass) and remains contested.