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Erdogan Moves Against the Gulen Movement in Turkey

By Patrick Cockburn
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President Recep Tayyip Erdogan started to use his powers under the newly-declared state of emergency today to close 15 universities and over one thousand schools alleged to have links to the Gulen movement, which is accused of having staged the failed military coup on 15 July.

The extent of the closures underlines the sizable nature of the network of influential educational establishments, charitable institutions and other associations built up by followers of the US-based cleric Fethullah Gulen in the last thirty years. Those now being shut include 1,043 private schools, 1,229 charities and foundations, 19 trade unions, 15 universities and 35 medical institutions.

Mr Erdogan has brought forward a meeting of the Supreme Military Council to 28 July, at which he will discuss with military chiefs his plans for purging and restructuring Turkey's 600,000-strong armed forces – with the aim of bringing them under tighter government control. At least 124 generals and admirals out of a of 358, or over a third of the total, have been detained as it becomes clear that the conspiracy to subvert the armed forces was far larger than the small clique that the government originally alleged had taken part. Mr Erdogan has also used the powers granted by the state of emergency to extend the period in which some suspects can be detained – from four days up to a maximum of 30 days.

The attempted coup has provoked a serious row between Turkey and the US over the extradition of Mr Gulen, amid Turkish accusations that the US knew about the coup. Foreign Minister

Mevlut Cavusoglu said that a dossier requesting the extradition of Mr Gulen, and providing evidence of his guilt, will be ready in a week to ten days. The 75-year-old cleric has vigorously denied involvement, but non-governmental experts on his movement in Istanbul say that they have no doubt that Gulenist officers organised and conducted the coup attempt.

Mr Gulen's nephew, Muhammed Sait Gulen, was detained in the northeastern Turkish city of Erzurum and will be brought to the capital Ankara for questioning, the Anadolu state news agency claimed on Saturday. Among possible charges that could be brought against him is membership of a terrorist organisation, the agency said.

There is a widespread popular conviction at all levels in Turkey that US government and its intelligence agencies were complicit in the coup. The Daily Sabah newspaper is asking its readers to vote on the question: "which institution of the US provided largest support for the Gulenist terrorist group?" They are asked to mark the appropriate box for the CIA, FBI, Department of State and the White House. Prime Minister Binali Yildirim called for the US to extradite Mr Gulen and to "stop standing up for savages who run over citizens with tanks, who strafe people from land and the air."

President Obama has firmly denied Turkish allegations and demanded evidence of Mr Gulen's involvement in the attempted putsch, but this is unlikely to dispel Turkish suspicions. Accusers say that the Gulenist movement is tightly run from the top, as in other religious cults, and is wholly under the control of its charismatic leader who is seen by some as having semi-divine powers. US security services were once interested in cultivating supposedly moderate Islamic movements such as the Gulenists as an alternative to salafi-jihadi extremists and this may explain their cosy relationship with Mr Gulen.

This war of words is unlikely to die away and Turkish leaders are angered by what they see as a tepid display of solidarity by Western leaders during the coup – followed by patronising admonitions not to over-react in purging those who tried to overthrow the government. Mr Erdogan complained about this on Saturday in an interview with France 24 television saying he could not understand why Turkey's Western allies did not see that he had to impose stringent security measures after a coup that had killed 250 people. He said that "I'm under the impression that they [Western leaders] will only see that once all the political leaders of Turkey are killed, and then they'll start to dance for joy."

It is becoming clear that – leaving aside government paranoia – a large number of units from the Turkish armed forces took part in the coup on 15/16 July and that it nearly succeeded. The latest to be detained are 283 members of the presidential guard, which numbers 2,500 men. The hard core of the plotters were in the gendarmerie and air force and had allocated an elite unit to detain Mr Erdogan at his hotel in Marmaris on the Aegean coast at 3am on 16 July. But he had already left by the time they attacked because the plotters in operational charge of the event, fearing the imminent discovery of the coup, had brought forward its timing by six hours and were unable to tell this to the soldiers targeting Mr Erdogan who escaped shortly before they arrived.