

THE PLOT AGAINST THE GENERALS

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On a drizzly winter day four-and-a-half years ago, my wife and I woke up at our home in Cambridge, Massachusetts, to sensational news from our native Turkey. [Splashed](#) on the first page of *Taraf*, a paper followed closely by the country's intelligentsia and well-known for its anti-military stance, were plans for a military coup as detailed as they were gory, including the bombing of an Istanbul mosque, the false-flag downing of a Turkish military jet, and lists of politicians and journalists to be detained. The paper said it had obtained documents from 2003 which showed a group within the Turkish military had plotted to overthrow the then-newly elected Islamist government. The putative mastermind behind the coup plot was pictured prominently on the front page: General Çetin Doğan, my father-in-law (see picture).

General Doğan and hundreds of his alleged collaborators would be subsequently demonized in the media, jailed, tried, and convicted in a landmark trial that captivated the nation and allowed Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to consolidate his power over the secular establishment. In a judgment issued in October 2013, Turkey's court of appeals would ratify the lower court's decision and the decades-long prison sentences it had meted out.

Today it is widely recognized that the coup plans were in fact forgeries. Forensic experts have [determined](#) that the plans published by *Taraf* and forming the backbone of the prosecution were produced on backdated computers and made to look as if they were prepared in 2003. A quasi-judicial United Nations body has [slammed](#) the Turkish government for severe violations of due process during the trial. Erdoğan and his close associates, once fully behind the charges, now talk about fabricated evidence and [concede](#) that there was a plot against the military. The 230 defendants held in jail



Cover of *Taraf* on the alleged coup attempt

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(including Çetin Doğan) were eventually released on June 19th, 2014, following a unanimous ruling by the constitutional court finding the defendants' right to a fair trial had been violated.

What has become evident now was obvious to us from the beginning. During the four years since the allegations first surfaced, my wife and I waged a lonely and frustrating battle trying to persuade journalists, commentators, politicians, Turkey specialists, and human rights groups of the facts of the case. We were shunned and denounced by the Turkish intelligentsia and ignored by much of the rest of the world. We often felt like Don Quixote tilting against windmills.

But beyond the personal aspects of the case, the broader – and more deeply unsettling – story here is that of a vibrant, apparently free society that descended into a republic of dirty tricks and lost itself in a wild frenzy where fact and fiction became virtually indistinguishable. It is a story about the power of narratives – no matter how false – to overcome and shape reality. My goal in writing this account is as much to make sense of this unsettling tale for myself as it is to explain it to others.

When I had first met him in 2004, General Doğan was already retired. A man whose gentle manner belied his long years of military service and strong arch-secularist views, he was well-known as an outspoken opponent of Islamist parties. He doted on his daughter Pınar, whom I would marry in late 2005.

Our views on the political role of the military differed, but I had no reason to doubt his honesty. So when we talked on the phone the day that the story broke and he told us this was the first he heard of the so-called Sledgehammer plan – the codename he and his co-conspirators had supposedly given the coup plot – we believed him.

There would be a devastating media onslaught over the subsequent days and weeks. *Taraf*, the daily that broke the story, serialized the coup documents, each more horrid than the other. The officers had apparently concocted a devilish plan that entailed false-flag attacks and bombings to raise the political temperature and destabilize the newly elected government. They had put together long lists of politicians and journalists they would arrest. They had also prepared a government program and selected the cabinet members to be appointed. Other pro-government newspapers also joined the bandwagon, subjecting Doğan and other officers named in the documents to a veritable lynching. Media outlets associated with the exiled cleric Fethullah Gülen were particularly active, serving up the

accusations with special relish. Erdoğan himself appeared to vouch for the veracity of the plot, saying that he had been aware of these preparations at the time.

Yet within days of the story breaking, problems with the coup documents had begun to surface. The extracts published in *Taraf* evinced odd anachronisms. For example, the core [document](#) supposedly authored by General Doğan and setting out the rationale for the coup referred to several government actions – such as [clamping down on the media](#) and amending the constitution – the Erdoğan administration would indulge in only many years later. An [ultra-nationalist organization](#) the officers wrote they would collaborate with turned out to have been founded years later, in 2006.

When Pinar and I began to [write](#) about these anachronisms, suggesting that the documents had been forged to frame General Doğan and the others, we were dismissed not just by the Gülenist and pro-government media, but by much of the Turkish intelligentsia. The coup documents played into an appealing narrative, not just in Turkey but in much of the outside world as well. The Turkish military had a long history of meddling in politics and overthrowing governments not to its liking. It was time it paid the price and the bad apples within it were brought to justice. When a Turkish court ordered the imprisonment of more than a hundred of the alleged perpetrators several months later, the ruling was widely seen as a victory for democracy and the rule of law.

Meanwhile, the inconsistencies in the coup plans continued to mount. At first we did not have access to the coup documents and had to piece them together from extracts published in *Taraf*. This changed in July 2010 when a court accepted the indictment and copies of the documents were provided to the lawyers. Once we could examine them directly, the hundreds of pages of planning documents and their annexes provided a rich trove of [anachronisms](#) and physical impossibilities that pointed unmistakably to their fraudulent origin. Sitting in an office thousands of miles away and armed simply with the Google search engine, Pinar was able to unearth dozens of tell-tale anachronisms left behind by the fraudsters inadvertently. Our [favorite example](#) was the pharmaceutical company *Yeni Ilac* that had been taken over by the Italian firm Recordati in 2008 and renamed *Yeni Recordati* subsequently. The coup documents, supposedly last saved and burned onto a CD in 2003, listed the company with its new name.

Even leaving such anachronisms aside, there was little that would make the coup plan stand in a real court of law. None of the accused had ever heard of Sledgehammer, and there was no corroborating evidence that contradicted them. Despite what *Taraf* had [repeatedly written](#) in its early reporting, none of the coup documents carried signatures. They were all digital files (in Microsoft Word, Excel, and

PowerPoint formats) that could have been easily forged. The CDs within which they came [could not be traced](#) to defendants' or military computers. Prosecutors' claim of authenticity relied solely on the names and dates on the digital documents and on the metadata. The informant had bundled the two incriminating CDs along with other military CDs (and voice recordings) that were genuine, and this provided an additional appearance of veracity. Doğan and other defendants pointed out that anyone could have created forged CDs bearing their names on backdated computers, but their argument fell on deaf ears.

It was soon apparent that we were up against a conspiracy that went beyond the handful of culprits who were responsible for the forgeries. Mounting and stage managing a trial of such proportions required the active cooperation of a large number of people and institutions.

The police anti-terror unit, which had carried out the investigation, was clearly in on the act: it produced [one-sided reports](#) full of distortions that failed to identify a single one of the inconsistencies we had documented. Three experts from the country's prestigious scientific research body [TÜBİTAK](#) produced a highly misleading analysis that seemed to authenticate the incriminating CDs by skirting on the edge of truth. Prosecutors not only [removed](#) correspondence revealing countless additional anachronisms from the dossier, preventing the defense from seeing them until much later in the trial, they also [misrepresented](#) their contents in their indictment. And there must have been collaborators within the military, who had leaked the genuine documents, CDs, and voice recordings that accompanied the forged CDs.

The judges, it soon became clear, had made up their minds before the trial started. They reacted with stony silence to the pleas from defendants who presented documentation proving they were travelling or hundreds of miles away from where they were shown on the documents. The indictment credited the former chief of the landed forces with preventing the coup from taking place; yet they refused to call him as a witness (he had [said in public](#) that he never heard of Sledgehammer). They repeatedly turned down defense requests to appoint experts to examine whether the incriminating files had been digitally tampered with. Notably, the government had appointed the presiding judge two days before the trial started. He replaced a judge who had previously issued some rulings favorable to the defendants in pre-trial motions.

Beyond *Taraf*, pro-government and Gülenist media played a significant role as well. They shaped public perceptions of the trial by publishing a steady stream of disinformation that distorted the basic facts of the case and covered up the forgery. We kept a growing list of falsehoods appearing in *Zaman*, the Gülen network's media flagship. Among them: the signatures on the Sledgehammer documents had been [authenticated](#) (a double lie, since there were no signatures to begin with); civilian secretaries had [confessed](#) to preparing the Sledgehammer CDs (in fact, the incriminating CDs were the ones they explicitly stated they [did not recognize](#)); the CDs had been [traced](#) to military computers (false); the general staff in Ankara had [admitted](#) the veracity of the Sledgehammer plot (false). These lies were regularly reproduced in the paper's English-language version, *Today's Zaman*, probably the chief source of information on Turkey for non-Turkish speakers. A regular reader of these papers would be left with little doubt as to the culpability of General Doğan and his supposed accomplices.

When asked why they supported the Sledgehammer prosecution so vehemently, Gülenist columnists would respond by saying it was because they cared for the rule of law. Yet anyone who brought up the indications of forgery and the massive violations of due process was attacked as dishonest and a coup monger. Pinar and I had started a [blog](#) and were writing in international publications, and became a frequent target (see collage below). At various times, *Zaman's* columnists portrayed me as a [naif](#) trying to save his father-in-law, a [dissembler](#) waging psychological warfare, an unwitting accomplice [duped](#) by the coup plotters, a scoundrel [damaging](#) Harvard's reputation, a member of a [global conspiracy](#), an opportunist slated to become the [minister of finance](#) following the Sledgehammer coup, and (once Erdoğan and Gülen split) an [ally of convenience](#) for Erdoğan. A columnist in *Taraf* then close to the Gülen movement (he has since changed sides) [described](#) me as a self-hating Jew in love with his executioner.



A collage of articles from *Today's Zaman*, Gülen movement's English-language mouthpiece

Our experience with Sledgehammer made us curious about other political trials that were going on at the same time. We wondered whether there were similar manipulations as well in the parallel prosecutions targeting nationalists, officers, and sundry opponents of the government and the Gülen movement.

The best known among these were a tangle of court cases revolving around an alleged ultra-nationalist terror organization called Ergenekon. Launched in 2008, these cases had been widely welcomed at first. It had seemed as if the judiciary was finally taking on Turkey's infamous deep state – an informal alliance of military officers and state officials implicated in crimes against Kurds, Christian minorities, and other suspected opponents of the Turkish state. Many of these cases had started in a fashion similar to Sledgehammer, through sensational stories in *Taraf* based on what appeared to be leaked documents

provided by unanimous whistleblowers. An early warning shot on the nature of these trials had been fired by Gareth Jenkins, a British analyst based in Istanbul who produced a detailed [piece](#) documenting the absurdities in the early Ergenekon indictments. But he was a lone voice and was promptly [dismissed](#) by Turkey's liberal intelligentsia.

The more time we spent with these cases, the more horrified we became. It wasn't just that people were being locked up on the basis of evidence that was flimsy and circumstantial. For example, wiretaps that indicated one suspect knew another were routinely used to establish a presumption of membership in a criminal organization. Far worse was the widespread practice of framing individuals with forged evidence. And in many instances it was clear that it was the police who were responsible for planting the evidence.

In 2009 *Taraf* published a horrendous plan called Operation Kafes ("Cage"), supposedly authored by naval officers. Connected by police to Ergenekon, the plan called for the harassment of religious minorities and assassinations of Greek Orthodox and Armenian individuals. Police claimed to have found the secret plan in a CD seized from the office of a retired naval major. But a minor [blunder](#) would give them away. It would turn out that prosecutors had asked another defendant about the Cage Plan before the police forensics unit supposedly discovered it in an encrypted file. A failure of coordination with the police appears to have resulted in the prosecutors acting prematurely. Later, the major's signature on the plan would also be revealed to have been forged.

Similar slip ups were peppered throughout the cases, leaving little doubt about police and prosecutorial complicity. In one instance straight out of Inspector Clouseau, police acting on an anonymous tip ended up [raiding](#) a different lieutenant's house, but still managed to recover a hard disk containing documents incriminating the original target. In another case, police [produced](#) a copy they said they had made of a CD supposedly seized from a defendant's house; the copy was created before the date on which the house had been searched. Illegal wiretaps were planted in the office of a senior police commissioner who had a falling out with the Gülen movement and wrote an expose on it – after he had [moved out](#) and cleared his office.

Working with a digital forensic [expert](#) in Boston, we were able to get a closer look at how the police operated. In 2009, police had raided the offices of an educational foundation led by [Türkan Saylan](#), one of Turkey's first female dermatologists and a staunch secularist. Saylan was terminally ill with cancer and died shortly thereafter. But the case against her associates continued and became part of the web of

Ergenekon trials. The evidence in this case, as in so many others, consisted of Microsoft Word documents linking the defendants to Ergenekon, which police had allegedly found on a hard drive seized from the foundation. When the Boston expert examined a forensic image of the hard drive four years later, he [discovered](#) the following sequence of events. Sometime after the hard drive's final use at the foundation, it had been connected to a different computer with a system clock that had been set back to an earlier date. Then the incriminating files had been copied onto the hard drive. Finally, the files had been erased. Now, it was a simple matter for the police to recover the deleted files.

In some cases police resorted to more imaginative strategies. Journalists at OdaTV, a popular web site which specialized in aggressive pieces against the Gülen movement, were accused of collaborating with – surprise! – Ergenekon. As evidence, police produced notes found on OdaTV computers in which the alleged conspirators had described organizational activities. Closer scrutiny of the computers would [reveal](#) that the files had been planted via malware sent as attachments from spoofed e-mail addresses. Despite [multiple forensic reports](#) produced by the defense, these files were used to jail well-known journalists Nedim Şener and Ahmet Şık, in addition to several OdaTV journalists and Hanefi Avci, the senior police commissioner who had written the expose on the Gülen movement. Pınar and I also featured in these notes, as collaborators of the conspirators. We decided it would be wise not to travel to Turkey for a while.

The police and prosecutors' units on these cases were well known to be staffed by Gülen sympathizers. The U.S. embassy in Ankara had famously [written](#) in a 2009 cable (made public by WikiLeaks) that the claim that the Turkish national police was controlled by Gülenists “is impossible to confirm, but we have found no one who disputes it.” Many of the investigations targeted opponents of the Gülen movement. This had prompted Ahmet Şık to utter his memorable sentence as he was being carted to jail: “those who touch [the movement] get burned.”

Whatever the [direct](#) role of Gülenists, the thread that connected all these cases, beyond police and prosecutorial malfeasance, was the unwavering support they received from the movement's mouthpieces. Even some pro-government columnists had raised an eyebrow when Şener and Şık were detained, given how implausible it was that they were part of some terrorist plot. Erdoğan himself would begin to dither and have second thoughts when the prosecutors managed to jail his former military chief of staff Ilker Başbuğ. But Gülenist media stood steadfast behind the police and prosecutors, publishing a mix of half-truths and distortions against whomever they nabbed.

Each time the police were embroiled in another embarrassing revelation, *Zaman's* columnists were ready with an explanation that would exonerate them, no matter how outlandish or untrue. In one instance, it was revealed that police had downloaded contact info onto the phone of a lieutenant to connect him with a terrorist organization. *Zaman's* editor-in-chief wrote a fiery [column](#) denying police malfeasance. He argued that contact listings from the wrong phone had simply been mistakenly appended to a police report on the lieutenant and the error had been discovered and rectified by the police themselves. [Neither](#) claim was true.

Eric Edelman, a former U.S. ambassador, would relate to me a telling [episode](#). While serving in Ankara, he had been approached in 2005 by a well-known individual connected to the Gülen movement. The person handed him a document, which he said was a coup plan leaked from the Turkish military. Apparently the Gülenist's purpose was to inform the U.S. that the military was preparing to mount a coup against Erdoğan's government. How a member of a putative civil society organization could have obtained such a plan, or why he would take it to the American ambassador instead of the proper Turkish authorities remained unanswered questions. In any case, the U.S. embassy's analysis of the document revealed it was a forgery. Just like the Sledgehammer plans that would surface five years later.

Early in the Sledgehammer affair, we had asked a long-time Turkish analyst who might be behind the forgeries: He had replied without batting an eyelid: "It's the cemaat [Gülenists]." "How do you know?" "It's as obvious as the sun rising from the east and setting in the west." We had thought this odd. Where was the evidence? But with everything we were learning, it was no longer a big leap of faith to think that the manipulations behind Sledgehammer and other cases were orchestrated by Gülenists.

There was [one case](#) in particular which unmistakably connected the dots between the Gülen movement and the tactics we were seeing all over. It was the story of Colonel Zeki Üçok, a military prosecutor who had uncovered a Gülenist plot and had his life turned upside down as a result. It received little attention in the media, though the details could be pieced together easily enough from documents made public during various trials he became embroiled in.

In March 2009, a non-commissioned officer (NCO) serving on an air force base in the central Turkish town of Kayseri was caught planting forged documents on a military computer at an air force base. The

NCO's detailed, handwritten account provided a rare glimpse of how Gülenists used their network to infiltrate the military and frame targeted officers with fabricated material.

The NCO told Colonel Üçok and other military investigators that he had a long-standing affiliation with the Gülen movement. As a high school student he had spent time in "Işık Evleri." Translated as "Light Houses" these are dorms and centers of instruction run by adherents of Fethullah Gülen. After finishing military school and getting posted to Kayseri, he was contacted by an "abi" (meaning older brother) he knew from Işık Evleri and asked to rent a flat with two other NCOs he was introduced to. The three soldiers were visited frequently by a succession of "older brothers" from the movement over the years. They were given books by Gülen and instructed about his teachings.

In February 2009, one of these "older brothers" gave the NCO a USB drive that contained two forged Word documents bearing the name of the Kayseri base commander. One of them was based on a real document, but with key text deleted to make it look like the commander had blacklisted some of the local restaurants. The second was an entirely fabricated document calling on army personnel to assist an officer jailed on charges of being an Ergenekon member. The NCO was asked to enter these files on the computerized document management system in the base, using another soldier's account name and password. The carrot was that he would be doing a good deed by ridding the army of bad apples. The stick was that otherwise the Gülenists would let the NCO's military superiors know of his connections to the Gülen movement.

The NCO followed the instructions. With the documents in the system and their authenticity thereby established, they could now be leaked to the media and townspeople to wage a smear campaign against the base commander. What makes the story even more telling, however, is what happened next, following the NCO's confession. The aftermath of the episode showed how Gülenists were able to manipulate the judiciary to cover up their tracks and turn the tables on those who shed light on their misdeeds.

Stories soon began to appear in the Gülenist media that the confession had been extracted by Colonel Üçok under torture. But the NCO had undergone regular medical examinations while in detention, and none provided any evidence of physical harm. So the NCO's new lawyer, who appears to have been assigned by the Gülen movement, argued that the method of torture was "hypnosis." Not only did the charge seem far-fetched, it flew in the face of the documented details of the case. The NCO had not complained to his original lawyers or anyone else about mistreatment, until the torture allegations had

begun to surface in the media. His statement had been taken in the presence of his original lawyer. And the specialist who was alleged to have carried out the hypnosis – a retired officer brought in to help with the case – was not even present when the NCO gave his initial confession (he arrived in town a day later).

Colonel Üçok was hounded and became the subject of a growing mountain of allegations – everything from bribery to consorting with Russian prostitutes. He found himself among those charged with plotting the Sledgehammer coup. Details of his life, down to his shopping lists, were leaked to the media. His assistant and a secretary were compelled to give false testimony saying that Üçok carried out his investigation on his own and in secret, openly contradicting the signatures that verify their presence at all stages of the proceedings.

Ultimately, Colonel Üçok was found guilty on the basis of a medical report, obtained a full year later, that found evidence of hypnosis – quite a feat of medical forensics given the time that had elapsed in between. He remains in jail to this day, forced to defend himself against a series of charges one more absurd than the other. The NCO, meanwhile, was cleared of any wrongdoing and returned to his military duties.

When I first heard the details of the story I was incredulous that any physician would issue a report corroborating charges of “torture by hypnosis,” a year after the fact. When I finally got my hands on the [report](#), prepared by specialists at the medical forensics institute attached to the ministry of justice, I could not believe what I read. By a majority vote, the examiners had concluded this: *if* the court were to find that hypnosis had been applied, *then* the NCO’s psychological symptoms could be in fact consistent with hypnosis. Interestingly, even the majority willing to go ahead with the prosecutor’s theory were unwilling to stick their neck out and say there was direct evidence of hypnosis. But no matter. This much was enough for the court to reach its foreordained conclusion.

The “hypnosis case,” as it became known, was a relatively insignificant one compared to the more sensational Sledgehammer or Ergenekon cases. But it placed the full range of Gülenist *modi operandi* on display: evidence fabrication, blackmail, planting of digital documents, targeting of military officers, framing, smear tactics, character assassination, media disinformation, judicial manipulation. It was emblematic of how a case such as Sledgehammer could be erected on forged and planted evidence. And it connected the Gülen movement directly to these manipulations.

But who was this man Fethulah Gülen? A charismatic cleric who had fled Turkey to avoid prosecution in pre-AKP days, he now lived on a sprawling ranch in Saylorsburg, Pennsylvania. From there, he commanded a vast empire that spanned five continents, encompassing schools, think tanks, newspapers and TV channels, banks, companies, business associations, and much more. His sympathizers ran more than a hundred charter schools in the United States alone, making his movement one of the largest charter school operator in the country. They avidly courted local and national politicians in the U.S. Tens of thousands of devout Muslim businessmen made regular contributions to his charities, educational activities, and other causes. The number of his devotees is hard to estimate, but probably ran into millions. His books and televised sermons circulated widely. There were even Gülen chairs at universities in Leuven, Jakarta, and Melbourne.

An important part of his appeal outside Turkey was that Gülen appeared to be a man of moderation and tolerance. “Inter-faith dialogue” was one his movement’s trademarks. He and his followers went to great lengths to reach out to other faiths, and assiduously cultivated ties with Jewish and Christian leaders. The movement’s rhetoric and activities had won Gülen plaudits as an exemplary Islamic scholar who tried to build bridges between different faiths.

Even observers who are sympathetic to Gülen concede that the movement lacks transparency. Gülenists are notoriously tightlipped when it comes to their organizational structure, financing, and membership. Despite the group’s extensive political activities, they present themselves as a civil society organization with no political aims. In the United States, officials at Gülen-affiliated schools vehemently deny they are part of the movement, admitting at most that they have been influenced by Gülen’s teachings. Outsiders who are drawn in to the movement’s conferences and gatherings can remain blithely unaware of their hosts’ links to Gülen. Sociologist [Joshua Hendricks](#) has called these pervasive tactics “strategic ambiguity,” a legacy of the days when Gülen and his followers had to act surreptitiously in order to avoid the attentions of a hyper-secular state.

But the lack of transparency could also be taken as an indication of an ulterior agenda. Few Western observers of the movement were aware, for example, that Gülen had not always been the paragon of moderation and inter-faith understanding he seemed today. He had never advocated violence, but his sermons and writings prior to his move to the United States contained vitriolic passages against Jews, Christians, the West, and the U.S. A piece titled “Jews” published in the mid-1990s, for example, reeks of anti-Semitism. He [wrote](#):

Jews will maintain their existence until the apocalypse. And shortly before the apocalypse, their mission ... will come to an end, and they will prepare their end with their own hands... [T]hese people, which look with scorn upon even their own prophets and killed many among them, will finally end up in the position of Nazis and will look for a place to hide in the four corners of the earth.

This was by no means an exceptional passage. This and [other similar passages](#) reveal Gülen to have been an inveterate anti-Semite prior to his departure for the U.S.

His [views](#) on women, Christians, and Americans were not much better. To justify wife-beating, albeit as a last resort, Gülen asked rhetorically: if it would do some good for one woman out of a hundred, why would Islam prohibit it? Christianity, he wrote, had become perverted, America was “our merciless enemy,” and Europe had a “sadist mentality” that desired to crush Islam. A frequent theme was that the Christian Crusades against Islam were a permanent feature of history. The European Union was simply “a continuation of the Crusaders’ mentality.”

The future he envisaged was not one of peace and harmony among the major faiths, but one in which Islam absorbed the other faiths and took over. In an essay titled “The End of the West” and published in 1996, he wrote:

In sum, the Western world is finished, bankrupt, and each day it moves closer to its downfall. As it withers away, as an alternative to it, our world must take the stage with all its institutions.

He acknowledged that Islam’s victory would take some time, requiring Muslim societies to become more powerful and self-confident. Islam had long been the victim of exploitation by the West. Why would Christians and Jews accept a far-superior religion, he asked rhetorically, when Muslim societies were still in the role of beggar and servant in relation to them?

Harmony and tolerance among the faiths, this was not. Discussion of these topics on his [English-language site](#) today have a very different character, stressing moderation, understanding, and the similarity among Muslim, Christian, and Jewish faiths. Yet nowhere in Gülenists’ present-day literature could one find the slightest acknowledgement that the man showcased as a beacon of tolerance and dialog once held such prejudicial views about the faiths and peoples to whom he was now trying to reach out. No repentance, no apologies. And no explanation for why and how Gülen’s worldview had

changed in such dramatic fashion shortly before he moved to the U.S. The most one can find in his voluminous opus is a passing statement that he had made some “small changes” in his thinking on Jews and other matters.

Recently, Gülen was [asked](#) directly by a friendly interviewer about “statements concerning Jews or Israel in your early sermons [that] have been perceived as anti-Semitic.” He responded by “admitting” that he “might have misunderstood some verses and prophetic sayings” and that in some cases his words had been taken out of context. It is unclear what kind of misunderstanding may have led to statements of the type I excerpted above.

Instead of coming clean on Gülen’s earlier views and explicitly denouncing them, his disciples prefer to dissemble and smear critics who bring them up. I had discovered the anti-Semitic and anti-Western passages on Gülen’s Turkish-language [web site](#). When I looked for them in his English-language web site the relevant entries were missing – even though other parts of the books from which the extracts came had been translated and placed online. I translated these bits and put them on our blog. The movement then responded by [quietly removing](#) the passages from the Turkish site as well. My tweet on Gülen’s views on women led to a column by a sympathizer interpreting the tweets as an attack by Ergenekon. The column was promptly translated and [featured](#) on Gülen’s U.S. web site.

In view of these practices, it is perhaps no wonder American and European boosters of the movement have been unaware of Gülen’s dramatic makeover. But what would surprise me is that even experts who should have known better were taken in. I sent a sampling of Gülen’s earlier writings to a prominent American official who had served in Turkey and had written a letter in support of his green card application. He wrote back telling me he had no idea.

Gülen’s [writings](#) from the 1990s contained detailed discussions of how to deal with the Christian world when Muslims were weak and not yet able to vanquish their opponents. Make sure you disguise your real thoughts and feelings from them, he advised his followers; if you let yourself known, you will only cause them to triumph. His strategy for achieving power in Turkey was apparently similar. In a famous video recording that had surfaced in 1999, Gülen had [said](#):

You must move in the arteries of the system, without anyone noticing your existence, until you reach all the power centers. ... 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. ... Until that time, any step taken would be too early, like breaking an egg without waiting the full 40 days for it to hatch.

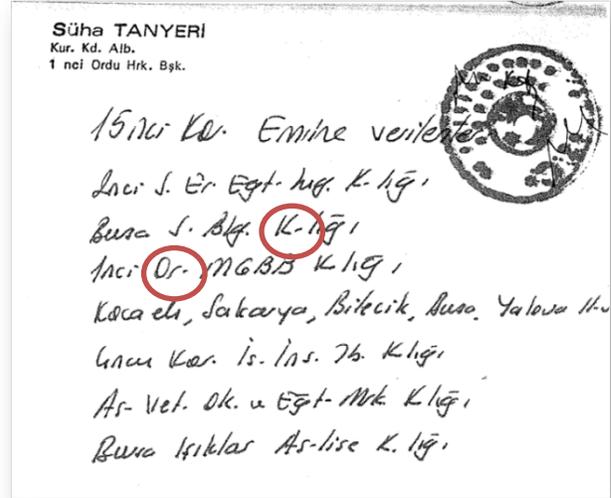
Subterfuge was a recurrent theme in Gülen's thinking. Could the man himself be unaware of what his sympathizers in the police, judiciary, and media in Turkey were up to? Perhaps, but it did not seem very likely.

By the end of 2010, Pinar and I had put together a [book](#) in Turkish about our findings on Sledgehammer, which our publisher rushed to the bookstores while we were spending winter recess in Turkey. (This would be the first of [two books](#) on the subject.) We held meetings in Istanbul with journalists willing to talk to us (more on this later) and [appeared](#) on all the major TV newscasts. The tide appeared to be turning in the general climate of opinion about Sledgehammer and some of the other cases. We could see we were making an impact by the frenzied reaction from the Gülenists.

It was then that an ex-police-officer-turned-*Taraf*-columnist came out with an astounding claim: he [asserted](#) that the lettering on the Sledgehammer CD was in fact the handwriting of General Doğan's then chief of staff, one of the Sledgehammer defendants. If true, this would provide the first direct evidence connecting the CDs to the accused. The theory was immediately picked up and given prominent coverage by *Zaman*.

Among the batch of material turned in by the anonymous informant was a notebook belonging to the officer in question. And the resemblance between the handwriting in it and on the CDs was unmistakable. But then why had the police and prosecutors not latched on to such an obvious piece of incriminating evidence? The handwriting on the CDs had in fact been [examined](#) by the police forensics unit, which had concluded that it did not belong to any of the defendants.

What we did not know at the time, but would [discover](#) some months later when we finally obtained high-resolution pictures of the CDs, was that the writing on the CDs was a blatant forgery. The letters on the CD were in fact perfect replicas of individual characters selected from the officer's notebook, produced by a mechanical copying machine (see picture). The forgery was so obvious that the police had apparently chosen not to draw attention to it. But it was a useful diversion for the general public at a time when the defense was gaining ground.



What gave the Sledgehammer case a second wind, however, was another development. Acting on an anonymous tip as usual, prosecutors searched a major naval base in Gölcük in late 2010. Under the floor boards of the intelligence unit, they recovered 10 sacks of discarded material. Much of it was of no interest – books, magazines, photos, and cassettes – but there were two CDs and a detached hard drive that would yield new evidence not just for the Sledgehammer prosecution, but for many of the other trials against military personnel taking place or about to start. One of the CDs was a virtual replica of the CD delivered to *Taraf*, holding the Sledgehammer files. The hard drive contained additional files related to some of the operations described in the original CDs. This new material, along with a flash drive supposedly retrieved from a retired air force officer's home, would enable the police and prosecutors to broaden the scope of their investigation, dragging more officers under their net. A second and third indictment would be produced in short order, increasing the number of Sledgehammer defendants to a total of 365.

The Gölcük find reinvigorated supporters of the Sledgehammer case. The new documents were as shocking as the original ones and provided plenty of new ammunition for the public campaign. More importantly, the fact that the new evidence was recovered from a military base seemed to establish the chain of custody that the original CDs lacked. How could anyone now argue that these plans were not authentic, belonging to the military?

In reality, we knew that the forgers had moles within the military. Recall that the Sledgehammer CDs delivered to *Taraf* had been bundled with authentic military CDs, voice recordings, and documents. If the culprits were able to remove such material from within a military compound, wouldn't they have

also been able to plant some fabricated files in a storage area on a naval base? Security appeared to have been quite lax in the intelligence unit. The location under the floor boards had been recently accessed by various people. There were fresh fingerprints on the detached hard drive, which did not belong to any of the defendants. (When Gülenists eventually split from Erdoğan, the spate of illicit recordings released in early 2014 to embarrass him revealed the extent to which Gülenists had access to sensitive material. The leaked recordings included private conversations between Erdogan and his son and from a high-security meeting between the foreign minister and the chief of national intelligence in which military options in Syria were discussed.)

The new coup documents that came out of Gölcük were as problematic as the original ones. Once again Pinar would [discover](#) dozens of anomalies, inconsistencies, and anachronisms that left little doubt that they could not have been produced by their putative authors on the dates appearing on the files. Regardless of where they were found, these documents were forgeries.

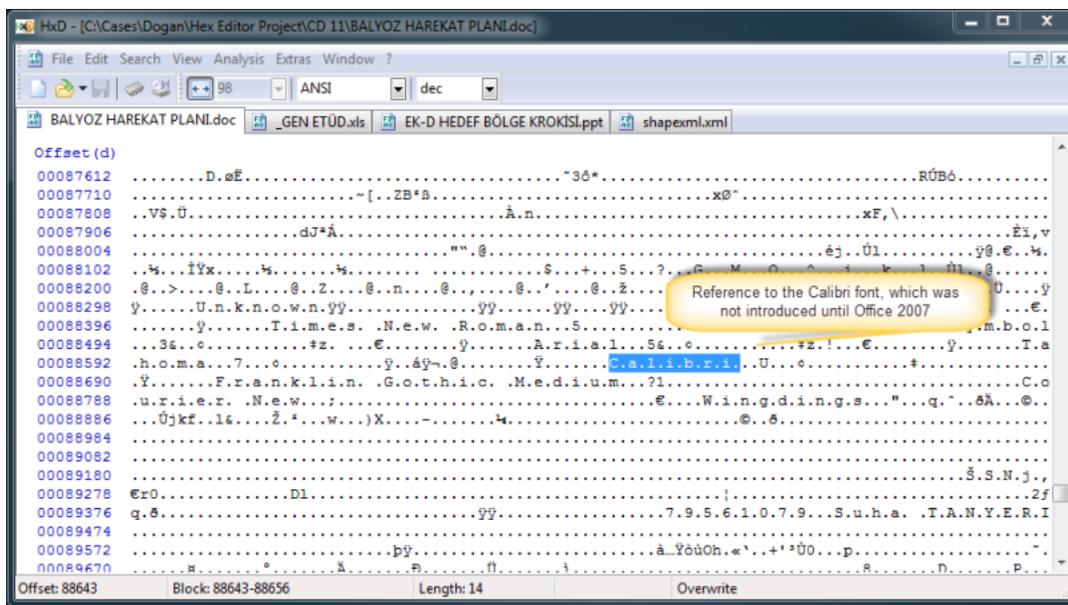
More than a year later, when the court finally allowed us to have a digital copy of the hard drive, we would make a further discovery that shed light on how the files had found their way there. The hard drive had been last used on the naval base in July 2009, and then removed from its PC and stored away. Forensic analysis would [reveal](#) that the incriminating files had been transferred onto the hard drive after that date, using a computer with a backdated system clock. In other words, someone had retrieved the hard drive, attached it to a new computer, and copied on to it a bunch of backdated files. These backdated files were of course none other than the new coup files. The modus operandi was similar to other instances of digital evidence planting we had encountered in the Ergenekon investigations.

Perhaps the most dramatic moment of the Sledgehammer trial came in March 2012 when a little-known officer and software engineer named Abdurrahman Başbuğ rose to his defense. His meandering [statement](#) and PowerPoint presentation were full of technical details and attracted little attention at the time from the judges or even other defendants. But there was a claim he made that would prove explosive and turn into the smoking gun exposing the conspiracy against the officers. In essence, Başbuğ asserted that the Sledgehammer documents had been prepared using Office 2007, a version of Microsoft's popular software that obviously did not exist at the time the coup plan is supposed to have been hatched. If ever there is a movie version of the trial, it will be that morning of March 29, 2012 that will be cast as the definitive turning point of the story, though few realized it at the time.

Several forensic reports would subsequently [confirm](#) Başbuğ's claim. The forgers had taken care to save the documents they had created with versions of Word, Excel, and PowerPoint that existed back in 2003. Superficially, there was nothing in the technical properties of the documents that gave them away. But what they had apparently overlooked was that Microsoft 2007 makes certain changes in the binary file that are retained even when a document is subsequently saved in an earlier format. These Office 2007-specific references are not visible to the naked eye, but can be seen using a forensic tool or a Hex editor, which reveal the raw information on the file. The most striking among these changes were recurring references to the Calibri font. Calibri was a new font, created specifically as the default font for Office 2007. It was first released to the public in mid-2006.

Consider the Word [document](#) titled "Operation Sledgehammer" which is the central document in the case. It describes the rationale for the military takeover and the broad contours of the plan. It carries the date December 2002 and has General Doğan's name underneath. On the face of it, there is nothing in the digital information associated with the file that would contradict this information. The metadata shows a "last-saved" date of December 2002 and the putative author to be General Doğan's then chief of staff. The CD on which it is found was burned in a single session, apparently in March 2003. The document is written using the Arial font and was saved in Microsoft Word 1997, both of which were widely in use in 2003.

Yet when forensic experts examined the raw file with a Hex editor, they could see in [plain sight](#) a reference to "Calibri" (see image below). The only explanation for this anachronistic reference was that the file had been worked on with Office 2007 before it was ultimately saved in an earlier version of Word. It was clear as daylight that "Operation Sledgehammer" could not have been produced and burned onto a CD in 2003.



The Sledgehammer coup document, viewed with a Hex editor

Digital fingerprints of Microsoft Office 2007 were in fact all over the documents on the incriminating CDs. In addition to Calibri, there were references to the Cambria font and various XML schemas first introduced with Office 2007. In one egregious instance, an Excel file had been saved in Calibri so that the font was visible to the naked eye. The forgers had apparently forgotten to save the document in an earlier font.

When these findings were presented to the court, backed up by reports from American, German, and Turkish digital specialists, they met with the same stony silence that earlier discoveries of anachronisms had encountered. The difference now was that the defense had incontrovertible forensic evidence on the forgery which did not rely on the substantive contents of the documents. The presiding judge responded with his usual one-word utterance, “OK,” and moved on.

In September 2012, the court found all but 34 of the 365 defendants guilty of plotting a coup against the legitimately elected government of the country. General Doğan and some of the other senior officers were handed 20-year prison sentences. The court took several months more to issue its reasoned judgment. When Pinar and I received the [text](#), we flipped through it hurriedly to see what the judges had said on the all-important Microsoft Office 2007 issue. What we read was stupefying. The judges [wrote](#) that they had confirmed from “open sources” that opening a document prepared in 2003 with a

2007 version of Office would make the document look like it had been prepared with the newer version. This was either irrelevant – digital forensics is carried out on the original file and does not modify any of its attributes – or exculpatory – amounting to an admission that the documents had been worked on with Office 2007 before being backdated to 2003. It was an obfuscation of the highest order that left no doubt as to the complicity of the judges.

In October 2013, the court of appeals ratified the prison sentences of 237 of the defendants. Unlike the lower court, it wisely [stayed away](#) from the Microsoft problem (as well as the other anachronisms that now numbered in the hundreds). Forced to choose between staggering illogic and compromising silence, it had apparently opted for the latter.

* * *

Turkey is not North Korea, nor even China. How could such a sham trial, based on demonstrably forged evidence, have taken place in a country that seemed at the time democratic, with a relatively free press and open public debate? This is a question that would keep me awake at night.

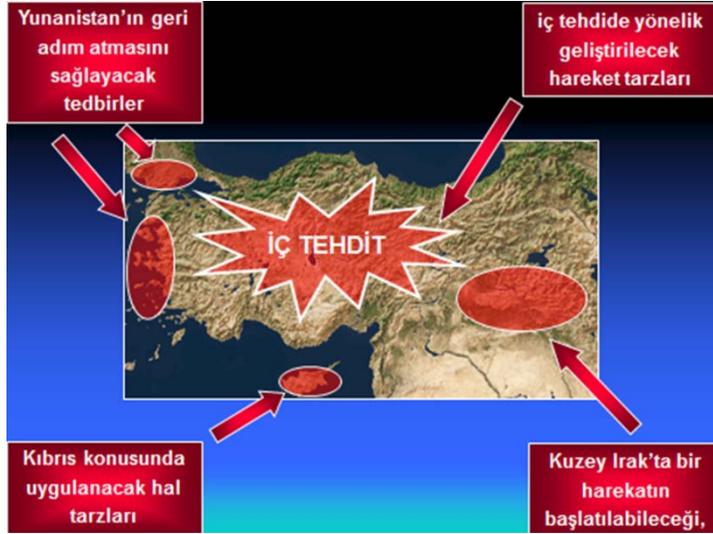
Part of it was that the plot dovetailed an established narrative about military malfeasance. The military's allergy to the AKP was well known, as was the high command's proclivity to remove governments not to its liking. General Doğan himself had figured prominently in the so-called "postmodern coup" of 1997 in which the military had tightened the screws on a coalition government led by Erdoğan's Islamist predecessor, Necmettin Erbakan. There had been a purge of suspected Islamists in the bureaucracy and universities, and Erbakan ultimately had been forced to resign. So Doğan was a usual suspect for liberals and Islamists alike -- the former because of his role in the 1997 intervention, and the latter because of his hardline secularist views.

Furthermore, coup rumors had been rampant during 2003-2004. It was well known that much of the military brass were uncomfortable with Erdoğan and the AKP, and Doğan usually figured among the group of hardliners. The chief of general staff at the time, Hilmi Özkök, was much more accommodating towards the AKP. The rift between him and the hardliners had created unusual tensions within the highest reaches of the military.

As commander of the 1st Army based in Istanbul, General Doğan had chaired a military seminar in March 2003. Among the batch of material delivered by *Taraf's* anonymous source were voice recordings from the seminar. They had somehow been secreted out of 1st Army headquarters, and bundled together

with the fabricated CDs. They would serve to lend further [credence](#) to coup allegations. In particular, certain parts of the discussion were used repeatedly in the public discussion to suggest that the seminar entailed preparations for a coup.

The seminar was essentially a contingency planning exercise. It was based on a hypothetical [scenario](#) prepared by General Doğan's staff that described the unfolding of a number of security threats of an extreme nature. The events laid out in the scenario were these: an independent Kurdish state was about to be formed in Northern Iraq; Kurdish terrorist groups had intensified their attacks around Turkey; relations with the European Union had come to a breaking point; military tensions with Greece, which had downed a Turkish jet, had increased to a boiling point; meanwhile an opportunist Islamist uprising had begun, resulting in widespread killings and looting; the unrest had forced the civilian population to seek refuge in military installments; the government had



Slide from scenario used in March 2003 seminar

sought to institute martial law, but parliament had failed to act. The stated goal of the seminar was to test the 1st Army existing military plans against this confluence of domestic and foreign military threats.

Like so much else in the case, the facts about the seminar were wildly [distorted](#) by Gülenist and pro-government commentators. A common ploy was to present snippets of conversation without mentioning that they were meant as responses to the contingencies described in the fictional scenario. For example, an officer's discussion of using a soccer stadium for detentions was used to argue that those present were planning to arrest large numbers of AKP supporters. At one point, General Doğan says he would ask his superiors to present an ultimatum if necessary for the creation of a government of national unity. This was used as evidence that he was planning to bring the government down, ignoring the fact that Doğan is quite clear he is talking in the context of the hypothesized scenario (which presumed a stalemated parliament).

Most importantly, there was nothing criminal in the proceedings of the seminar – no mention of Sledgehammer or any of the other plots contained in the digital coup documents (such as the mosque

bombings). The indictment charged Doğan and his accomplices with preparing plans to sow domestic unrest whereas the seminar was about responding to unrest in case it were to unfold. The seminar was part of a regular series of contingency exercises by the military and had been scheduled with the approval of the high command. It was attended by 15 military observers from Ankara, who in their subsequent reports mentioned nothing unbecoming taking place during the proceedings. Özkök himself was supposed to be present, but last-minute developments in Iraq had kept him in Ankara. It was Doğan himself who had ordered the recording of the proceedings.

Prosecutors claimed the seminar had been a covert dress rehearsal for the Sledgehammer plot. (The fraudsters had sprinkled bits of the seminar discussions into the coup documents to suggest a link between the two.) Yet they indicted only a small number of the seminar participants (52 out of 162). The vast majority of those on trial (313 out of 365, or 86%) had nothing to do with the seminar, their names appearing only on the contested digital documents. The argument that the seminar was a surreptitious preparation for a coup required suspension of disbelief on many levels. It implied that the military observers sent from Ankara and the majority of seminar participants who were not indicted sat in the room in blissful ignorance of the coup preparations taking place around them. Moreover, the claim rested on the veracity of the Sledgehammer documents, since without those documents there was no plot to rehearse.

Some of the proceedings of the seminar were clearly problematic when viewed from the perspective of the military's role in a democracy. Even though the Islamist uprising discussed in the seminar was hypothetical, it is clear from the recordings that Doğan thought the day might come under the AKP when the scenario might become a reality. The seminar may have even been a message to chief of general staff Özkök and the leaders of AKP who had just assumed power: "we are watching developments closely, and we will not let the AKP undermine the secular order and sow reactionary chaos ..."

There were other questions as well revolving around the seminar. Had Doğan abused his authority by including the Islamist uprising in the scenario despite the apparent desire of his superiors to postpone that particular discussion to a later date? Why had names of AKP officials been used in the seminar on a couple of occasions – a clear violation of military rules – and why had the offending officers not been disciplined as they should have been?

These were at best disciplinary matters. The vast majority of the defendants had not been at the seminar and knew nothing about it. It would have been very difficult to mount a credible criminal trial on the basis of the seminar alone. That is presumably why the bogus coup documents were created. Nevertheless, the seminar was useful fodder for the supporters of the prosecution, as it served to portray the defendants as putschists in the public's eye.

But it was the country's intelligentsia, more than anyone else, who legitimized the Sledgehammer farce. Had prominent intellectuals not lent credence to the charges and supported the prosecution, it would have been very difficult, if not impossible, to stage these trials and bring them to their preordained conclusion. These were mostly liberal democrats whose ideals and aspirations I shared. They were the opinion leaders from whom the educated, Westernized Turkish public would take its cues.

What united these intellectuals was the view that the military and its control of state institutions – what they termed “military tutelage” – posed the greatest obstacle to democracy in Turkey. This perspective would ultimately transform the weakening of the military's political influence into an end in itself. It would allow them to overlook or downplay the growing list of transgressions of the rule of law and due process, as long as the usual suspects – military officials and ultranationalists – were at the receiving end. Worse still, it would blind them to the deeply corrosive influence of Gülen sympathizers within the police and judiciary. What the intelligentsia applauded as democratization and civilianization would eventually turn out to be the replacement of military tutelage by a Gülenist mafia.

In view of these intellectuals' obsession with the military, it is easy to see the appeal that *Taraf* held. Widely perceived as an independent and courageous paper, it featured an intrepid reporter named Mehmet Baransu with good contacts in the police and a knack for getting his hands on secret military documents. Many of these, as in the case of Sledgehammer, would turn out to be forged, but few people suspected that at the time. After all, the military had a history of coups and other political manipulations; certain of its officers were known to have been involved in a dirty war against Kurds in the Southeast. Moreover, *Taraf* was led by Ahmet Altan and Yasemin Çongar, a well-known novelist and reporter, respectively, with strong liberal reputations.

Judging by what they said at the time, the [credulity](#) that Altan and Çongar exhibited when Baransu showed them the Sledgehammer documents borders on the criminally naïve. Altan [wrote](#) confidently that the names on the documents proved conclusively that the plans were authentic and came out of

General Doğan's command. Çongar [wrote](#) that the “digital fingerprints” of the coup plotters were all over the CDs. Later, when pressed by an American journalist, she would [defend](#) herself by saying the plans were too detailed not to be real. If these two were duped by Baransu, they in turn duped Turkey's liberals. (Recall that *Taraf* not only presented the plans as indisputably authentic, it also repeatedly reported the documents were signed by General Doğan and his collaborators when no one else had access to them and could argue otherwise.)

Soon after the Sledgehammer story broke out, a journalist [proposed](#) that Baransu and I pose each other three questions. She would collect the answers and publish them. I said yes and Baransu agreed too, so I passed on my questions to the reporter: (i) did the Sledgehammer documents carry signatures? (ii) how had *Taraf* authenticated the documents? (iii) how did Baransu explain the anachronisms that had come to light? She promised to hold on to my questions until she received Baransu's own questions. Baransu's answers did not arrive by the deadline, and when the journalist pressed on, she learned Baransu had changed his mind. He had consulted with Altan and Çongar and was told not to go ahead. The reason Baransu would give for renegeing was that he and the others did not want to be a party to the dispute – an odd excuse for a group of journalists who had published grave accusations against Doğan and others, without bothering to get their views or verifying the incriminating documents' authenticity.

Altan and Çongar's even greater sin was to have stuck with their story even after it became indefensible. I wrote to Çongar with the anachronisms we had uncovered; she failed to respond. They have both since left *Taraf* and stopped writing on this topic. To this day, neither has produced a reckoning or apology.

They are scarcely alone. One of the earliest to jump on the Sledgehammer bandwagon was Hasan Cemal, a widely respected columnist known by many as the doyen of Turkish journalists. Cemal was [convinced](#), along with many others, that the military had made plans during 2003-2004 to remove the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government. When the Sledgehammer documents were published, he declared that those were the plans in question. I happened to know Cemal; we had taken turns questioning Erdoğan at a Davos (World Economic Forum) dinner one year, and I had seen him since a few times. I reasoned that he would be interested in my take on the matter. I was wrong. He would not respond to my messages, and declined to meet with me even after a mutual friend interceded to arrange a get-together while I was in Istanbul in December 2010.

This same friend – a well-known businessman who funded many liberal causes – arranged a session in which Pinar and I would present the findings in our book. He invited the leading columnists in the mainstream media. A total of three showed up.

That would set the pattern for the next three years. There were a few prominent journalists such as Sedat Ergin, Aslı Aydıntaşbaş, and Ezgi Başaran who wrote about the inconsistencies in the mainstream media. But for the most part we were ignored by the Turkish intelligentsia, and when not, pilloried for our views. Rarely was the evidence we presented discussed seriously. I became more critical over time, and began to accuse these opinion leaders of lending their support to mafia tactics in their quest to take the military out of politics. For their part, they saw me as putting my family ties first, tarnishing my academic reputation by defending the coup plotters. An absurd, but common charge was that Pinar and I were lending support to militarism. We also became the frequent target of ad-hominem attacks; Ali Bayramoğlu, a respected liberal, [likened](#) us to Pinochet’s children and called us “putschists’ offspring.”

What made the experience surreal was the disregard for the plain facts of the case that many leading members of the intelligentsia exhibited. In addition to Altan, Çongar, and Cemal, a who’s-who cast of leading intellectuals repeatedly misrepresented the details of the case. In part, this may have been because there was so much disinformation floating in the air, spewed out by Gülenist outlets in particular. But these authors were impervious to the corrections we would try to make.

Etyen Mahçupyan was emblematic. Then a highly regarded commentator, he wrote a column for *Zaman* but was known as an independent thinker. As an Armenian, he was clearly not in the inner circle of Gülenists. His name [appeared](#) in the Sledgehammer documents, along with other left-liberal intellectuals supposedly targeted by the coup plotters. (This is one of the documents dated 2003 in which embedded Microsoft Office 2007 elements were found.) He had once attended an economics lecture I gave in Istanbul, and I knew he was familiar with my academic work. I approached him first in early 2010 when he wrote (along with Ahmet Altan and others) that military experts had confirmed the March 2003 seminar was part of the coup preparations. Though incorrect, this was widely reported at the time. The military had issued a statement explicitly correcting those news reports and confirming there was no evidence the seminar was coup-related. I sent Mahçupyan the statement, which had in fact appeared before his column, expecting that he would rectify what he had written. He advised me to stay out of these matters, and after a string of exchanges that got more heated along the way, he refused to acknowledge that he had misrepresented what the experts had concluded.

I stopped communicating directly with Maḥcupyan from that point on. But what he would write in his columns in *Zaman* would be a frequent source of exasperation. Maḥcupyan continued to produce a series of howlers that made me wonder what could possibly be going on in his head. At various times, he wrote that General Doğan had initially [admitted](#) to prosecutors having prepared the Sledgehammer plan; that Doğan had [lied](#) to his superiors about the content of the military seminar; that the European Court of Human Rights had [rejected](#) the claim that the digital data had been fabricated; that the Gölcük hard drive was [protected](#) by the personal password of one of the defendants; that the updated versions of the Sledgehammer plans had been [retrieved](#) from Gölcük. These were all false. In none of these cases, did Maḥcupyan acknowledge his mistakes or publish a correction. When the constitutional court threw out the convictions in June 2014, he would finally admit there were problems with the evidence, but [argue](#) that Doğan and other “putschists” were guilty politically, even if not legally.

Another noteworthy case was Alper Görmüş, a liberal columnist at *Taraf* who produced a series of articles defending the authenticity of Sledgehammer. To his credit, he was the only Sledgehammer proponent who took our arguments seriously and [discussed](#) them extensively – even if to downplay them ultimately. Over the course of the four years he wrote about the case, his argument evolved significantly. At first, he tried to show that the anachronisms we had identified were [not real](#). When this failed, he argued that the anachronisms could have been the result of [updating](#) of coup plans over time. The trouble was that the documents showed no evidence of updating other than the occasional anachronism. Moreover, they were all dated 2003 or earlier, and the names on them were of officers on duty at the time. Görmüş then suggested that perhaps the plotters had made deliberate [mistakes](#) to cover their tracks. This made little sense either: if the plotters were interested in covering their tracks they could have easily used code names instead of sprinkling their real names all over the incriminating documents. He [suggested](#) a fake CD may have been created by the defendants to create “plausible deniability” in case they were caught, overlooking that all the evidence for the coup came in similarly problematic digital form. At one point, he [wrote](#) the Sledgehammer CD delivered to *Taraf* had been burned on the hard drive retrieved from Gölcük – an error he [retracted](#), again to his credit, after we [pointed](#) it out.

Eventually, Görmüş would essentially give up any pretense of a credible court case against the defendants. In an [interview](#) published in early 2014, he would say he opposed the arguments Pinar and I were making because of the effect we were having on “public opinion”: “I am fighting against the

perception that ‘nothing happened in this country since 2002, that the military did not take a stance against the elected government, that everything is made up.’”

Ultimately, to many commentators it apparently did not matter whether the Sledgehammer documents were authentic. They argued the proceedings of the March 2003 military seminar chaired by General Doğan were evidence enough. This became a common tactic as the problems with the Sledgehammer documents grew too severe to ignore. Yet this tactic undermined the entire logic of the prosecution, which rested on the veracity of the digital evidence. Who had created the bogus documents? Why had prosecutors chosen to rely on them to build their case if the seminar was a coup attempt on its own? These remained unanswered questions.

A debate has now flared in Turkey whether these individuals allowed themselves to be used as the [useful idiots](#) of the government and the Gülen movement. The problem with Altan, Çongar, Mahçupyan, Görmüş and the others wasn’t simply that they turned their back on the overwhelming evidence of forgery. Nor was it the support they lent to judicial practices that undermined due process. Their greatest mistake was to believe that democracy could be erected on such rotten foundations.

When well-intentioned outsiders – American and European politicians, reporters, and human rights specialists – looked for information and insight on Turkey, it was largely to these same individuals that they would turn. Viewed as brave souls resisting military dominance, the Turkish intellectuals who supported the Ergenekon and Sledgehammer prosecutions would become the darlings of Western media and foundations. *Taraf* was typically presented as a small but heroic paper taking the military head on -- Turkey’s most courageous newspaper as [Spiegel](#) called it. Yasemin Çongar would be the subject of adoring profiles (see [here](#), though the original story seems to have been removed from the site). Under the banner of democracy promotion, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) would [fund](#) Etyen Mahçupyan’s activities with TESEV (a Turkish NGO), including a report that concluded the Ergenekon trial “had not gone far enough.”

These individuals would in turn present their foreign interlocutors with an appealing narrative. Here finally was a popular Muslim politician who was opening up the country to democracy and sending the military back to the barracks, despite his Islamist roots. This narrative gained further strength from Erdoğan and the Gülen movement’s successful manipulation of democratic institutions and procedures towards non-democratic ends – the use of nominally independent courts to undermine rule of law, the

disinformation generated by what appeared to be a free press, and the pursuit of the widely-shared goal of ending “military tutelage.” The weakening of old taboos associated with the traditional secular-military elites – against Kurds and Armenians in particular – would also cloud the real picture, making it difficult to distinguish a power transition, pure and simple, from democratization.

All of these help explain – if not quite justify – why so many outsiders viewed developments in Turkey with rose-tinted glasses for so long. Typical was the view expressed by the Council on Foreign Relations’ Turkey expert Steve Cook, who would [state](#) confidently in May 2012 that “the Justice and Development Party has done everything that it can ... to forge ... a more democratic, open country....” In early 2014, the same Cook would [bemoan](#) Erdogan’s penchant for “using the institutions of the state for retribution and political intimidation” and his gambit of manipulating judicial reform “to his own political ends.” Never mind that all of that was happening while observers like Cook were applauding Turkey’s “democratization.”

In Europe, liberals would fret about criticizing Erdogan lest this feed into Islamophobia or be mistaken for support for militarism, even when they expressed concerns in private. As late as November 2013, Sweden’s foreign minister Carl Bildt would [argue](#) Erdogan’s Turkey was on the right path, citing with approval that “the old military-controlled state apparatus [has been] transformed into more genuine popular rule, with a more open social climate.” When I talked to Western observers about the reality behind the military trials, I kept bumping against an attitude that had hardened. As the European editor of a major international newsweekly would tell me bluntly: “we support the AK government against the army, and especially against the Ergenekon lot.”

What was true of Western media, policy makers and think tankers was also true of human rights organizations. The military were the traditional culprit in Turkey’s human right register, with a long record of abuses against Kurds in particular. Outfits such as Amnesty International generally supported the political-military trials and refused to get engaged when I and others approached them about investigating the rights violations in the Sledgehammer case. The idea that it was the rights of military officers that were now being violated was one they could not quite handle.

The established narrative that painted the military as the villain not only made it difficult for well-meaning outsiders to comprehend the nature of these trials, it also made them unwitting accomplices in the fraud being perpetrated. This was brought home to me in the course of my interactions with Gerald Knaus, the founding director of the European Stability Initiative (ESI). ESI is a Vienna based NGO with a

wide network of activities supporting democratization in Turkey and Southeastern Europe, funded by the Open Society Institute and various European foundations. Knaus was spending time at the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy at Harvard's Kennedy School at the time that the Sledgehammer story broke. He and his Institute had taken a strong interest in the Ergenekon trials, in the then-common expectation that these would bring Turkey's notorious deep state to account.

When I began to talk to him about my own findings on these cases, he was interested but skeptical. The ESI's information on these cases drew heavily on the positive coverage in *Taraf* and *Zaman* sources, which dominated the source material on their [web site](#). Gareth Jenkins' well-researched and skeptical [analysis](#) on Ergenekon was listed as "controversial," the only source described thus. I tried to explain to him that *Taraf* and *Zaman* were hardly unbiased, to no avail. Knaus would serve as my discussant when I presented some of our early findings on the Sledgehammer case at Harvard in May 2010. His defense of the prosecutions would be featured approvingly in an [error-filled article](#) in *Zaman*.

ESI staff had even taken the trouble to translate the notorious Cage Plan targeting Christian minorities into English, posting it as a prime example of deep state activity in Turkey. The document was a clear forgery, planted by the police (as I discussed above). Even some former *Taraf* columnists have now admitted as much, [acknowledging](#) that they were duped. I showed Knaus my evidence and told him he should remove the bogus plan from the site. He said he would look into it, but despite my repeated pleas, he did nothing.

I do not know if Knaus still believes the Ergenekon investigations were tackling the real deep state. But to this day, the Cage Plan features on ESI's web page in both the original Turkish and English translations – continuing to serve as testimony to the triumph of wishful thinking over reality.

Reality would eventually catch up. On February 26, 2014, the *New York Times* [published](#) on its front page a long story on the Sledgehammer case, calling it a sham trial in no uncertain terms. Referring to the Microsoft and other anachronisms, it noted:

Yet all of this — and plenty more dubious evidence — was judged in recent years by a court here as sufficient to convict hundreds of military officers and other officials of conspiracies to overthrow Mr. Erdogan's Islamist-rooted Justice and Development Party, or A.K.P.

While the *Times* piece was the most detailed, articles in the [London Times](#), [Wall Street Journal](#), [Financial Times](#), [New York Times Magazine](#), [The Economist](#), [New Yorker](#), [New York Review of Books](#) by now have all noted the use of forged evidence in Turkey's military trials. The narrative on Turkey, it appears, has changed drastically. It was not so long ago that these trials were hailed as a successful instance of a moderate, democratic Islamic regime sending the military back to its barracks. It is now virtually impossible to encounter an article on Turkey that does not mention the undermining of the rule of law they represented.

In what might seem like a curious twist, it is Erdoğan himself who has put the final nail on the coffin of the previous myth. Erdoğan's AKP and the Gülen movement were steadfast allies as long as the military and secular elites retained some power. Erdoğan was happy to let Gülen sympathizers in the police and judiciary do the heavy lifting, while his government facilitated the trials behind the scenes. Once the common enemy was vanquished, the two sides found themselves engaged in a full-fledged war for control of state institutions. Gülenist prosecutors launched an extensive corruption probe against AKP officials and Erdoğan's own son. Erdoğan became desperate to make his new opponents look bad. He now charges the Gülen movement with having set up a "parallel state," accusing Gülenists with using illegal wiretaps, forged evidence, and media disinformation to go after their opponents.

Leading AKP members openly admit that they made a mistake by allowing the movement to lodge itself within the police, judiciary, and other parts of the state bureaucracy. And in a stupendous turnaround, Erdoğan's top advisor has [admitted](#) that Sledgehammer and Ergenekon were a "plot" against the country's army. Erdoğan himself has [said](#) that the Gülenists were behind these trials and that many of the defendants did not receive a fair trial. Many AKP officials say they were duped by their previous allies. These claims ring hollow since the defendants had tried every means possible to draw the government's attention to the machinations going on in the trials. (Early in the process, I had a private meeting with one of the government's senior ministers and shown him the forgery evidence.) The constitutional court's ruling of June 2014, ordering a retrial in Sledgehammer, likely reflects this political rebalancing rather than any return to the rule of law.

To slay the monster he helped create, Erdoğan has purged thousands of police officers, brought the judiciary under government control, tightened the screws on the media and Internet, and given the national intelligence organization vast new powers. The collateral damage has been enormous; Turkey is rapidly losing even the semblance of a democracy. The fight with the Gülen movement appears to have escalated beyond the point of no return. It is difficult to see how the two sides could possibly reconcile

in view of the accusations that they have hurled at each other. Either the Gülen movement will succeed in sidelining Erdoğan in favor of another, more pliable politician. Or Erdoğan will manage to eviscerate the Gülen movement. So far, Erdoğan seems to have gained the upper hand with his electoral victory in the municipal elections of March 2014. Presidential elections in August will determine whether he can extend his political dominance into the next decade.

In the rather short interval of four years between 2007 and 2011, Turkey's political balance underwent a momentous transformation, marked by the dissolution of the secular-military old regime. The Turkish army was reduced from powerful arbiter setting the rules of the political game to a docile branch of the AKP government. Used to dealing with threats of a very different nature, the high command had no clue how to handle such a public-relations disaster and never managed to mount an effective response to the charges it knew were false. The security breaches revealed by the extensive leaks from within the military bred suspicion and turned the army ranks against each other. Successive indictments under Sledgehammer and Ergenekon paralyzed officers for fear they might be next in line. A few frustrated commanders resigned when it became clear that repeated assurances from Erdoğan on fixing the judicial abuses would lead nowhere. In the end, the combined onslaught from the judiciary and the media brought down the military like a house of cards.

Many interpreted this [at the time](#) as a process of democratization -- perhaps a bit too messy, with some rule-of-law violations, but democratization nonetheless. Yet anyone looking closely at Sledgehammer and the other political trials that made this rapid transformation possible would have been under no such illusion. What was happening was something else entirely, a power grab by the Gülenists and the AKP using Kafkaesque methods. Just as the military's own transgressions in the past had undermined democracy, the dirty war against the military and the secularists would ultimately serve to empower a mafia within the state and condemn Turkey to an even darker authoritarianism.

It is trite to say Sledgehammer and related mass trials were a missed opportunity for Turkey to confront and come to grips with the country's deep state and history of military coups. But the real damage goes much deeper. Regardless of the outcome of the presidential elections in August, Turkey will have to live with the consequences of the dirty tricks deployed to accomplish regime change: the deepening of old wounds and the political-cultural cleavage between secularists and religious-conservatives; the power struggle at the center stage of Turkish politics between two groups with fundamentally undemocratic

modus operandi, Erdoğan's AKP and the Gülenists; and the almost-certain descent into an authoritarianism that moves Turkey further away from democracy.

Erdogan and the Gülenists may be the primary culprits behind all this, but no-one comes out looking good from this sorry tale. Not the military-secular elites, who ruled the country with a strong hand for so long and virtually guaranteed the backlash from the religious-conservative groups whom they scorned. Not Turkey's friends in Europe and the U.S., who continued to lend support to a government engaged in a vast range of abuses. And certainly not the intelligentsia, who badly misread what was happening and legitimized sham trials that would put Kafka to shame.