

**Closed Session**

**Activities of Terrorist Groups Abroad:**  
FETO and PKK





## Closed Session

# Activities of Terrorist Groups Abroad: FETO and PKK

The TRT World Forum 2018, recognised as one of the most significant political events of the year, took place from October 3rd-4th at the Swissotel in Istanbul gathering together over 600 esteemed guests and panellists. Consisting of 8 public sessions, 11 closed sessions and keynote speeches delivered by some of our most esteemed guests, this year's Forum succeeded in providing a platform for serious engagement with the most pressing challenges of our time. The themes of the sessions ranged from the future of the Middle East and the European Union to the growing trend of Islamophobia, refugees, Turkish foreign policy in an age of crisis, the crisis of new media and female leadership in a world of conflict. Uniting all of these themes was a focus on the fragmented state of today's world and a sincere desire to offer meaningful solutions.

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## Background

**O**n October 3, 2018, TRT World Research Centre held a roundtable meeting on the Activities of Terrorist Groups Abroad. This was one of a series of roundtable meetings forming part of the two-day TRT World Forum 2018, which included 8 public sessions and 11 closed sessions.

The roundtable meetings were held in English under the Chatham House Rule. This rule stipulates that 'when a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed.'

Terrorism today is a trans-national phenomenon which has fundamentally changed the nature of

counter-terrorism. Terrorist organisations have long sought foreign support for their causes. However, the undertaking of direct advocacy in foreign countries is a relatively new phenomenon employed by some organisations in the last few decades. The PKK and FETO provide clear examples of how terrorist organizations operate overseas under a chain of command that functions through the organisations that they establish abroad. The PKK and FETO operate mainly in Europe and the US, exploiting the democratic rights and freedoms in these countries for their political purposes. The primary strategy of these terrorist organisations abroad is to wage a psychological and political war in order to gain leverage and legitimacy for their cause. This session seeks to shed light on this relatively new phenomenon and provide functional strategies against such activities of terror groups.

## Discussion themes of the session:

- Reasoning of the Turkish government deal with the terrorist organisations in the trans-national context.
- Engagement of the PKK and FETO in Turkey and overseas.
- Turkey's strategies and actions.
- The parasitic relationship between a terrorist group and a third country.

## Introduction

The PKK and Fethullahist Terrorist Organisation (FETO) are two completely different terrorist groups formed for separate reasons and at separate points in Turkey's history. Although the roots of the PKK can be traced back to 1974 when the "Kurdish question" was among the principal agenda, the terrorist organisation officially began its armed campaign against the Turkish state in 1984. FETO, on the other hand, started as a religious movement in the 1960s and has been operating internally since. Nevertheless, both organizations have come to constitute key security threats for Turkey, and as such pose a similar danger. The session aimed to compare the two groups in terms of their methodology and objectives, and how they have transformed from their inception to the present day. Speakers outlined the differences and similarities between the two terrorist organisations, demonstrating that although both groups are different ideologically, they use similar tactics.

Although the PKK claims to represent the ethnic, cultural, and legal rights of the Kurdish people, when in reality, as proven by several studies and experiences on the ground, it does not. The FETO organisation, however, has different dimensions compared to the PKK. Its followers portray themselves as a civic social movement and claim to focus more on Islamic values, education and humanitarian work, rather than politics. However, through a soft power approach and by building a secretive network of influence, the organisation made a coup attempt to overthrow the government on July 15, 2016.

The speaker pointed out that female member of the PKK are represented as "woman fighters" and their presence (whether voluntarily or otherwise) is romanticised and glorified. Despite the mounting evidence of the exploitation of women in the PKK, several media outlets continue to portray female militants as "freedom fighters" and their participation as a display of gender equality.

Commenting on the violation of human rights, one speaker highlighted the PKK's long history of exploiting young children as fighters. The speaker shared her experiences of the complex situations that some families were faced with in the East of Turkey. One particular case that stood out was when a family member had children in opposite camps -one son

kidnapped by the PKK and the other son in the military fighting against the group. In a similar vein, FETO has also been implicated in dozens of human rights offences, including documented abuses at FETO houses or dormitories, and more recently, a bloody coup attempt that killed hundreds of people.

With regards to FETO, one speaker stated that when its leader Fethullah Gulen encouraged his female followers to abandon their headscarves in order to be able to attend their universities, he undermined the struggle of thousands of women who demonstrated for their rights in the women's movement of the 90's. In order to be treated equally, if not favourably, followers in the United States preferred not to wear the headscarf. Moreover, those who chose to keep the headscarf remained passive within the Gulen hierarchal order, both in social life and in politics.

Both of these organisations have very strong lobby activities, which can explain their prolonged existence. Aside from receiving political and material support from the international diaspora, the PKK have also generated funds through illegal activities abroad. One speaker pointed out the difficulties in reaching a wide international agreement against the PKK and FETO, only because the struggle to define terrorism is as hard as the struggle against terrorism itself. Although the United States and European Union states have maintained that the PKK is a terrorist organisation, their media insists on glorifying the group, resulting in the cliché, "one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter." The deliberate ambiguity which is created by use of such terminology makes it even more difficult to reach a common consensus on terrorist organisations and understand their nature and counter it efficiently.

## Politics

Our speakers highlighted that FETO and PKK are highly active in the following areas:

Both organisations have received external support and have exploited the Kurdish and Turkish diaspora abroad, especially in Western Europe. Their aim is to gain some sort of legitimacy in the eyes of the Western world. They usually present themselves as victims of the Turkish government by depicting the government as oppressive and as a violator of human rights. This language appeals to many academics and journalists who already see the Turkish government in this light. During the session, one speaker highlighted FETO's and the PKK's growing presence in the United Kingdom. In order to pursue their own agenda, they have embedded themselves in political parties, among politicians, political associations, local governments, civil society organisations and

human rights associations. Human rights associations, in particular, have proven to be very effective in the international arena and so securing their support is seen as pivotal in gaining international legitimacy.

An example of the close relationship between FETO and foreign politicians can be seen in a Times Newspaper article, in which it was revealed that a UK member of parliament was paid by FETO to collaborate with a FETO human rights group based in Turkey. Turkey has put its whole effort to overcome the problems related with these organizations and their recognition by Turkish allies. In particular, in negotiations with the European Union and with investigating the Turkish democratization process, Turkey had some positive dialogue despite numerous regional and international challenges.

## Academics

Universities are considered the main producers of knowledge and the impact that academic research can have on the wider world is pivotal in shaping public opinion. FETO and the PKK have often been the subject of scholarly studies and existing literature on both organisations have been largely subjective. Academic publications have maintained their bias in relation to Turkey's decades-long fight against the PKK. Furthermore there is almost a general consensus taken by academics outside Turkey that supports the FETO group, while not even mentioning its terrorist activities against the state and its people. Similarly, although there have been many victims of the PKK since the 1980s and 1990s, there is little or no mention of the 40,000 people who died as a result of PKK attacks, or the 251 civilian deaths during the July 15 coup attempt orchestrated by FETO. Another example of bias in Western academia is the fact that whilst it is easy to find several documentaries and publications

citing Turkish violence against the Kurdish populations, there remains a lack of any significant material detailing the suffering of both Turks and Kurds under the PKK.

The speaker highlighted that the PKK terrorism issue in Turkey is often deliberately misrepresented as a "Kurdish" issue, even though Turks and Kurds have coexisted peacefully for many years. The PKK terrorists must not be viewed as representative of the predominately peaceful Kurds and cannot be seen as the spokespersons for the Kurdish population. In contrast to PKK tactics, Gulen and his followers have promoted their ideas through various academic initiatives, such as conferences, publications and cultural foundations. Their strong presence in academia has therefore made it even more difficult for Turkey to convince people of the organisations illegal activities.

## Media

The media plays a prominent role in shaping public opinion and behaviour. Terrorist organisations and their supporters have made use of the power of media, particularly social media, as a tool for spreading propaganda. Furthermore, in an attempt to water down the Turkish government's national security concerns, the Western media has often propagated narratives that legitimise both terrorist organisations by branding them as 'revolutionaries' or 'rebels.'

Before 2013, FETO had a particularly powerful media presence in Turkey and the organisation's message was widely circulated through its large media empire consisting of newspapers, television stations and publishing houses. Outside of Turkey, the Gulen organisation established European editions of its newspaper not only to target the Turkish diaspora in

Europe, but also to forge links with foreign media and retain control over its portrayal abroad. After the 15th July coup attempt in 2016, many journalists were accused of using the media as a propaganda tool to actively support the coup attempt, and consequently jailed for perpetrating criminal activities. The majority of Western states reacted with discontent and demanded the release of journalists in the name of "freedom of expression." The speaker underscored the irony of Western states legitimising and defending a terrorist organisation whilst claiming to defend democratic values and rule of law. The speaker also highlighted the Western media's failure to provide an accurate portrayal of the coup and demonstrate genuine solidarity with the Turkish people. Rather than praising the strength of Turkish resistance to the military coup, the media focused on condemning the government's state of emergency and post-coup policies.

## Economics

FETO and PKK organisations have established large business associations that have contributed to their development. Apart from its illegal business transactions, both groups rely heavily on networks of supporters to raise funds and aid money. The speaker referred to his experiences in witnessing PKK supporters easily and openly generating funds from an unwitting public through aid money collected in the streets of London. It

is also well known that FETO funds its activities largely through sympathetic businessmen who contribute large sums to the movement. Aside from receiving a stable source of income by its supporters, it is evident that these terrorist groups are economically independent outside of Turkey due to their vast network of organisations in Europe.

## Institutionalisation

Both groups have heavily invested in establishing a presence in a range of areas - from business to media to education - and creating institutions intended to support their cause. Their inner workings and hierarchy are also highly secretive to outsiders as no real names are used.

The Turkish government is always reminding its partners and allies about these groups' intentions but has not gotten much support. Additionally, FETO has

built schools in 160 countries, and thus has a strong institutional background. This comes up with a very important question of why they open schools and what their intentions are. FETO has spent millions of dollars on schools, all of which are non-profit. The speaker believed that the reasons behind this investment in schooling has not been adequately considered by western countries, downplaying the importance of schooling in affecting one's ideological outlook.



## Recruitment

Another area that these organisations are active in is recruitment, both within Turkey and abroad. Since decisive action by the Turkish authorities post July 15, FETO has lost ground in Turkey and has since tried to replenish its ranks from abroad. Similarly, the PKK has also been recruiting young people of Kurdish origin for many years. Its members generally join for ideological purposes and have intentions of creating an independent Kurdish state.

The speaker referred to his time in the UK when he met members of the Council of Europe who were pro-PKK and pro-FETO, whilst at the same time still representing Turkey in council meetings. Although the real threat to Turkey and its allies are the PKK and FETO, many politicians in Europe have chosen to defend both group members. Turkey still has a lot of work to do if it is to convince Europe and indeed the rest of the world that both terrorist organisations are a threat to regional and global security.

## Infiltrating Institutions

Participants highlighted that particularly in Africa and Central Asia, FETO are trying to persuade the country's elites to send their children to their schools. They have also accumulated a lot of wealth in foreign countries and their schools and services cover most continents, and range from Colombia to Taiwan, and from Iran to Pakistan and China.

One participant from Africa mentioned that although FETO externally appeared to be a friend of Turkey and a group consisting of committed Muslims, they were networking with governments and media outlets to further pursue their hidden agenda. There was a state-like structure even within the Turkish state, a "parallel state," working in pursuit of its own agendas and taking orders not from the state but from regional FETO leaders. Even in the military, FETO generals would take orders not from their superiors but from civilians who were high ranking FETO leaders. The participant emphasised that if lessons must be learnt from groups like FETO, it is to be aware of the dangers of blindly following a religious cult.

Another participant questioned how this economically and politically friendly looking organisation suddenly became the enemy of the Turkish state. When analysing FETO members, it is evident that most of them are highly educated, multi-lingual, intelligent professionals from all walks of life. Whilst the Turkish public were well aware of their credentials, they found it difficult to fathom the idea that such a group would commit to ousting the government and become 'traitors'. In response one of the speakers stated that the July 15 coup attempt was the turning point. July 15 was also

the day the parliament passed the reforms that would make the selection process of the council of judges and prosecutors more democratic. All these reforms and democratisation processes made the FETO terrorist organisation realise that they were about to lose a lot of power.

One participant pointed out that even when Ecevit was in power in the 1990s, he was surrounded by Gulenists, indicating that FETO had been an intrinsic part of the state apparatus for years. In light of these, after the coup attempt, the Turkish government tried to convince the U.S of the dangers of the organisations but these concerns were not taken seriously. Another participant asked how the international community should deal with this dilemma because there is no consensus on the issue. The speaker's response was that whilst international solidarity is highly crucial, the Turkish government must continue in its efforts to implement realistic and effective measures and uphold the rule of law.

Another participant asked the panel why FETO members were not being extradited to Turkey since the coup attempt. The speaker suggested that the reason for this is that Turkey's allies do not consider this organisation as terrorists, as according to them Turkey has not provided adequate evidence of criminal activity. Furthermore, FETO has built a strong lobbying machine in the US and Europe which has been a key factor in the failure of extraditions to Turkey.

One participant asked if there had been any negotiation processes that took place between the government

and these groups. The speaker referred to the peace agreement of 2013 when the Turkish government and the PKK subsequently declared a mutually recognised cease-fire that held for two years. During this period in the history of the Kurdish-Turkish conflict, there were no terrorist attacks, but after the June 7 elections in 2015, the peace process collapsed and returned to a full-fledged war. The HDP leader called people onto the streets which triggered widespread civil disorder and further violence across the southeast of the country.

One speaker mentioned that in Turkey, certain groups were in the past marginalised and discriminated based on ethnicity, religious belief and ideology. There was limited freedom of expression and phrases like, "I am Kurdish", "I want to speak Kurdish", "I am an Alevi", "I am an Armenian citizen", "I want to wear my headscarf", could not be easily heard in public. However, it is important to remember that diversity is in the very nature of Turkey. Indeed, a lot has changed in Turkey since those earlier days and people have been given more freedoms. In 2013, president Erdogan initiated steps in order to try and combat any remaining societal discriminations by giving more rights to the Kurdish population. This was also when the peace process started with the PKK.

## Conclusion

The FETO and PKK are both unique terrorist organizations which have emerged out of different sets of circumstances. Although they externally claim to have liberating objectives, both are characterized by a clear animosity towards the Turkish state and have focused on seizing power through different means. While the PKK has resorted to armed violence, FETO increased its influence by infiltrating key institutions of the Turkish state, including the military, the judiciary, and even the media. The PKK has also capitalized on the valorisation of the YPG-PYD by Western media in the struggle against Daesh, and attempts to paint itself as the sole spokesperson of Kurdish demands in Turkey. In reality, both terrorist organizations have used traditional

One speaker highlighted that the rule of law still exists in Turkey, something which critics generally forget. It is often headline news when suspected terrorists get arrested but the media and public are not necessarily aware of all those who are subsequently freed. If there is anyone who is mistakenly convicted or fired from their job, there is an institution called the State of Security Investigation Commission which looks at each of these individual cases separately and ensures transparency and fairness in their trials. Applications for this process are not necessary as it is done automatically.

One participant expressed that there is no freedom of speech in either Turkey or other countries. The speaker claimed this in reference to the idea that the distinction between hate speech and freedom of the speech well defined, otherwise it would threaten stability and the government. Another participant pointed out that people do not think that there is no point to the merger between FETO and PKK. Additionally, another speaker pointed out that upon investigating publications, language or discourse, it becomes obvious that these two organizations share a common goal.

and new forms of social media to mask their aim of undermining the Turkish state by any means necessary. They have been unwittingly (and at times deliberately) supported by international media outlets which fixate on the Turkish government's policies in the post July 15 coup environment, without adequately highlighting the extremely dangerous nature of these organizations and their methods. Our speakers concluded that despite the differences in methods, both terrorist groups aim to undermine the Turkish state and have displayed a clear propensity to inflict violence upon citizens of the Republic of Turkey, making them threats of the highest order.

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