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# THE CASE OF MUSTAFA ULAŞLI:

A DEFAMATION CAMPAIGN AGAINST  
A CORONAVIRUS EXPERT  
AND  
THE UNENDING  
DEHUMANIZATION OF TURKEY'S  
DISMISSED PUBLIC SECTOR  
WORKERS

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MAY 2020

### Executive Summary

Mustafa Ulaşlı is a Turkish coronavirus expert. Under normal circumstances, he would be required to be at the forefront of the country's battle against the current COVID-19 outbreak. However, he is also one of tens of thousands of people who were summarily dismissed from the public sector in the wake of a failed coup attempt in July 2016, which means he is categorically banned from being employed at any kind of public service. He recently came to prominence after publicly offering his assistance to Turkish authorities in dealing with the pandemic. While he received considerable public interest afterwards; he was also immediately subjected to a wave of defamation and insult. This report deals with the smear campaign mounted against Ulaşlı as it relates to the wider context of the perpetuated dehumanization of Turkey's purged public sector workers.

May 2020

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## 1. Background

### a. Mustafa Ulaşlı

Mustafa Ulaşlı is a Turkish geneticist who conducted research on coronavirus between 2002 and 2005 at Princeton University in the U.S. and between 2007 and 2011 at Utrecht University in the Netherlands. In February 2011, he successfully defended his dissertation titled “Coronavirus replication in host cells” at University Medical Center Utrecht and was awarded PhD<sup>1</sup>.



*Mustafa Ulaşlı*

Despite being offered a permanent position at Princeton University and having earned the right to apply for Dutch citizenship<sup>2</sup>, he returned to Turkey and took up a post at the Gaziantep University as a medical geneticist<sup>3</sup>. His work in Gaziantep continued until he was summarily dismissed by a state of emergency decree on 1 September 2016<sup>4</sup>.

### b. The 2016-2018 state of emergency period

On 15 July 2016, elements within the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) attempted a coup d'état aimed at toppling President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his government by

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.cellbiology-utrecht.nl/8-general.html>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.duvarenglish.com/health-2/coronavirus/2020/03/19/sacked-by-emergency-decree-turkish-coronavirus-researcher-excluded-from-fight-against-pandemic/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.thenational.ae/world/europe/purged-coronavirus-expert-sidelined-in-turkey-1.997333>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.resmigazete.gov.tr/eskiler/2016/09/20160901M1-1-15.pdf>

seizing control of several key places in Ankara and İstanbul. The attempt was thwarted by forces loyal to the government.

Erdoğan and his government claimed that the faith-based Gülen movement and its leader, the U.S.-based cleric Fethullah Gülen, had orchestrated the abortive putsch<sup>5</sup>. Gülen denied any involvement<sup>6</sup> and called for an international investigation.

Prior to the coup attempt, the Turkish government had already designated the movement as a terrorist organization<sup>7</sup>, adopting the derogatory term “FETÖ (Fethullahist Terrorist Organization)” to refer to it. The U.S. authorities have so far declined to comply with Turkey’s repeated requests for Gülen’s extradition, citing failure to provide sufficient evidence<sup>8</sup>.

Government officials from several Western countries have called into question the Turkish government’s narrative regarding the coup attempt and the Gülen movement’s alleged role in it. This report does not deal with this controversy. However, in view of the fact that the movement has not been listed as a terrorist organization by the United Nations, the European Union and an overwhelming majority of the international community, this report refrains from using the terrorism-related term coined by the Turkish government to describe the group, except in direct quotes. Instead, it will be referred to as ‘the Gülen movement,’ the term adopted by most impartial observers.

The coup attempt prompted the Turkish government to declare a three-month state of emergency in order to take immediate measures aimed at removing alleged Gülen

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<sup>5</sup> <https://edition.cnn.com/2016/07/17/asia/turkey-attempted-coup/index.html>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/17/us/fethullah-gulen-turkey-coup-attempt.html>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-gulen-idUSKCN0YM167>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/01/officials-visit-turkey-gulen-extradition-request-190102155042596.html>

followers from state institutions<sup>9</sup>, which would see successive extensions and remain in effect until July 2018<sup>10</sup>.

During the two-year-long emergency rule, the Turkish government issued 36 decrees which curtailed a number of civil and political rights, expanded police and prosecutor powers and provided for the summary dismissal of some 130,000 public sector workers<sup>11</sup> with suspected links to the Gülen movement. The mass purge was in no way limited to the attempted coup as it also targeted thousands of academics<sup>12</sup> including Ulaşlı, along with people working at all levels of local and central government.

For the purged public sector workers, the arbitrary and blanket dismissals did not only mean losing their jobs. In some cases, they were entirely cut off from access to their professions. The stigma of being branded “terrorists” significantly hampered their prospects in the private sector. They were also prevented from seeking employment abroad, as the emergency decrees entailed the cancellation of their passports<sup>13</sup>.

As regards legal remedies, those dismissed did not have any clear recourse in the early stages of the state of emergency, as highlighted by a December 2016 opinion published by the Venice Commission<sup>14</sup>.

Upon considerable pressure from the international community, the Turkish government issued an emergency decree in January 2017<sup>15</sup>, setting up a “State of Emergency

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-36852080>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-security/turkeys-emergency-rule-expires-as-erdogans-powers-expand-idUSKBN1K824E>

<sup>11</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/COUNTRY\\_19\\_2781](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/COUNTRY_19_2781)

<sup>12</sup> <https://ahvalnews.com/universities/post-coup-crackdown-has-crippled-turkish-academia-study>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/EUR4462722017ENGLISH.PDF>

<sup>14</sup> [https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD\(2016\)037-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD(2016)037-e)

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.mevzuat.gov.tr/mevzuatMetin/4.5.685.pdf>

Inquiry Commission” to review individual complaints emanating from state of emergency measures.

While the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) acknowledged the Commission as a valid domestic remedy and therefore rejected complaints from Turkish applicants on procedural grounds, the move drew significant criticism from observers and the international community.

Prominent Turkish human rights lawyer and academic Kerem Altıparmak argued that the State of Emergency Commission was far from meeting the criteria set forth by the Venice Commission<sup>16</sup>. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) said that the Commission cannot be considered as an independent body that would guarantee full respect of due process<sup>17</sup>. Amnesty International described the Commission as unfit for purpose as a reviewing body; and criticized it for its lack of independence, protracted procedures, inadequate procedural safeguards and flawed review process<sup>18</sup>. The New York-based Human Rights Foundation (HRF) said that the Commission was evidently under executive control, accusing the ECtHR of failing to effectively address the human rights issues in Turkey in the post-coup period<sup>19</sup>.

As of March 2020, the Commission had reviewed 105,100 cases since December 2017, with only 11,200 decisions to reinstate or to take similar measures of redress<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> [https://eldh.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/kerem\\_altiparmak\\_commission\\_2017.pdf](https://eldh.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/kerem_altiparmak_commission_2017.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> [https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/TR/2018-03-19\\_Second\\_OHCHR\\_Turkey\\_Report.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/TR/2018-03-19_Second_OHCHR_Turkey_Report.pdf)

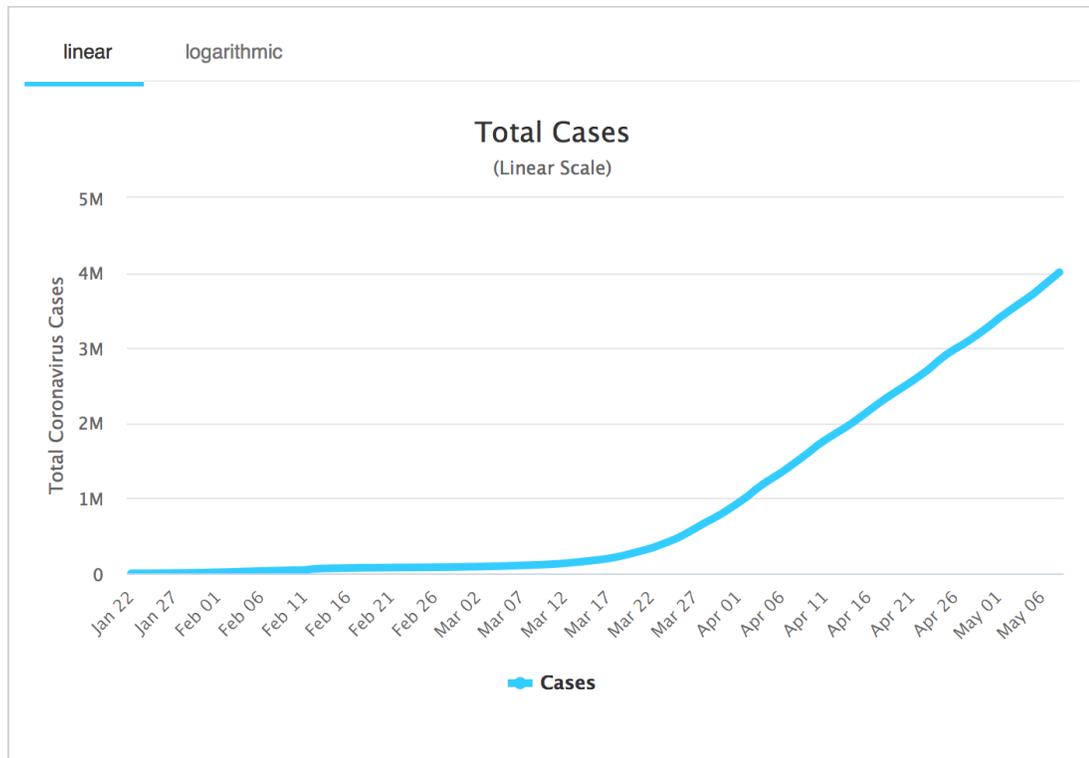
<sup>18</sup> <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/EUR4492102018ENGLISH.PDF>

<sup>19</sup> [https://hrf.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Turkey-ECtHR-Report\\_April-2019.pdf](https://hrf.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Turkey-ECtHR-Report_April-2019.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.ntv.com.tr/turkiye/ohal-komisyonunun-karar-sayisi-105-bini-gecti,trXVUBemak6YbISGgaCUEA>

## 2. The COVID-19 pandemic

The Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by the novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2)<sup>21</sup>. First seen in the Chinese city of Wuhan, it rapidly spread around the world throughout the first quarter of 2020. It was declared a ‘pandemic’ by the World Health Organization on 11 March. By 10 May 2020, the virus had infected over 4,000,000 people worldwide, killing nearly 280,000, according to the Worldometer website<sup>22</sup>. Turkey, which officially confirmed its first case on 11 March, had some 137,000 cases, with a death toll of more than 3,700<sup>23</sup> as of writing.



Source: Worldometer - [www.worldometers.info](http://www.worldometers.info) 

<sup>21</sup> [https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/technical-guidance/naming-the-coronavirus-disease-\(covid-2019\)-and-the-virus-that-causes-it](https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/technical-guidance/naming-the-coronavirus-disease-(covid-2019)-and-the-virus-that-causes-it)

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>

<sup>23</sup> <https://twitter.com/drfehrettinkoca/status/1259158008325693442?s=20>

### 3. Ulaşlı's call on Turkish authorities

On 17 March, Ulaşlı posted a series of messages on his personal Twitter account<sup>24</sup> revealing his credentials as well as addressing Minister of Health Fahrettin Koca, Minister of Justice Abdülhamit Gül, opposition leaders, members of parliament and a prominent journalist. In the tweets<sup>25</sup> he said: *“I am probably the only person in Turkey with a PhD on coronavirus. Would you not think it is a waste for the country and humanity that I have been kept aside as an emergency decree victim for 3.5 years, despite being acquitted of legal charges? When will this mistake be rectified?”*

Three days later, he reiterated his offer<sup>26</sup>: *“I would like to reaffirm that I am ready to take up any duties without expecting anything in return.”*

### 4. News coverage and reactions social media

On 17 March, Ömer Faruk Gergerlioğlu, opposition member of parliament known for his human rights advocacy, live streamed a video<sup>27</sup> in which he expressed support for Ulaşlı and called on government authorities give heed to his offer of help.

While his plea went ignored by the country's largely government-controlled mainstream media at first, foreign-based outlets such as the Bold Medya<sup>28</sup> and Euronews<sup>29</sup> did interviews with him and two columnists, the Habertürk newspaper's Nihal Bengisu Karaca and Elif Çakır from the Karar newspaper, expressed sympathy for his offer of assistance, which ignited a larger debate on social media.

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<sup>24</sup> <https://twitter.com/DocDrMulasli?s=20>

<sup>25</sup> <https://twitter.com/DocDrMulasli/status/1239952332596686851?s=20>

<sup>26</sup> <https://twitter.com/DocDrMulasli/status/1241098537582104576?s=20>

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.psep.tv/w/1kvJpXppMbdJE?t=3m10s>

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xuHcATBanU8>

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sCN9x6Wkeco>

On 21 March, Elif Çakır wrote a column<sup>30</sup> on Karar daily in which she expressed regret that Turkey was ‘unable to benefit from his expertise on coronavirus.’ She also revealed the details of the criminal investigation into Ulaşlı following his dismissal from the Gaziantep University in September 2016. According to Çakır, the university administration filed a criminal complaint against him for alleged links to the Gülen movement, which ultimately ended with the charges being dropped by the court due to lack of grounds for legal action, as prosecutors had found no evidence linking him to the group other than having an account with the Gülen-affiliated Bank Asya.

The same day, Nihal Bengisu Karaca quoted Ulaşlı’s first tweet and said<sup>31</sup>: “*A valid question*”. The next day, her column<sup>32</sup> on Habertürk was about Ulaşlı as well as thousands of health workers who were purged during the state of emergency. She urged government officials to consider inviting back those without a court decision against them.

On 21 March, Gergerlioğlu announced<sup>33</sup> that he spoke with Minister of Health Fahrettin Koca about the case of Ulaşlı as well as thousands of purged health workers and that the ministry would contact Ulaşlı. Some media outlets further suggested<sup>34</sup> that Minister Koca himself was expected to meet Ulaşlı. When asked about the issue during his daily press briefing, Koca’s response<sup>35</sup> was rather vague: “*We would like everyone to convey to us any information that they have, including the person referred to.*”

During the following few days, these developments unleashed a flood of insulting and threatening remarks targeting Ulaşlı as well as those who brought up the issue. The wave

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<sup>30</sup> <https://www.karar.com/tarih-tekerrur-etmesin-1550946>

<sup>31</sup> <https://twitter.com/nibenka/status/1241274637964673024?s=20>

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.haberturk.com/yazarlar/nihal-bengisu-karaca/2620612-khkli-saglik-calisanlari-goreve-cagrilmali>

<sup>33</sup> <https://twitter.com/gergerliogluof/status/1241352456472330241?s=20>

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.independentturkish.com/node/150491/haber/koronavirus-uzerine-doktorasi-olan-ancak-khk-ile-ihrac-edilen-mustafa-ulasli'dan>

<sup>35</sup> <https://boldmedya.com/2020/03/23/fahrettin-koca-khkli-doktor-ulasli-ile-ilgili-soruya-boyle-cevap-verdi-bizimle-tecrubelerini-paylasmasini-bekliyoruz/>

of defamation was marked by several characteristics of the systematic dehumanization that Turkey's dismissed public sector workers have been undergoing for years, which will be analysed under the next title.

## **5. Aspects of the defamation campaign as they relate to a wider dehumanization**

### **a. Presumption of guilt**

While the presumption of innocence is an essential guiding principle enshrined under Article 11 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights<sup>36</sup> which stipulates that individuals should be considered innocent until proven guilty, the emergency decrees of the post-coup period in Turkey established a setting where the complete opposite prevailed. Having one's name on one of the decrees automatically led to a ban on travelling abroad, a number of undue restrictions on professional activities and being registered as a terror suspect on the country's social security database, a registry that is visible to any potential employer. The purged public sector workers were placed under an overwhelming burden of suspicion against which they had, as explained above, no effective legal remedies.

The campaign targeting Ulaşlı has been a textbook example of how Turkey's dismissed public sector workers are "considered guilty until proven innocent." Below are some of the comments labelling him as a "Gülen-linked terrorist" despite the fact that no criminal charges had been levelled against him at the time.

Ali Gür, the rector of the Gaziantep University from which Ulaşlı was removed in September 2016, posted the following tweet<sup>37</sup> on 21 March: "*Over the past few days, while we as a country are fighting against the coronavirus outbreak, members of FETÖ have turned it into an opportunity for spreading propaganda. They claim*

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<sup>36</sup> [https://www.ohchr.org/EN/UDHR/Documents/UDHR\\_Translations/eng.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/EN/UDHR/Documents/UDHR_Translations/eng.pdf)

<sup>37</sup> <https://twitter.com/profalogur/status/1241443847391064065?s=20>

*that they will find a vaccine and that they are the best scientists. Those who give this courage to members of terrorist organizations should think twice.”*

Malik Ejder (@malikejder\_), a well-known pro-government troll made the following comment<sup>38</sup> the next day: “*We do not need this doctor who supposedly opposed the FETÖ coup on 15 July by saying ‘coups are bad’ while not uttering the word ‘FETÖ’ once!*” In response to journalist Merdan Yanardağ’s tweet<sup>39</sup> “*There are certain suspicions about Ulaşlı, but if he is an expert with knowledge in the field, it would be best to utilise [him],*” Ejder responded<sup>40</sup>: “*Certain suspicions’ what suspicions! The guy has not said one bad thing about the organization! [the Gülen movement]”*

Ejder’s comments were noteworthy in that they were evocative of the French philosopher Roland Barthes’ famous words: “*Fascism does not prevent speech, it compels speech.*” In the post-coup Turkey, failure to adopt the government narrative on the “fight against terrorism” might be construed as grounds for terrorism-related accusations, something the country’s Kurdish minority is also awfully familiar with.

Metin Külünk, a politician close to President Erdoğan tweeted<sup>41</sup> “*FETÖ is seeking to infiltrate public administration and politics under the guise of science.*”

Fatma Ceren Yazgan, Turkey’s Ambassador to Georgia, had this to say about the news that Ulaşlı might be received by Health Minister Koca: “*This virus has an attacking style similar to that of structures such as FETÖ etc. – using your immune system against you, having your cells fight each other. It can cause permanent damage in those who recover. Pandemic response is about the society’s resilience,*

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<sup>38</sup> [https://twitter.com/malikejder\\_/status/1241829147992883200?s=20](https://twitter.com/malikejder_/status/1241829147992883200?s=20)

<sup>39</sup> <https://twitter.com/merdanyanardag/status/1241753064270368778?s=20>

<sup>40</sup> [https://twitter.com/malikejder\\_/status/1241829796281270278?s=20](https://twitter.com/malikejder_/status/1241829796281270278?s=20)

<sup>41</sup> <https://twitter.com/mkulunk/status/1241719332821925888?s=20>

*independently from this virus.<sup>42</sup>” Ambassador Yazgan went on: “If this man was raised by FETÖ, he should not get anywhere near the state [government] as no good can come from the scientific knowledge of someone whose loyalty is suspect. I think it is obvious why he even gave this interview. If there is no other scientist than this in this country, we should rather close the shop.<sup>43</sup>”*

Pro-government columnist Ardan Zentürk’s tone was rather dramatic. In a tweet<sup>44</sup> addressed to President Erdoğan, Minister Koca and other prominent government figures, the pro-government Star newspaper’s columnist said: *“During this outbreak please do not let us face traitors instead of patriotic doctors. Let us shoot ourselves in the head.”*

Cem Küçük, another pro-government journalist tweeted<sup>45</sup>: *“They started to suggest that we forgive FETÖ members. No way. Let us not forget our 251 martyrs and thousands of veterans. FETÖ is another type of virus and we saw how dangerous they are on 15 July.”* By using the word ‘forgive,’ Küçük admitted the punitive nature of the emergency decrees. In addition to presumption of guilt, this comment exposed another fallacy frequently employed in Turkish public debate any time purged public sector workers’ suffering is highlighted from a human rights perspective: bringing up the July 2016 attempted coup and the people who lost their lives as some sort of counterweight that allows to justify the human rights violations against a large group of people who had nothing to do with it.

Retired army commander Coşkun Başbuğ tweeted<sup>46</sup>: *“FETÖ is seeking to turn the turmoil to its advantage and to reintroduce into the system a so-called scientist, a*

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<sup>42</sup> <https://twitter.com/fcyazgan/status/1241585156391088128?s=20>

<sup>43</sup> <https://twitter.com/fcyazgan/status/1241585158618329088?s=20>

<sup>44</sup> <https://twitter.com/ardanzenturk/status/1241791859724292098?s=20>

<sup>45</sup> <https://twitter.com/cemkucuk55/status/1242107989135368192?s=20>

<sup>46</sup> <https://twitter.com/basbugcoskun/status/1242029098735714304?s=20>

*terrorist who has FETÖ written all over him with his stance, words and looks.”* While the criteria used here by Başbuğ to conclude that Ulaşlı is a “Gülenist terrorist” do not seem completely legal, they certainly resemble the algorithms<sup>47</sup> some institutions used to root out alleged members of the Gülen movement, which relied on data about lifestyle, family ties and social relations.



**Coşkun BAŞBUĞ** @basbugcoskun · Mar 23

En alçak ve en omurgasız terör örgütü FETÖ;  
-kargaşa ortamını lehine çevirmenin,  
- Duruşuyla, sözleriyle, tipiyle ben FETÖ'yüm diye haykıran birtakım KHK'lı  
sözde bilim adamı teröristi tekrar sisteme döndürmenin arayışı içinde.  
Bunu medya üzerinden kriptolarla yapmaya çalışıyor

83

937

2.6K



*“A terrorist who has FETÖ written all over him with his stance, words and looks.”*  
*Retired military commander Coşkun Başbuğ describes Ulaşlı*

On 24 March, journalist Çağdaş Bayraktar tweeted<sup>48</sup>: *“FETÖ is trying to put its dismissed militants back into circulation by taking advantage of the coronavirus outbreak. To that end, it presents its militants as ‘those who will find a vaccine against coronavirus, the hope of humanity.’”*

The same day, ultranationalist former military officer Ahmet Zeki Üçok posted a tweet<sup>49</sup> addressed to the health minister where he drew parallels between Ulaşlı and soldiers with alleged Gülen links who took part in the July 2016 coup, using the same rationale as Küçük’s tweet on 23 March.

<sup>47</sup> <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/03/turkey-navys-incredible-algorithm-in-fight-against-gulen.html>

<sup>48</sup> <https://twitter.com/cagdasbayraktar/status/1242355230173474819?s=20>

<sup>49</sup> <https://twitter.com/ucokahmetzeki/status/1242402821279973376?s=20>

Üçok was quote tweeted by pro-government journalist Fuat Uğur who said<sup>50</sup>: “I agree. FETÖ member doctors should be kept out of the fight against coronavirus. No good can come from imbeciles who become doctors by cheating.” Evidently, Uğur’s tweet included a suggestion that Ulaşlı had cheated his way through Princeton University and Utrecht University although he did not specify how.

The same cheating allegation appeared in a tweet<sup>51</sup> by far-right journalist Ömer Turan who said: “How can people who pass exams only by cheating can be world class scientists? Show me one FETÖ member who is a world class scientist. You cannot. Do not be fooled by FETÖ members’ hoax. Their aim is to evade prison by taking advantage of the outbreak.”

On 25 March, Rector Ali Gür posted a tweet<sup>52</sup> accusing those who supported Ulaşlı of ‘trying to present him as innocent.’ Considering the fact that Ulaşlı had not been charged with any criminal offence at the time, Gür’s comment implying that he is *a priori* guilty constituted another admission that emergency decrees are an extra-legal and irreversible tool of incriminating people.



*Rector Gür accuses those who support Ulaşlı of trying to “trying to present him as innocent”*

<sup>50</sup> <https://twitter.com/FUATUGUR/status/1242524888906244096?s=20>

<sup>51</sup> <https://twitter.com/omerturantv72/status/1242346440657195008?s=20>

<sup>52</sup> <https://twitter.com/profaligur/status/1242787938884337668?s=20>

The same day, pro-government Akşam daily published a column<sup>53</sup> by Kurtuluş Tayiz titled “*FETÖ’s dreams of restoration*” in which Tayiz wrote “*What kind of calculation can lead to calling for the assistance of FETÖ members, who betrayed even their own doctor’s [Hippocratic] oath?*” He did not specify, however, in what ways Ulaşlı or other purged doctors had broken their professional oath.

Pro-government journalist Nedim Şener tweeted<sup>54</sup> “*Certain politicians and journalists should keep in mind that by defending FETÖ members such as Mustafa Ulaşlı, who they are trying to pass on as a ‘miracle pill against the coronavirus,’ they are being unfair to those [dismissed public workers] who have rightfully been reinstated by the state of emergency [inquiry] commission.*” Şener was arguably implying that if Ulaşlı was in fact innocent, he should have been reinstated by the state of emergency inquiry commission which, as mentioned above, has been described as being under executive control by the United Nations as well as credible international observers. By Şener’s logic, failure to receive a positive response from the commission amounts to a confirmation of guilt, which comes to mean that over 90,000 people<sup>55</sup> whose applications have been rejected by the commission have automatically become criminals and that they should be treated as such.

#### **b. Hateful rhetoric**

Throughout history, hate speech has been an integral part of almost all mass dehumanization campaigns. Whether in the case of slavery, Holocaust or Apartheid; dehumanization always entailed verbal slurs that encouraged to view and treat the members of the targeted group as less than human beings.

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<sup>53</sup> <https://www.aksam.com.tr/yazarlar/kurtulus-tayiz/fetonun-restorasyon-dusleri/haber-1056402>

<sup>54</sup> <https://twitter.com/nedimsener2010/status/1242727975591784448?s=20>

<sup>55</sup> <https://www.ntv.com.tr/turkiye/ohal-komisyonunun-karar-sayisi-105-bini-gecti,trXVUBemak6YbISGgaCUEA>

Such hate speech against dismissed public sector workers in Turkey has been one of the relatively less reported aspects of the post-coup period. The social media debate about Ulaşlı and purged health workers included several remarks that went beyond the boundaries of presumption of guilt and amounted to hate speech, presenting opportunities to identify two main patterns which also stand out in the wider context of the treatment of purged public sector workers.

The first one was characterising the allegedly Gülen-linked former public sector workers as ‘just another kind of virus,’ something probably inspired by President Erdoğan<sup>56</sup> who has described the mass purge of public sector workers as the ‘*cleansing of state institutions of viruses.*’ It was reflected in Ambassador Yazgan’s tweet<sup>57</sup>, which put forward a supposed similarity between the way viruses and Gülenists operate, and another one<sup>58</sup> posted by retired military officer Ali Türkşen who said “*I prefer COVID-19 over FETÖ member doctors, at least this virus [coronavirus] is a manly virus which does not conceal its true identity.*”



**Ali Türkşen** @aliturksen · Mar 23

Şimdi size evinizde, ailenizle, tüm iletişim kanalları açıkken oturmak zor geliyor ya, biz bunu FETÖ’cü hainlerden sebep yıllarca yaşadık zaten. Bu nedenle FETÖ’cü doktorlardansa Covid-19’u tercih ederim. Hiç değilse bu virüs kendini saklamayan, ne olduğu belli delikanlı bir virüs.

1.2K

1.5K

15.1K



*Retired military officer Ali Türkşen says purged doctors are worse than COVID-19*

Secondly, several remarks suggested an inherent and deep-seated malevolence in each and every allegedly Gülen-linked former public sector worker. One example

<sup>56</sup> <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/todays-headlines/erdogan-purge-of-gulenists-from-state-will-continue/609718>

<sup>57</sup> <https://twitter.com/fcyazgan/status/1241585156391088128>

<sup>58</sup> <https://twitter.com/aliturksen/status/1241988403601776644?s=20>

of this pattern was pro-government commentator Fatih Tezcan's tweet<sup>59</sup> on 23 March which read: "A FETÖ member doctor wishes to be reinstated to his/her job for one thing only: To kill those who are against FETÖ!" Similar comments were made by pro-government journalists Hacı Yakışıklı who tweeted<sup>60</sup>: "Those who say that dismissed FETÖ member health workers should be reinstated... Why? So that they can spread the virus even more?" and Erem Şentürk who tweeted<sup>61</sup>: "During an outbreak, health workers affiliated with FETÖ and PKK [the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party] are the world's most dangerous suicide bombers. The moment you let your guard down, they will turn Turkey into a fire scene. They are waiting for an opportunity to infiltrate."



**hacı yakışıklı** @haciykk · Mar 22

"FETÖ'den atılan sağlık çalışanları yeniden görev alsın" diyenler! Niye? Virüsü daha yaysınlar diye mi? 15 Temmuz'da tank yürüten hainlere yeniden tank vermek gibi! Devletimize ve vatanperver doktorlarımıza candan güveniyoruz! Yeter ki yetkililerin uyarılarını tam dinleyelim!

🗨 172

↻ 1.7K

❤ 6.7K



*The Ankara correspondent of the radical Islamist Akit daily suggests that the purged doctors would deliberately spread the virus if they were reinstated to their jobs.*

### c. Intimidation of those who dare to speak up

While Mustafa Ulaşlı initially drew limited public attention after his interviews with foreign-based online news outlets, journalists Nihal Bengisu Karaca and Elif Çakır, who write for centrist and conservative newspapers, have been instrumental in igniting the wider public controversy surrounding him as well as purged health workers and as a result, they have been indirectly or directly threatened in some of the offensive comments.

<sup>59</sup> <https://twitter.com/fatihtezcan/status/1242128530491822089?s=20>

<sup>60</sup> <https://twitter.com/haciykk/status/1241799728469282816?s=20>

<sup>61</sup> <https://twitter.com/EremSenturk/status/1242038501538967553?s=20>

Rector Gür's tweet<sup>62</sup> on 21 March said that those who encourage alleged Gülenist propaganda should "*think twice.*"



**Prof Dr Ali GÜR** @profaligur · Mar 21

Son günlerde ülke olarak coronavirus salgını ile mücadele ederken FETÖ mensupları bunu fırsata çevirip propaganda yapmaya başlamışlar. Aşı bulacaklarını ve kendilerinin en iyi bilim adamı olduklarını iddia ediyorlar. Terör örgütü mensuplarına bu cesareti verenler iyi düşünsünler.

1.6K

354

2.2K



*Rector Gür issues a thinly-veiled threat to the journalists highlighting Ulaşlı's expertise: "Think twice"*

On 23 March, pro-government journalist Ufuk Coşkun tweeted<sup>63</sup>: "*Those who call dismissed FETÖ members back to duty in a time like this are in treason.*"

Another tweet<sup>64</sup> posted by far-right journalist Ömer Turan read "*Those who bring up amnesty for FETÖ militants at every turn are crypto FETÖ militants.*"

Pro-government journalist Ersoy Dede's comment was significantly harsher. In a tweet<sup>65</sup> referring to Nihal Bengisu Karaca, who is viewed as a relatively pro-government journalist, he said: "*Suicide bombers wait for the right time to explode themselves. They wait so that their explosion serves a useful purpose.*"

Kurtuluş Tayiz in his column<sup>66</sup> on 25 March accused the two journalists of supporting terrorism: "*These journalists are not inviting back into the system the*

<sup>62</sup> <https://twitter.com/profaligur/status/1241443847391064065?s=20>

<sup>63</sup> <https://twitter.com/ufukcoskunn/status/1242036392332582913?s=20>

<sup>64</sup> <https://twitter.com/omerturantv72/status/1242140141642268672?s=20>

<sup>65</sup> <https://twitter.com/ersoydede/status/1241992967314948098?s=20>

<sup>66</sup> <https://www.aksam.com.tr/yazarlar/kurtulus-tayiz/fetonun-restorasyon-dusleri/haber-1056402>

*FETÖ member doctors, but FETÖ itself. (...) Their call is not about science; they are merely reflecting FETÖ's dreams of restoration.”*

Despite their relatively comfortable position in Turkey's media setting and strenuously emphasising a previous court decision that cleared Ulaşlı of Gülenist ties, Karaca and Çakır found themselves on the receiving end of terrorism-related accusations, simply for suggesting the reinstatement of purged health workers that are not criminally prosecuted amid a worldwide pandemic.

This dimension of the debate presented a striking example of how dangerous it is in Turkey to speak up against the inhumane treatment of purged public sector workers.

#### **d. Blatant profiling by authorities**

As in the case of ‘Fetometer<sup>67</sup>’ (FETÖMETRE), an algorithm applied to identify alleged Gülenists in the military, Turkish authorities frequently relied on gathering of data pertaining to private life in their efforts to remove Gülen followers from state institutions.

The case of Mustafa Ulaşlı provided another striking example of the practice when, on 23 March, Gaziantep University rector Ali Gür tweeted<sup>68</sup> what seems to be a profiling document containing data gathered on the scientist, which he presented as a proof of his alleged criminality.

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<sup>67</sup> <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/03/turkey-navys-incredible-algorithm-in-fight-against-gulen.html>

<sup>68</sup> <https://twitter.com/profalogur/status/1242169663322312704?s=20>



**Prof Dr Ali GÜR** @profaligur · Mar 23

Lütfen hakkında bilgi sahibi olmadığınız kişi veya olaylarla ilgili algı yöneticileri ve kitle psikolojisini kullananların etkisinde kalarak ağır hakaret içeren yorumlarda bulunmayın. Bilmeyerek yaptıysanız özür dilemek de bir erdemdir. FETÖ sevicilerine gelince onlar umutsuz vaka

de SGK kaydı mevcut

9. FETÖ/PDY ile irtibatı nedeni ile kapatılan Fatih Üniversitesinde 11.02.2005-06.06.2011 tarihleri arasında çalışma kaydı mevcut
10. TMSF'ye devredilen Cihan Medya Dağıtım AŞ. ye 17.04.2014-21.10.2015 tarihleri arasında toplam 544 TL ödeme yapmış
11. 03.10.2014 tarihinde Kimse Yok mu Derneğine SMS yolu ile para göndermiş
12. 15.1.2014-15.3.2014 tarihleri arasında 2310.00 TL FETÖ/PDY ait Güney Özel Öğretim İşletmeleri AŞ. para yatırmış
13. Ankara OHAL İnceleme Komisyonuna yaptığı göreve iade başvurusu 19.09.2018 tarihinde oybirliği ile reddedilmiş
14. Sürekli olarak KHK kapsamında görevden uzaklaştırılan akademisyenlerle birlikte olmuş, onların koruması altında bulunmuş ve görevden uzaklaştırılınca kadar tüm çalışmalarını FETÖ/PDY irtibatlıları ile yapmış
15. Bu yüzden yukarıdaki deliller ve kurum içindeki irtibatları, birliktelikleri ve çok sayıda tanık ifadeleri doğrultusunda kuvvetli

*Rector Gür releases the profiling document as his vindication.*

The document included Ulaşlı's past record of relations with a number of Gülen-affiliated institutions such as his undergraduate and postgraduate studies at the Fatih University, his account movements at Bank Asya, his membership in a medical association, his subscription payments to a Gülen-linked media corporation and to a charity organization. Gür's suggestion followed the same logic of retroactive criminalization of activities that applied in the mass purges with bank accounts, newspaper subscriptions, union memberships and graduations from Gülen-linked schools being considered as grounds for dismissal and even imprisonment despite the fact that all of these Gülen-affiliated institutions were operating legally at the time.

The list posted by Rector Gür also cited Ulaşlı's close social and professional relations with other allegedly Gülen-linked academics who were purged by emergency decrees and "numerous witness testimonies" as reasons for the "strong doubt" that led up to his dismissal.

## 6. Triggering the judiciary

On 25 March, journalist Nedim Şener's column<sup>69</sup> in the pro-government Hürriyet newspaper slammed the Gaziantep prosecutor who decided to drop criminal charges against Ulaşlı. Şener said the prosecutor made the decision in spite of a police report cited Ulaşlı as part of “*FETÖ's academic network in Gaziantep.*”

Two days later, Şener wrote<sup>70</sup> that the prosecutor had overlooked a crucial witness testimony as evidence for Ulaşlı's ties to the Gülenist academic network in Gaziantep and continued his criticism of the decision.

On 28 March, pro-government Sabah daily reported<sup>71</sup> that Gaziantep prosecutors reopened the investigation into Ulaşlı, citing “new evidence.”



*“Bad news for FETÖ's coronavirus specialist” pro-government Sabah's headline about the reopening of the investigation into Ulaşlı upon emergence of new evidence*

<sup>69</sup> <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/yazarlar/nedim-sener/fetocu-akademisyene-takipsizlik-nasil-verildi-41477131>

<sup>70</sup> <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/yazarlar/nedim-sener/fetocu-doktordan-itiraf-mustafa-ulasli-orgutle-irtibatimizi-sagliyordu-41479015>

<sup>71</sup> <https://www.sabah.com.tr/gundem/2020/03/28/fetonun-coronavirus-uzmanina-kotu-haber>

## **7. Conclusion**

The case of Mustafa Ulaşlı provided an overview of the treatment of dismissed public sector workers, demonstrating that their mass dehumanization is prevalent two years after the lifting of the state of emergency.

For years, purged public sector workers have been encountering the same presumption of guilt and hateful rhetoric while others were successfully intimidated into keeping silent.

Lastly, the emergence of “new evidence” that coincided Ulaşlı’s arrival to public attention provided another insight into the inner workings of Turkey’s judiciary, whose lack of independence continues to draw criticism across the international community.