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Erdogan's Hunt Against the Gülen Movement A Deadly Rivalry

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Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has sparked a witch hunt against suspected backers of a prominent Islamist cleric. But were Fethullah Gülen's supporters really behind the country's recent coup attempt?

For two decades, Lieutenant Colonel Levent Türkkan was entrusted with a special task in the Turkish military: Do not attract attention. He first served in the infantry before becoming an officer and ultimately aide-de-camp to the chief of staff for Turkey's armed forces. Yet Türkkan's loyalty didn't belong to his employer or the Turkish state -- he was a follower of Fethullah Gülen, the Muslim cleric accused by Erdogan's administration of orchestrating the failed coup on July 15, which left at least 270 people dead.

There was a time when Erdogan called Gülen a "friend." But today, the Turkish president reserves the words "terrorist leader" and "fascist" for his former ally, who has lived in exile in the United States since the 1990s. In recent weeks, Erdogan has arrested thousands of soldiers, teachers, judges and academics, whom he accuses of being the cleric's accomplices. His administration, however, has so far failed to present clear evidence that Gülen was, in fact, behind the bloody uprising.

Lieutenant Colonel Türkkan is considered a primary witness by the anti-Gülen camp. Last week, he became the first suspected conspirator to tell state prosecutors that a group within the Turkish military loyal to Gülen had given the order for the coup.

Türkkan comes from a family of peasant farmers. As a kid, he dreamed of one day becoming a soldier. According to a transcript of Türkkan's interrogation, which has been viewed by DER SPIEGEL, Gülen loyalists helped him get into cadet school by sneaking him the answers to aptitude tests ahead of time. After that, Türkkan felt he had a debt to Gülen.

For a long time, Gülen and his people never asked anything of Türkkan. Only after he was chosen to assist the chief of staff did any Gülen supporters approach him, Türkkan said during the interrogation. He was asked to plant bugs in his boss' office every morning and collect them each night. Türkkan spied on his superior for years without talking to anyone about it. Until the night of the coup attempt, he never even knew who else inside the military was part of Gülen's Islamist movement. In order to maintain his cover, he drank alcohol and broke his Ramadan fast early.

It is possible that Türkkan's confession was extracted under torture. Photos from the state news agency Anadolu Ajansi show him with scars on his face and bandages on his hands. But his statements are so detailed that many experts nevertheless consider them to be credible.

How Involved Was Gülen?

The fury with which Erdogan has lashed out against his critics and the speed with which he has turned Turkey into a dictatorship have made the rest of the world anxious.

Yet the accusations against the Gülen community don't seem to be entirely unfounded. Few in Turkey doubt that Gülen or his supporters were involved in the uprising.

Hulusi Akar, the chief of staff of the Turkish armed forces, who was briefly detained on July 15 by putschists, told a court last Monday that his captors had pressed him to speak to their "leader," Fethullah Gülen, on the phone. Istanbul's former chief of police, Hanefi Avcı, said Gülen's supporters were the only ones with the resources, personnel and ruthlessness necessary to carry out such an operation. He believes members of other factions within the military simply went along with the coup.

Even Turkey's opposition parties agree with Erdogan's assessment of Gülen -- a unity not often seen in Turkish politics. "We have been warning for years about the anti-democratic nature of the Gülen movement," said Selahattin Demirtaş, co-chairman of the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP). The head of Turkey's center-left Republican People's Party (CHP), Kemal Kilicdaroglu, spoke out in favor of Erdogan's demand that Gülen be tried in a Turkish court.

Gülen denies any blame. "It is absurd, irresponsible and erroneous to claim that I had anything to do with this appalling coup attempt," he said from the US state of Pennsylvania. His supporters present themselves as modern and tolerant. They have opened schools, universities, hospitals and media organizations in more than 140 countries.

At the same time, the Gülen community has also been involved in a number of illicit machinations in recent years. US diplomats have been warning since 2010 that Gülen supporters have infiltrated the Turkish state. In 2011, Istanbul-based journalist Ahmet Sik described in his book, "The Imam's Army," how Gülen's supporters among the Turkish police, judiciary and media have been waging smear campaigns against the cleric's opponents. Sik was thrown in jail for a year under murky circumstances.

Erdogan had long supported the Gülen movement, back when its attacks were primarily directed against their common enemies -- military personnel, journalists, secularists and leftists. Only after Erdogan and Gülen fell out in 2011 did the then-prime minister start going after the cleric's followers.

With the botched coup on July 15, the conflict between Erdogan and Gülen reached a preliminary climax. Erdogan used the uprising as a pretext to purge Turkish institutions of Gülen's supporters once and for all. But the president has also gone after other members of the opposition, lumping them together with the "Gülenists" without any proof. In recent days, his government suspended or arrested tens of thousands of state employees, including teachers, judges, prosecutors, journalists and academics. The president has sparked a witch hunt against suspected Gülen supporters that is reminiscent of the persecution of alleged Communists by Senator Joseph McCarthy in the 1950s. Even the partly state-owned Turkish Airlines fired 211 employees last week whom it suspected of sympathizing with Gülen.

Western governments have thus far treated the conflict between Erdogan and the Gülen movement as a strictly Turkish problem. But officials in Berlin, Brussels and Washington won't be able to afford this luxury for much longer. There have already been clashes in cities in Germany -- home to at almost 3 million people who have a least one Turkish immigrant parent -- between proponents and opponents of the failed coup, with supporters of Erdogan's Justice and

Development Party (AKP) targeting establishments of the Gülen movement. US President Barack Obama will soon have to decide whether or not to acquiesce to Ankara's request and extradite Gülen to Turkey. The Turkish government is demanding that Germany, too, hand over any Gülen supporters living there.

Faith and Betrayal

The history of the rivalry between Erdogan and Gülen is one of faith and betrayal. It is a history in which two powerful Muslim nationalists turned an entire country inside-out -- and then led it into the abyss.

Gülen presents himself as an open-minded scholar of Islam, who lives on an estate in the woods of Pennsylvania and advocates interfaith understanding. People who have fallen out with him, however, describe Gülen as a guru and ideologue who doesn't tolerate opposing views.

The preacher's following doesn't have a membership register or an address. It professes to be a loosely coordinated movement, but in reality it is stringently organized. Gülen himself determines the trajectory and orientation, followed by his most trusted confidants, the so-called "elder brothers." They control the most important businesses within the community and pass along orders to subordinates.

The journalist Latif Erdogan has known Gülen for decades. He helped build the community and was once an "elder brother" and the No. 2 man in the organization. Five years ago, he broke away. "Many of our followers were no longer interested in spirituality," Erdogan says. "Only politics and money."

Latif Erdogan, who is in no way related to the Turkish president, sits in his office on the outskirts of Istanbul. His bookshelves are lined with literature about Islam. "Gülen could have gone down in history as a religious scholar and benefactor," he says. "But now his name will forever be associated with the shameful coup." He is convinced that Gülen's supporters incited the uprising. He also thinks he knows why: "Power corrupted this community."

Gülen was born in 1941 in eastern Anatolia and began his career in the 1960s as an imam in the Turkish city of Edirne. "He was a fantastic orator," Latif Erdogan recalls. "People used to break out in tears during his sermons." Gülen collected money to build schools and rent apartments to pious schoolchildren and university students, who back then were discriminated against by the state.

Within the course of only a few years, the community grew from a group to an international movement. Gülen was no longer satisfied holding sermons and collecting donations. He wanted to transform society.

In a secret sermon given in the 1980s, Gülen called on his students to infiltrate the Turkish state and to act in conspiratorial ways until the time was right to seize power. "You must move in the arteries of the system without anyone noticing your existence. □ You must wait until such time as you have got all the state power," he is alleged to have said. After parts of a recording were

leaked to the public in 1999, Gülen fled to the US. He claimed the recording had been manipulated and, years later, a court acquitted him on charges of treason.

Gaining Clout

The rise of the Islamist-conservative AKP finally offered Gülen the opportunity to have a say in Turkish politics. The party's chairman at the time, Erdogan, viewed the cleric after his election victory in 2002 as an ally in his battle against the secular establishment. As prime minister, Erdogan filled key posts in the government and administration with people from the Gülen community.

For quite some time, both sides profited from the alliance between Erdogan and Gülen. Erdogan awarded government contracts to the community's businesses, and with his help, Gülen supporters secured positions in government ministries, the judiciary and the police. Gülen's lobby groups abroad, meanwhile, promoted Erdogan as a Muslim champion of democracy, and the community's media and the daily *Zaman* newspaper published blatant pro-Erdogan propaganda. Together, Erdogan and Gülen ousted the military from politics.

During the so-called Ergenekon and Sledgehammer trials, hundreds of generals, admirals and officers, along with members of the opposition, journalists and academics were convicted as alleged putschists and, in some cases, given lifelong prison sentences. A majority of the evidence used against them had been fabricated by investigators and public prosecutors aligned with Gülen. It took several years before the charges against many of those convicted were reversed.

The trials tore a hole in the military, thus paving the way for Gülen associates to attain leadership roles in the armed forces. The community had been seeking to gain a foothold in the military since the 1980s. But now, for the first time, the resistance of the secular generals had been broken.

A Declaration of War

With their victory over the old societal elite, Erdogan and Gülen had lost their common enemy. In 2011, after his third election victory, Erdogan no longer felt the need to rely on the community's support and began removing Gülen's backers from the state apparatus. In response, Gülen supporters in the police temporarily detained intelligence service chief Hakan Fidan, one of the prime minister's close confidants. Erdogan viewed the maneuver as a declaration of war. In the autumn of 2013, he announced the closure of Turkey's Gülen schools, the movement's most important recruitment tool.

By then, at the latest, it had become clear to everyone in Turkey that the confrontation between Erdogan and Gülen was becoming an annihilation campaign. The Gülen community then put all of its energy into trying to depose the prime minister. They initiated corruption investigations against Erdogan's son Bilal and other people close to the Turkish leader and published snippets of defamatory telephone conversations.

Erdogan survived the crisis and struck back even harder. In May 2016, it declared the Gülen community as a "terrorist organization" and placed Gülen-aligned media, like the nationally circulated *Zaman* newspaper, under state supervision. Some observers view the military coup as a last, desperate attempt on the part of the Gülen community to regain lost ground.

By July 15, Erdogan had just taken steps to restructure his relationship with the military. He had distanced himself from the Ergenekon trials, and he had reached out to Israel and Russia, a step welcomed by his generals. "The Gülen movement was the only group within the armed forces that had a motive for the coup," says former military judge Ahmet Zeki Üçok.

More than two weeks have passed since the failed putsch, but many details surrounding the maneuver remain unclear. It still cannot be determined with certainty how the putschists prepared the coup or why the plan ultimately failed. But one thing has become clear: The events of the night of July 15 will lead to lasting changes in the country.

Erdogan's purge operations have long targeted more than just Gülen supporters. Last Wednesday night, his government ordered the closure of 45 newspapers and 16 television stations, including the pro-Kurdish channel IMC TV and the leftist daily *Taraf*. The government also issued arrest warrants against 47 *Zaman* employees.

Human rights lawyer Orhan Kemal Cengiz was on his way to London when police arrested him at the Istanbul airport. Cengiz is one of Turkey's most prominent jurists. He has represented Kurds in court, Christians and, most recently, *Zaman*. Now he is being forced to justify tweets critical of the government that he posted over a year ago.

Cengiz remained in jail for four days, and he has since been prohibited from leaving the country. "I understand that the government is taking steps against putschists," he says, "but why are they turning the entire country into a prison?"