

## **Turks Agree on One Thing: U.S. Was Behind the Failed Revolt**

*The New York Times*

August 2, 2016

ISTANBUL — A Turkish newspaper reported that an American academic and former State Department official had helped orchestrate a violent conspiracy to topple the Turkish government from a fancy hotel on an island in the Sea of Marmara, near Istanbul. The same newspaper, in a front-page headline, flat-out said the United States had tried to assassinate President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on the night of the failed coup.

When another pro-government newspaper asked Turks in a recent poll conducted on Twitter which part of the United States government had supported the coup plotters, the C.I.A. came in first, with 69 percent, and the White House was a distant second, with 20 percent.

These conspiracy theories are not the product of a few cranks on the fringes of Turkish society. Turkey may be a deeply polarized country, but one thing Turks across all segments of society — Islamists, secular people, liberals, nationalists — seem to have come together on is that the United States was somehow wrapped up in the failed coup, either directly or simply because the man widely suspected to be the leader of the conspiracy, the Muslim cleric Fethullah Gulen, lives in self-exile in the United States. “Whenever something shocking and horrific happens in Turkey, the reflex is conspiracy,” said Akin Unver, an assistant professor of international relations at Kadir Has University in Istanbul.

That response goes back almost a century, to the end of World War I, when the West carved up the defeated Ottoman Empire. A Western plan to divide what became modern Turkey failed after Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the country’s founder, waged war against the occupiers. But the effort forever ingrained in the Turkish psyche a fear of Western conspiracies.

In the case of the failed coup, there is much more at play than fanciful conspiracy theories, many Turks say, because of the nearly universal conviction that it was engineered by Mr. Gulen, who for 16 years has lived in a secluded compound in the Pocono Mountains in Pennsylvania.

In various interviews and statements, Mr. Gulen has strongly denied involvement in the coup. Yet because he lives in the United States, and because of other salient facts — including that a former C.I.A. official and a former American ambassador to Turkey helped Mr. Gulen receive a green card — many Turks believe Mr. Gulen is an American agent. From there, it is a short step to the conclusion that the United States conspired with him to bring down the Turkish government.

“The U.S. is behind the coup, no doubt,” said Haluk Taylan, 48, a shopkeeper in Istanbul. “The deep state of the U.S., the C.I.A., had a role in it.”

The theories have become so rampant that top American officials, including President Obama, have been forced to publicly deny trying to topple the government of a NATO ally.

I know there isn't any real evidence yet, but I think it would be naïve to say that the U.S. has no involvement in the coup attempt," said Bekir Karabulut, a software developer in Istanbul. "The U.S. likes to meddle in our business, and the C.I.A. has supported Gulen for years. They helped him flee from Turkey."

Turkey has demanded Mr. Gulen's extradition, saying he commands the Fethullah Terror Organization. To back the claim, the Turkish government has sent a dossier of evidence to the White House, although it has not yet made a formal legal request.

A delegation of Turkish lawmakers arrived in the United States this week to press the case, and the two countries appear to be on a collision course over the matter. In an interview on CNN Turk, John R. Bass, the United States ambassador to Turkey, referred to "the apparent involvement of a large number" of Mr. Gulen's supporters in the coup plot. Analysts are doubtful Turkey will be able to provide evidence for extradition that will hold up in an American court.

Turks, in their exasperation that the United States has not turned over Mr. Gulen, have made this analogy: What if Turkey, in 2001, had harbored Osama bin Laden? Given the widespread sentiment that Mr. Gulen was behind the coup, a failure to extradite him would probably provoke a popular backlash in Turkey against the United States, and would confirm for many that the Americans had conspired against Turkey.

"If they don't give him back, that is the end of our relationship with America," said Osman Arsan, a waiter in Istanbul. "They are backstabbing and insincere. They must show their true colors. If not, they should prepare themselves for the response of the Turkish people. We are all united for this cause. We will not forgive them."

Turks have also been rankled by what they see as the preoccupation of the United States and Europe with Mr. Erdogan's post-coup crackdown, rather than standing by Turkey for facing down the existential threat the coup represented.

The West has criticized the purges, in which thousands of soldiers have been arrested and tens of thousands of government employees dismissed from their jobs for supposed links to Mr. Gulen, as Mr. Erdogan has moved quickly against perceived enemies in the government.

But many of Mr. Erdogan's traditional opponents — Kurds, secularists, nationalists — have long worried about the influence of Mr. Gulen's loyalists inside the state, and are largely united in believing Mr. Gulen was behind the coup. They not only support the purges, but also assume that the United States is taking Mr. Gulen's side.

Turkish leaders have been playing a double game with the notion of American involvement in the coup, sometimes encouraging the conspiracy theories publicly while privately assuring American officials that nothing has changed in the countries' relationship.

Ibrahim Kalin, Mr. Erdogan's spokesman, recently told reporters, "We don't think that the U.S. has any involvement in the coup attempt."

And this week, when Gen. Joseph F. Dunford Jr., the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, visited Ankara, the capital, Turkish officials assured him that their country was intent on maintaining a close relationship in the fight against the Islamic State.

Last week, an American general said he was concerned about the relationship with Turkey because several Turkish officers who had been interlocutors with the United States on counterterrorism issues had been arrested after being accused of taking part in the coup. Mr. Erdogan seized on these comments and lashed out at the United States. "The U.S. general stands on the coup plotters' side with his words," he said. "He disclosed himself with his statements."

Saying the comments amounted to standing beside the coup plotters, Mr. Erdogan also referred to Mr. Gulen, saying: "The coup plotter is in your country. You are nurturing him there. It's out in the open."