Millions of Muslims around the world idolize Turkish preacher Fethullah Gülen, who likes to present himself as the Gandhi of Islam. His Gülen movement runs schools in 140 countries and promotes interfaith dialogue. But former members describe it as a sect, and some believe the secretive organization is conspiring to expand its power in Turkey.

The girl is singing a little off-key, but the audience is still wildly enthusiastic. She is singing a Turkish song, although her intonation sounds German. The room is decorated with balloons, garlands in the German national colors of black, red and gold, and crescent moons in the Turkish colors of red and white. Members of the audience are waving German and Turkish flags.

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The Academy cultural association is hosting the preliminaries of the "Cultural Olympics" in a large lecture hall at Berlin's Technical University. Thousands of people have come to watch the talent contest. They applaud loudly when a choir from the German-Turkish Tüdesb school sings "My Little Green Cactus." And they listen attentively when a female student recites a poem, while images of women holding children in their arms appear on the screen behind her. The poem is called "Anne," the Turkish word for "mother." The name of the poem's author, Fethullah Gülen, appears on the screen for a moment.

Everyone in the auditorium knows who Gülen is. Millions of Muslims around the world idolize Gülen, who was born in Turkey in 1941 and is one of the most influential preachers of Islam today. His followers have founded schools in 140 countries, a bank, media companies, hospitals, an insurance company and a university.

The cultural association hosting the contest at the Berlin university is also part of the Gülen movement. Hence it isn't surprising that many participants attend Gülen schools, that companies associated with Gülen are sponsoring the cultural Olympics, and that media outlets with ties to Gülen are reporting on it.

The images from the evening show Germans and Turks learning from one another, making music together, dancing and clapping. The obvious intent is to emphasize the peaceful coexistence of different religions. "We are the first movement in the history of mankind that is completely and utterly devoted to charity," says Mustafa Yesil, a Gülen confidant in Istanbul.

A Sect Like Scientology

People who have broken ties to Gülen and are familiar with the inner workings of this community tell a different story. They characterize the movement as an ultraconservative secret society, a sect not unlike the Church of Scientology. And they describe a world that has nothing to do with the pleasant images from the cultural Olympics.

These critics say that the religious community (known as the "cemaat" in Turkish) educates its future leaders throughout the world in so-called "houses of light," a mixture of a shared student
residence and a Koran school. They describe Gülen as their guru, an ideologue who tolerates no dissent, and who is only interested in power and influence, not understanding and tolerance. They say that he dreams of a new age in which Islam will dominate the West.

Some experts reach similar conclusions. Dutch sociologist Martin van Bruinessen sees parallels between the Gülen movement and the Catholic secret society Opus Dei. American historian and Middle East expert Michael Rubin likens the Turkish preacher to Iranian revolutionary leader Ayatollah Khomeini. According to a diplomatic cable obtained by WikiLeaks in 2010, US diplomats consider the Gülen movement to be "Turkey's most powerful Islamist grouping." The Gülen movement, the cable continues, "controls major business, trade, and publishing activities (and) has deeply penetrated the political scene."

Only very few former members are prepared to talk about their time in the movement, and those who do insist on not being identified by name. They are afraid of Gülen and his people, afraid for their jobs, their health and their families.

**Like in Prison**

One of these former members, who agreed to speak with SPIEGEL under a fictitious name, is Serkan Öz, who lived in a "house of light" in a major German city for several years. He moved into the facility immediately after graduating from a German high school. He had been attracted by Gülen's sermons, which he saw on the Internet, because he felt that they reconciled Islamic piety with Western modernity.

Both the furnishings and everyday life in the residence, says Öz, were more evocative of the frugality and rigidity of a monastery than the relaxed atmosphere of a student dormitory. There were only men living in his house, and both alcohol and visits by women were prohibited. A supervisor, who all residents referred to as "Agabey" ("elder brother"), determined the daily routine, dictating when it was time to work, pray and sleep. "We were guarded as if we were in prison," says the former member. Öz read the Koran and studied Gülen's writings every day.

The houses of light are the foundation of the movement, where young "Fethullahcis" (as followers of Gülen are called) are taught to become loyal servants. The residences exist in many countries, including Turkey, the United States and Germany. There are two dozen in Berlin alone. The cemaat offers schoolchildren and university students a home, often free of charge, and in return it expects them to devote their lives to "hizmet," or service to Islam.

In his book "Fasildan Fasila," (From Time to Time) Gülen writes that a pupil must be "on the go day and night" and cannot be seen sleeping. "If possible, he sleeps three hours a day, has two hours for other needs, and must devote the rest entirely to hizmet. In essence, he has no personal life, except in a few specific situations."

Residents of the houses of light are also expected to proselytize, and Gülen even offers advice in his writings on how to go about it. The students, he writes, should befriend infidels, even if it means having to hide their true motives. "With the patience of a spider, we lay our web to wait for people to get caught in the web."

**Banned from Watching TV**

The more Serkan Öz lived his life in accordance with Gülen's rules, the "Hizmet düsturları," the fewer freedoms he had. For example, the cemaat tried to dictate to him which profession he was to choose. He had almost no friends left outside the movement.
Other former members report that they were pressured to marry within the Gülen movement. In some residences, there are rules that prohibit watching TV, listening to music or reading books that contradict Gülen's ideology, including the works of Charles Darwin and Jean-Paul Sartre. Some residents were coerced into cutting off ties with their families when the parents tried to resist losing their children to the cemaat.

Serkan Öz decided to move out of the house of light. Now he was a renegade, and the career doors that had opened up for him were suddenly closed. Öz became isolated, losing his friends and acquaintances, his religious home and, as he sees it today, his place in the world.

Germans have devoted a lot of attention to Islam in recent years. There are conferences on Islam and research projects on integration. But the German public knows almost nothing about Gülen and his movement, even though it has more influence on Muslims in Germany than almost any other group. "It is the most important and most dangerous Islamist movement in Germany," says Ursula Spuler-Stegemann, an Islamic scholar in the western German university city of Marburg. "They are everywhere."

**Bringing Together Rabbis and Imams**

Members of the cemaat run more than 100 educational facilities in Germany, including schools and tutoring centers. They have established roughly 15 "dialogue associations," such as the Forum for Intercultural Dialogue (FID) in Berlin. The associations organize conferences that bring together rabbis, pastors and imams, as well as offer trips to Istanbul.

Gülen supporters publish Zaman, the highest-circulation newspaper in Turkey, with a European edition and subsidiaries around the world, as well as the monthly magazine The Fountain. They operate TV stations like Ebru TV and Samanyolu TV. Barex, an employers' association consisting of 150 companies in Berlin and the surrounding state of Brandenburg, is also believed to be part of the network.

Rita Süssmuth, a member of the center-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and former president of the German parliament, is on the advisory board of the FID in Berlin. Other politicians, like Jörg-Uwe Hahn, a member of the liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP) and the justice minister of the western state of Hesse, prominent CDU politician Ruprecht Polenz and Social Democrat Ehrhart Körting, who was the interior minister of the city-state of Berlin for many years, have accepted invitations to events organized by the Gülen community.

One of the cemaat's biggest successes is the Tüdesb High School in Berlin's Spandau neighborhood. The school has a good reputation, with small class sizes, motivated teachers and modern equipment, and there are always several applicants for each spot. The students, most of whom are of Turkish origin, speak Turkish and German, lessons are based on the Berlin city-state's curriculum, and some teachers have never even heard of Fethullah Gülen. Others, however, are believed to surrender a portion of their monthly salary to the movement. For a long time, the school claimed to have no connection to Gülen, but now the chairman of the association that operates the school openly supports him.

'You Must Move in the Arteries of the System'

The Gülen movement has two sides: One that faces the world and another that hides from it. Its finances are particularly murky. Rich businessmen donate millions, but civil servants and skilled
manual workers also contribute to the financing of Gülen projects. Fethullahcis donate an average of 10 percent of their income to the community, with some giving up to 70 percent.

Gülen likes to portray himself as a modest preacher akin to a Muslim Gandhi. One of his mantras is: "Build schools instead of mosques."

But before he moved to the United States, Gülen treated the West as the enemy. "Until the day of judgment," he wrote in his book "Cag ve Nesil" (This Era and the Young Generation), "Westerners will exhibit no human behavior." Gülen condemned Turks who embraced Europe as "freeloaders," "parasites" and "leukemia." In a November 2011 video message, he called upon the Turkish military to attack Kurdish separatists: "Locate them, surround them, break up their units, let fire rain down upon their houses, drown out their lamentations with even more wails, cut off their roots and put an end to their cause."

Gülen also disputes the theory of evolution, calling it "unscientific" and an "illusion." He believes that scientific facts are only true if they agree with the Koran.

**Calls for a New Muslim Age**

Gülen grew up as the son of a village imam in Anatolia. He studied at a mosque in Erzurum, a city in eastern Turkey, together with Cemaleddin Kaplan, who would later move to Germany where he was known as the "Caliph of Cologne" because of his radical preaching. At the same time, Gülen encountered the teachings of Said Nursi, a Kurdish Sufi preacher, and joined his community.

When Ankara, in its fight against communism in the 1980s, invoked the ideology of the "Turkish-Islamic synthesis," Gülen seized the opportunity. He founded schools in Turkey and abroad, and he became an adviser to the strictly secular prime minister, Tansu Ciller.

In one of his sermons, he called upon his students to establish a new Muslim age. He advised his supporters to undermine the Turkish state and act conspiratorially until the time was ripe to assume power. "You must move in the arteries of the system without anyone noticing your existence until you reach all the power centers ... until the conditions are ripe, they (the followers) must continue like this. If they do something prematurely, the world will crush our heads, and Muslims will suffer everywhere. (...) You must wait until such time as you have gotten all the state power (...) Until that time, any step taken would be too early – like breaking an egg without waiting the full 40 days for it to hatch. It would be like killing the chick inside."

When a recording of this speech was leaked to the public in 1999, Gülen had to flee from Turkey. He claims that his words were manipulated. He has been living in exile in the United States ever since.

**No Address and No Bank Account**

His movement has no address, no mailbox, no registration and no central bank account. Gülen supporters don't demonstrate for sharia and jihad, and the cemaat operates in secret. Gülen, the godfather, determines the movement's direction. Some members within the inner circle of power have been serving Gülen for decades. They control the most important organizations within the movement, the publishing houses and foundations. Within the cemaat, individual world regions, like Central Asia and Europe, are managed by a "brother." The hierarchy extends all the way down to national and local "brothers" in city neighborhoods.
Gülen’s influence in Turkey was enhanced when Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s conservative Islamic party, the AKP, won the Turkish parliamentary election in 2002. Observers believe that the two camps entered into a strategic partnership at first, with Gülen providing the AKP with votes while Erdogan protected the cemaat. According to information obtained by US diplomats, almost a fifth of the AKP’s members of parliament were members of the Gülen movement in 2004, including the justice and culture ministers.

Many civil servants act at the behest of the "Gülen brothers," says a former senior member. "They were our students. We trained and supported them. When these grateful children assume office, they continue to serve Gülen." In 2006, former police chief Adil Serdar Sacan estimated that the Fethullahcis held more than 80 percent of senior positions in the Turkish police force. "The assertion that the TNP (Turkish National Police) is controlled by Gulenists is impossible to confirm but we have found no one who disputes it," wrote James Jeffrey, the then US ambassador in Ankara, in a 2009 cable.

Good Muslims

Ercan Karakoyun is the face of the Gülen community in Germany. The 31-year-old runs the Forum for Intercultural Dialogue (FID) in Berlin, which has Gülen as its honorary chairman. Karakoyun, the son of Turkish immigrants, meets with visitors in an office at the city’s prestigious Potsdamer Platz which has light-blue carpeting and plain, functional furniture. The bookshelf contains works by Gülen, "The Diary of Anne Frank," "The Bible in Fair Language" (a new German translation of the Bible which aims to be free of gender bias and anti-Semitism) and a book by the late German Protestant theologian Heinz Zahrnt. The book selection seems balanced and judicious, with a little of everything and nothing too controversial. It seems intended to convey the following message to visitors: Look, we’re good Muslims. We mourn the dead of the Holocaust, we are interested in theological discussions of Christianity and we are democrats.

Karakoyun found his way to the movement through a "brother" who addressed him in front of a mosque in the western state of North Rhine-Westphalia when he was a teenager. He began reading Gülen’s books. He accompanied the "brother" to Turkey and became involved in the cemaat, recruiting new members at the university and in high schools. He rose up through the hierarchy until he became a "brother" himself.

Speaking in eloquent German, Karakoyun says that whenever he and his Gülen community organize events, they receive letters, emails and calls from what he terms "the usual suspects" - people who want to harm the movement and see it as a dangerous sect. He characterizes all of this as "conspiracy theories."

Karakoyun divides the world into two groups: "critics" and "sympathizers." As examples of critics, he cites Western Islamophobes, Turkish ultranationalists and the terrorists of the Kurdish PKK. Sympathizers, he says, are all people who are interested in "dialogue, tolerance and peaceful coexistence for the benefit of all."

'Anyone who Messes with Gülen Is Destroyed'

All of this sounds harmless, tolerant and peaceful. But Ilhan Cihaner experienced in Turkey what can happen to critics. "Anyone who messes with Gülen is destroyed," says the former chief prosecutor. He has been a hero among secular Turks since he investigated the Gülen community in 2007. Cihaner says that he had received information about illegal financial transactions within
the cemaat. But then, in response to pressure from the government, he was taken off the case. He was arrested in 2010.

Cihaner was accused of being a member of the ultranationalist Ergenekon organization, a group of conspirators who had allegedly planned to overthrow the government. Even Cihaner’s political rivals believe that the charges against him were absurd. The former prosecutor had acquired a reputation for his staunch campaigns against mafia-like networks. And now he was being accused of working with Ergenekon and planning to plant weapons in dormitories where Gülen supporters lived so as to discredit the movement. The prosecution based its case on statements by anonymous witnesses. Cihaner was eventually released because of insufficient evidence against him. He is now a member of the opposition in the Turkish parliament.

Istanbul-based journalist Ahmet Sik suffered a similar fate. He was arrested in March 2011, shortly before his book about the Gülen movement, "Imamin Ordusu," ("The Imam’s Army"), was to be published. Security forces searched the offices of his publishing house, and the manuscript, in which Sik describes how the Gülen movement has allegedly infiltrated the police and the judiciary in Turkey, was confiscated. The investigative reporter was charged with being a member of Ergenekon. Ironically, it was Sik who, together with a colleague, had exposed the secret coup plans of an Ergenekon admiral in the weekly magazine Nokta in 2007 and who had repeatedly targeted the Ergenekon network. Sik was released a few months ago, following international protests.

In September 2010, Hanefi Avci, a former Turkish police chief and former Gülen sympathizer, was arrested and accused of having participated in the Ergenekon conspiracy. He had just published a book in which he accused Gülen members in the police of illegally wiretapping their enemies’ telephone conversations and manipulating trials.

**Lies and Manipulation**

There is no evidence that Gülen was behind the arrests. He lives a reclusive life in the Pennsylvania mountains and behaves as if the accusations have nothing to do with him. He declined a request to be interviewed by SPIEGEL.

Others speak on his behalf, like Mahmut Cebi, the former editor-in-chief of the pro-Gülen newspaper Zaman, whose office is in the World Media Group building in Offenbach near Frankfurt. Cebi built up the European edition of Zaman and has worked as an writer for the publishing company since April. The European edition has about 30,000 subscribers in Germany alone.

Cebi and Zaman explain to readers what the world looks like from the perspective of the cemaat. The newspaper prints the writings of Gülen and excerpts from his sermons and poems. Critics accuse Zaman of deliberately spreading false reports to harm Gülen’s opponents.

When politicians in Germany's far-left Left Party criticized Gülen’s remarks on the Kurds a few weeks ago, Zaman claimed that the Left Party supports the banned Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK).

"The movement is up to its neck in dirty tricks," Dani Rodrik, a professor of international political economy at Harvard University, said in a recent interview. Zaman, he added, supports this "mafia" with "false and misleading accounts" and "manipulations." "There is no disinformation they will not peddle to further the causes they support," said Rodrik.
Cebi denies all accusations. His newspaper is guided by Gülen's ideals, he says, but it doesn't take orders from him. Gülen is not a sect leader, says Çebi. Instead, he compares him to one of Germany's leading public intellectuals: "He's a philosopher like Habermas."

Translated from the German by Christopher Sultan

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