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The End of the Caliphate State? The Metin Kaplan Case

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Western Europe
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Against Metin Kaplan, self-proclaimed head of the Caliphate State, proceedings were taken up by the Oberlandesgericht Düsseldorf in February 2000. The 'emir of the believers and caliph of Muslims' had been charged with incitement for the murder of his opponent Halil Ibrahim Sofu in Berlin in 1997, and with running a criminal organization. The process may very well mark the end of most radical Islamic group which has developed in the German diaspora of Turkish migrants.

The community was founded by Metin Kaplan's father, Cemaleddin, in the early 80s as a breakaway from the National View – the European branch of the National Salvation Party in Turkey. In 1983-84, the leadership of the former National Salvation Party split on the issue of whether the party should be re-established after the *coup d'état* of 1980. All parties had been outlawed but now new national elections were scheduled. When Erbakan and the party establishment opted for the foundation of a successor party (the Refah (Welfare) Party), a revolutionary wing headed by Kaplan separated. For them the history of the *coup d'état* had demonstrated the limitations of a parliamentary way to an Islamic rule. As soon as an Islamic party became strong enough to form the government and to introduce serious reforms, it would be suppressed. Kaplan's teaching can be summed up under three headings: (1) Following Sayid Qutb, he proclaimed a revolutionary situation: Turkey was in a state of barbarity, analogous to the period of *cahiliyyet* in pre-Muslim Mecca. In this situation, no compromises with the system were possible. (2) The revolution could be achieved by building up an extra-institutional grassroots movement by means of *tebliğ* (preaching with words and practice): On the sole basis of the Koran, the disastrous frictions between Muslim communities worldwide could be overcome, a mass movement would be established and the unity of the *ümmet* could be restored. (3) Revolutionary pan-Islamism: The reunification of Islam has to start from below with a coalition/cooperation of all revolutionary Islamic groups (including the Islamic Republic of Iran). The final aim would be the re-establishment of the caliphate. The new revolutionary community set up by Kaplan called itself 'Union of the Islamic Communes and Communities' (*İsâmî Cemaatleri ve Cemiyetleri Birliği*).

The movement had a good start. Many sympathizers of the National View in Europe were weary of the compromises made by the party establishment. Typical slogans were those such as: 'Does Islam exist for the party or does the party exist for Islam?' In many of the mosques established by the National View, the Revolutionary wing found a majority and took over the mosque.

A religious military order

It soon became evident, however, that the movement was not able to keep up the momentum it had in the beginning. It remained restricted to the Turkish diaspora communities in Europe. But even there it did not appeal in a significant way to Muslims who were not members of the National View (like member of the Süleymançı or Nurcu communities). In 1985, the Kaplan movement stagnated and in 1986 an erosion process began. This process culminated when Ahmed Polat, one of the founding members, left the movement together with a considerable number of followers in 1987. An erosion process is particularly problematic for a charismatic movement in which fascination born out of success is of existential importance. A charismatic movement ei-

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ther grows or declines at an exponential rate. The secession of Polat, therefore, could have meant the end of the community. In order to cope with this crucial situation, Kaplan re-organized the hitherto rather open movement into a closed sect.

An issue of crucial importance was the relation of the movement to the Islamic Republic of Iran. In the early 80s, the Sunni-Shia split seemed to be a matter of the past for many Muslims who were enthusiastic about the possibilities of Islamic revolutions. However, the Iranian revolution remained a singular event (and became stuck in the dirty war with Iraq). The hopes for other revolutions waned. Parallel to disillusionment, the old resentments against Shites re-surfaced again. After Polat had defended his secession with a criticism of Kaplan's pro-Iranian stance, Kaplan saw himself forced to redefine his position. He now began to insist on the basic dogmatic differences between Sunna and Shia. This dogmatic clarification had practical consequences. Kaplan stopped the practices of a group of enthusiastic believers, who had sworn an oath of allegiance to Khomeini and had also insisted on putting up Khomeini posters in mosques. Dogmatic clarification thus implied centralization, i.e. a stronger control of the local mosques. In order to be able to control the mosques which were spread all over Europe, Kaplan began to control personally the appointment of persons in charge (preachers and heads of mosques). The autonomy the mosques had enjoyed in the early phase of the movement thus came to an end. The drastic changes led to conflicts in the community and to the divorce from dissenting members. Kaplan interpreted this process as one of purification. He thus implied that the loss of numerical strength was more than compensated by an increase in spiritual strength: While the fearsome and weak parted, the strong and courageous remained. A further aspect of this process was an increased drawing of boundaries. The attendance of mosque services and prayers also by members of other communities which had been the practice during the first years ceased and only members of the Kaplan community proper now frequented the mosque. A more or less exclusive in-group thus evolved within which increasingly non-conformist positions were developed, emphasizing the differences to other Islamic communities.

Ideologically all this was reflected in the transformation of the movement's self-perception: the Kaplan community no longer conceived itself as a movement open to all but rather as a closed religious military order. The steps for becoming initiated were centered around the institutions: school (*medrese*), mystical convent (*tekke*) and barracks (*kışlak*). The sectarian process culminated in Kaplan declaring himself *locum tenens* of the caliph in 1992. He also proclaimed a government in exile. With this

step, the differences to the other Islamic communities in Europe became irreconcilable.

Kaplan as caliph

The radicalization of the movement went along with a dramatic change in the social composition of the community. The first followers of Kaplan had been autodidacts of the first generation, men who had little or no formal education, who had taught themselves to read and write, and who had discovered Islam on their own terms. They had found in Kaplan a figure that expressed their scepticism towards the wider society. They associated Kaplan's programme with the hope for the restoration of the unity of Islam – an issue of central importance to them. Most of these men left Kaplan when he became more sectarian. They realized quite clearly that any claims to the caliphate were unacceptable to the other Islamic communities and would therefore deepen the frictions rather than help to overcome them. However, younger migrants of the second generation took their place – among them a considerable number of academics and high school students. These students introduced new practices into the community. They set up groups for learning Arabic, studying Islamic law, learning about the life of the Prophet, and so on. In short, they developed a rather academic approach to Islam, using the intellectual tools they had acquired in German institutions of higher education. They stressed truth more than unity and therefore had fewer problems with the increasingly sectarian nature of the community. Kaplan's success with regard to the recruitment of new members stabilized and reinvigorated the community. The number of members, which had dropped from approximately 12,000 in 1985 to 1300 in 1992, has remained stable ever since.

The years 1992-1994 saw further developments toward an elitist cadre party which increasingly viewed itself as the spearhead of the Islamic revolution. In 1994, Kaplan finally declared himself Caliph-proper. This rather presumptuous step was justified with the notion of a historical turning point. After centuries of the decline of Islam, only a small but powerful elite was left (all other Muslims being trapped in compromises with the world). Under the leadership of the new Caliph, a *reconquista* would commence. Sceptics were reminded of the small number of believers Muhammed commanded in the battle of Badr. This construction is characteristic of the hermetic logic that had developed in the sect during the first half of the 90s. Although internally coherent, it could no longer be communicated to members of other Islamic communities.

In 1995, on his deathbed, Cemaleddin Kaplan appointed his son Metin as successor to the Caliphate. Metin, who did not have the charisma of his father, faced considerable problems in the community. In early 1996, the movement split and a counter

caliphate under Ibrahim Sofu was proclaimed in Berlin. Both caliphs issued diatribes, brandishing each other as *deccal*. In summer 1996, Metin issued a fatwa condemning the counter-caliph to death. In May 1997 Ibrahim was actually killed by a death squad in his apartment in Berlin. Although – of course – Metin was under suspicion, nothing could be proven. There is the suspicion that the murder was committed by volunteers who had served as mercenaries in Kosovo and in Afghanistan and had learned to kill in these wars. In October 1998, Turkish authorities claimed (in what looked very much like a set-up by the Turkish Secret Service) that the police had prevented an attack on the Anitkabir (the mausoleum of Atatürk) during the festivities celebrating the 75th anniversary of the revolution.

In 1999, Metin Kaplan was arrested, though the charges against him seem to stand on rather shaky grounds. The state attorney admitted during the first day of the trial that a direct link to the murder of Ibrahim Sofu cannot be established. A conviction seems doubtful. But even if the trial is inconclusive, it is increasingly placing political pressure on the movement and might very well mean its end. ♦



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