Alternative Islamic Discourses and Religious Authority

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Chapter 4

Muslim Perception of Fethullah Gülen and the Hizmet Movement: Accommodating or Hindering Modern Turkey?

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This chapter examines the transnational Gülen Movement, also known as the Hizmet Movement, one of the most prominent civic movements in Turkey with approximately eight million adherents around the world. This analytical approach is from the perspective of an Islamic studies scholar, focusing and elaborating on the personality of the movement's namesake, Fethullah Gülen (b. 1941). This chapter examines Gülen’s discourses on themes such as pluralism, interfaith dialogue, tolerance, new understanding of religious terms, and politics. There is also a special emphasis on the critiques of Fethullah Gülen and his movement along with responses to those critiques within the framework of whether Gülen can be seen as hindering or accommodating democracy in Turkey.

Muslim scholars like Mawlana Wahid al-Din Khan have spoken about Gülen and his contribution to Islamic scholarship. Some American scholars of Islamic and Middle Eastern studies have recognized Gülen as a high profile, contemporary Muslim intellectual. John Esposito, a leading scholar of Islam in the United States, considering Gülen's contribution to peace and inter-religious harmony, compares Gülen to the Dalai Lama.¹ Similarly, Dale F. Eickelman, a prominent American scholar of Middle Eastern studies, likened Gülen’s influence in Turkey to Billy Graham’s in the United States, despite this famous Christian evangelist's conservative and controversial aspects.² One can argue that both of these comparisons have merits. Gülen’s contribution to peace, his ascetic lifestyle and religious devotion bears a resemblance to the Dalai Lama. It would be wrong to conceive of Gülen as merely a religious figure, he is not only a preacher but a scholar, a thinker, and a charismatic leader. With his stance on justice and equality, he could be compared to Gandhi in India and Martin Luther King, Jr. in the United States.

Who is Fethullah Gülen?

According to available records in the Turkish Registration Office, Fethullah Gülen was born into a traditional and pious Turkish family on 27 April 1941, in Eastern Anatolia, Korne, a village in Erzurum province of modern-day Turkey. During World War I, this region had been a battle line, suffering attacks from both Russian and Turkish forces. Although Turkey did not actually participate in World War II, Gülen grew up with horrific war experiences because there was the constant possibility of Turkish involvement.

Education

Opportunities for a modern education were very limited in Eastern Anatolia, with no access to modern libraries or schools and neither his city nor the region had a university. However, unofficially, the Ottoman education system was still working and remained culturally influential. This exposure gave Gülen a remarkable background in Islamic studies. The cultural environment in which Gülen was raised was generally favourably disposed towards literature, poetry and mysticism. Only later, when doing military service, would Gülen encounter Western philosophers. At a very young age he memorized the Qur’an followed by studying the classics in Islamic law, Qur’an commentaries, as well as the Hadith collections; the authoritative sources for traditions and sayings of the Prophet. In respect to poetry, Gülen once told the author during an interview that he could recite over 1000 couplets by heart. He said, ‘I learned from the cultural environment and the overall milieu of my generation.’

After gaining some elementary knowledge through modern secular education, he started learning Islamic sciences through his father and the prominent figures of his community, such as the Naqshband Shaykh Muhammed Lüfl (d. 1956) who was a noted personality in Islamic mysticism in the region. Later, Gülen would quench his thirst for knowledge by reading many Eastern and Western classic authors such as Attar (d. 1220), Sa’di-Shirazi (d. 1291), Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) and Emile Zola (1840–1902). In addition to these sources, Gülen frequently speaks of the influence of his grandmother, his father, and his mother, who was also his first Qur’an teacher. This early teaching prepared Gülen for his later scholarship.

As a young man, he began his search for people who were involved in religious revivalism in Turkey. Throughout his life he sought out ideal human beings. He was not happy with the quality and condition of religious sciences taught in the educational institutions of the time. Especially, the poor quality of the madrasas who were remnants of the Ottoman educational system.

On one occasion, Gülen encountered a group of people who would have a great influence on his career. These were pious people and semi-mystics who were...
students of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi (1887–1960) living in Gülen’s hometown. Nursi was a well-known, prominent figure in the area of revivalism of Islam. Because of his religious writings, Nursi was considered in opposition to the practices of the Turkish government, especially with regard to religious issues. The Turkish Republic was in place and a new regime, based on the principles of Kemalism, was heavily practised by the secular Turkish government. Nursi wrote over 100 treatises on various Islamic subjects, also known as The Treatises of Light, or Risale-i Nur in Turkish, which were banned by the government due to the extreme secularism that prohibited all religious discourses not validated by the government. Reading or acquiring one of these books was a reason for being put in jail but Nursi’s writings attracted thousands of people in the country. Their strong arguments against materialism and irreligiosity caught Gülen’s attention. It can be argued that this encounter with Nursi’s students and his writings sowed the seeds that later flourished in Gülen’s views. The government ban on the books did not stop Gülen from acquiring and reading them. He believed in the honesty of the students of Nursi. Their behaviour, such as steadfastness, humility, sincerity and knowledge about contemporary issues of Islam, and their volunteerism and philanthropy impressed him greatly. They were peaceful but at the same time very active in their criticism of some of the government’s practices.

Gülen was on a quest. For a while, he continued to attend the reading circles organized by Nursi’s students in his hometown. The participants were generally middle class, less educated members of the community, yet very enthusiastic about reading and learning. Joining them or having any affiliation with them was considerably risky. Due to the government ban, Nursi’s writings were mostly handwritten and distributed secretly by his students until 1958, when a democratic government came to power through free elections and allowed the publication of Nursi’s books. Prior to this permission, owning one of his publications was equal to the possession of prohibited substances. In fact, on one occasion a prosecutor accused Nursi’s books of poisoning university students. One of the students of Nursi responded to the accusation in court, addressing the judge, ‘Your honour, if the Treatise of Light is poison, we are in need of a ton of it and thousands of kilos. If the prosecutor knows where it is found with abundance, he should send it to us with cargo planes.’ The writings were so powerful that despite the ban people did not stop reading them. Readers would occasionally be taken to jail and then the court would acquit them, which happened in more than 2,000 court decisions.

It was clear that the young Gülen was not afraid of the government’s opposition to Nursi’s writings because he, himself, found great inspiration in those works.

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Alternative Islamic Discourses and Religious Authority

Therefore, he continued to increase his knowledge by reading Nursi’s writings and the writings of many early Islamic scholars, such as al-Ghazzali (d. 1111). Gülen was a gifted student and at a very young age memorized the Qur’an. Despite his youth, Gülen became well known in the scholarly circle of his hometown, where he worked as a preacher, substituting for his father at times who was an imam. A few years later, he left his hometown for western Anatolia to work as an imam and preacher. While performing his job under the Directorate of Religious Affairs, unlike many imams he was conscious of the importance of modern education. According to Gülen education was the most important work that Muslims in Turkey could undertake.7

Developing an Alternative Discourse

After the establishment of the modern republic in 1923, the leaders of the country needed to establish a state institution for religious affairs, not at the level of ministerial affairs, but as a directorate, this was the Directorate of Religious Affairs. The head of this institution was, and still is, appointed by the government since it was important and had great influence, setting the norms for any religious discourse. It is still seen as a religious institution under the control of the state, which provides salaries for the imams, administration of the mosques, as well as answering questions about religion and other religious programmes.8 Turkish secular authorities would not allow any kind of religious activity that was not recognized by the Directorate of Religious Affairs. It has been argued that one of the goals of the establishment of this department was not only to organize matters related to religion but also to control religion. Gülen was a member of this directorate and had a great respect for the institution, yet, intentionally or unintentionally, he was developing an alternative Islamic discourse. This was not in a sense of rivalry but it was still quite different to the current discourses going on in the country. For example, Gülen was a strong advocate for the compatibility of science and religion in education, and therefore he had no problem with secular schools that taught the sciences.

Gülen wanted to show that modernity was reconcilable with the religion of Islam, which was an unusual trend among Turkish Muslims in this period. Because government schools were approaching education from a materialistic perspective, many Muslims were afraid to send their children to them, thinking that students would become irreligious after studying there.

There were several approaches to modernity. The governmental approach understood modernity and modern culture in Turkey as a curtailment of religion, in this case Islam. The second, or rejectionist, approach rejected all elements of

modern society and avoided all types of engagement by living a ghetto style of life, occasionally making powerful rhetorical statements in rejection of modernity. A third, mystical, approach neither rejected nor supported modernity, most people who held this view kept silent and focused on their own Sufi traditions. In such a challenging environment Gülen had three options: to reject the current culture of modernity and to isolate himself from the world, like many Sufis did; to become an ardent defender of modernity as practised by the secular government, as the official clerics did; or to engage and participate in the process of modernity and its dominant culture. He preferred the third option, but without sacrificing his own values. Therefore, he strongly advocated for the establishment of modern secular schools. His approach to modernity and contemporary culture came from his inclusive and broad understanding of Islam. Therefore, Gülen’s endeavours were understood as a new discourse that did not conform to the official religious discourse, not because it was against the official discourse but because it was developed without government control.

From the late 1960s to the end of the 1970s Gülen worked as an imam and preacher and extended his circle by finding more admirers and supporters. Over that time he gained a following through teaching college students and preaching as an imam. One can argue that these ten years of preparation helped with Gülen’s later widespread influence, especially over Turkish businessmen. Gülen’s emergence as a real community leader and a religious personality started in the 1980s when he encouraged Muslims in Turkey to establish educational institutions, in particular secular, private elementary, middle, and high schools as well as college preparation schools. This was a deviation from the traditional understanding among religious groups. After the military coup of 12 September 1980, Gülen was persecuted once again. When Turgut Özal (1927–1993) was elected as the Prime Minister of Turkey in 1983 a more tolerant approach towards religion returned. Özal, who had great sympathy for Gülen, emphasized three freedoms: of religion, entrepreneurship, and thought. These helped Gülen and his community to grow and express themselves more freely. It was in this era that Gülen started to establish schools outside Turkey, many of which were endorsed by Prime Minister Turgut Özal, who would later become the President of Turkey. Özal was among those who understood and admired Gülen’s views on education. Most likely this is because of Özal’s proposed model of education for Turkish Muslims, which was to have “the Qur’an in one hand and a computer in the other”. In other words, he emphasized the combination of religion and science, a principle which Gülen had been advocating for a long time. With this principle Gülen was actually walking in the footsteps of Said Nursi, who proposed that religious sciences and modern sciences should be taught together. Therefore Gülen and Özal were meeting on common ground.

It can be argued that President Özal’s courageous stand for democracy prevented the fourth military coup in 1990, despite several attempts. Özal passed away in 1993. The military ambitions for a coup were still present, but this time the leader of the military attempted to have a, so-called, postmodern military coup.
known as the 28 February Process, by issuing a memorandum during a national Security Council meeting that forced the government to step down in 1997. Again, Gülen was among the most notable victims of this postmodern military coup. In fact, some even claim that Gülen and his movement’s rapid growth were among the major reasons for the coup. Gülen was always a target because he offered an alternative discourse that combined religion with modernity, a pattern that was considered a rival to the military establishment. This was a new discourse, because traditionally Muslims would build mosques and houses of worship, rather than modern secular schools. Having a religious scholar of Islam promoting the establishment of modern secular schools was considered strange by the community. It is believed that Gülen changed the mindset of many people in Turkey by having them focus more on educational institutions than on Islamic politics as advocated by politically-oriented Muslims. Gülen believed that people had enough prayer houses and they needed more modern schools. He even received strong criticism from members of certain religious communities on the premise that establishing secular schools would not be compatible with the teaching of Islam. However, in Gülen’s understanding, learning and knowledge was a core Islamic value of his community. One can argue that Gülen saw a gap between the needs of the community and what the Ministry of Education in Turkey could provide, and he also saw the lack of confidence in public schools on the part of the community. His school project was a worthwhile response to the needs of the community. It is believed that he was among the first, if not the first, that saw this problem and provided a solution. This could be one of the reasons for the success of the schools established by the Gülen movement.

Gülen’s understanding of Islam was, and still is, Sunni, and mainstream. It is highly respectful of tradition, but open to modernity and new developments. As Şahin Alpay, a well-known political scientist and columnist for Zaman newspaper, put it: there were three Islamic discourses in Turkey: the official Islamic discourse, represented by the government, political Islamic discourse, represented by the major Islamic political party, and the mystical discourse, that which he calls the people’s discourse. Gülen’s approach was much more closely related to the people’s discourse or mysticism and the spirituality of Islam with its new dynamic of educational and cultural components. The discourse that Gülen presented was quite modern and respectful of diversity. It emphasized the importance of the free market economy and supported Turkey joining the European Union. It also emphasized the compatibility of science and religion. Although some political parties in the country have accepted the principles of Gülen’s discourse, the Gülen movement carefully avoided direct participation in politics. Occasionally the Gülen movement would rally the Turkish community to vote, especially when

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9. See Ezgi Basaran’s interview with Şahin Alpay, Radikal Newspaper, 20 February 2012.
Elections became very important for the future of Turkey, such as the constitutional referendum on electoral reform in 2007 and the parliamentary elections in 2011. Gülen’s influence, success, and charismatic leadership created both jealousy and fear on the part of his opponents, particularly in some military leaders who managed to control many state institutions. During the 28 February Process (1997), the prejudice against Gülen had escalated to such a degree that his opponents, who produced a bogus cassette of Gülen’s speeches, orchestrated a campaign against him on several public TV channels to distort his image and destroy his influence. The Turkish prosecutor accused Gülen of urging people to overthrow the secular power. In 1999 Gülen left the country for the United States for medical purposes, but the trial continued. Gülen defended himself against these accusations through his lawyers. On 25 June 2008 the court acquitted Gülen after a long period of accusations and investigations.

Gülen’s Departure From Turkey

While all these storms swirled around him Gülen left Turkey for the United States in April of 1999 complaining about his heart problem and diabetes and has been there ever since. Gülen received angioplasty treatment in the United States. It is believed that the military intervention of 1997 contributed to Gülen’s decision to stay in the United States and not to get directly involved in a possible conflict with the establishment in Turkey, which could have contributed even more to the destabilization of the country. While in the United States, he continues his relationship with his community in Turkey through guidance, advice and weekly speeches. The movement’s educational institutions grew in Turkey and elsewhere, including in many Islamic countries.

Contribution to Peace Through Education

These educational institutions contribute to the establishment of peace in different regions that are suffering due to political conflicts. Educational institutions in northern Iraq, the Philippines, and the Balkans, including Macedonia and Bosnia,
are contributing greatly to the establishment of peace in these regions.\textsuperscript{14} Although the \textit{Hizmet}, or Gülen movement is well known for its educational endeavours, the movement's approach to interfaith dialogue is also worth mentioning. They receive both support and criticism from different groups in the Islamic world. Those who criticize interfaith dialogue efforts presented by the movement refer to religious texts to support their case. Rather than elaborate on the details of those discourses we will examine Gülen’s discourse on interfaith dialogue.

\textbf{Gülen’s Discourse on Interfaith Dialogue}

As a scholar of Islam, Gülen finds no theoretical contradiction between Islam and dialogue with adherents of other religions. On the contrary, he thinks that Islam necessitates interfaith dialogue. In response to those who criticize his efforts for interfaith dialogue based on Islamic texts, he finds a theological foundation for dialogue by connecting the idea of dialogue between human beings as showing respect to God. Gülen says, “As a matter of fact, dialogue [between human beings] means respect for humanity, and respect for humanity means respect for God.”\textsuperscript{15} He emphasizes the importance of being a human. He says, “To love and respect human beings purely because they are human beings is an expression of love and respect for the Creator. If one loves only those who agree with him or her, then that is not considered a real love and respect. On the contrary, it is selfishness and idolizing one’s self.”\textsuperscript{16} Lack of dialogue, Gülen holds, stems from a lack of trust in the religion of Islam.\textsuperscript{17} Gülen argues that humanity is currently entering the age of knowledge and science, where science will rule the world to a larger measure in the future. Thus, the adherents of a religion like Islam, whose principles in his opinion are proven by reason and science, should not, he concludes, be doubtful or find difficulty in conversing with adherents of other religions. Gülen sees dialogue as one of the duties of Muslims, to paraphrase:

In a world that is moving towards science, and will move even further towards science in the future, Islam has made sure that all its principles are compatible with reason and science. A Muslim who believes in such an Islam should have no


\textsuperscript{15} Ahmed Kurucan’s personal notes 1 May 2009.


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problem getting into dialogue with adherents of other religions. Such a dialogue is not a matter of gentleness, or relevance, but, for Muslims who are conscious of their duties on earth, it is a matter of critical importance. According to Gülen, the adherents of all religious traditions should strive to overcome the possible obstacles to dialogue. With regard to the mistakes of the past, such as the era of the crusades and the colonization of the Islamic world by Western powers, he says, 'We are resolved not to remember those events and not to give an opportunity for the rebirth of animosity. We strongly encourage the constraint of historical mistakes within the limits of the history books so as not to resurrect the feelings of animosity among people.' Similarly, he emphasizes forgiveness and self-criticism as components of Islamic understanding of interfaith dialogue. For Gülen, forgiveness is upheld as an essential element for building peace and harmony. For example, he narrates a story from the Bible when a woman accused of committing adultery was brought to Jesus, who said, 'Let the person who is without sin, cast the first stone' (John 8:7). Gülen adds, 'Those who understand the depth of this statement cannot throw stones at others while they deserve stoning.' Self-criticism, for Gülen, is an important step towards forgiveness: 'We will never be able to make a right decision, neither on behalf of ourselves nor on behalf of others, until we break the idols within us, with a courage like the courage of Abraham.'

Gülen promoted the importance of dialogue between communities and adherents of religion prior to 11 September 2001. His efforts for dialogue started in the 1990s when he championed a dialogue between Sunnis and Alevis in Turkey. He met with prominent Alevi leaders and organized gatherings between Sunnis and Alevis in order to reduce tension and prevent further conflict. Similarly, he advocated for dialogue between Muslims and other religious minorities, such as Eastern Orthodox and Armenian Christians, Catholics, and the Jewish community, as well as some atheist educators. The Journalists and Writers Foundation was established under the auspices of Gülen in Istanbul in 1994, with the aim of promoting dialogue between these groups. Gülen believed that dialogue was essential for the harmony of the country, which had witnessed conflicts between various groups, religious versus religious or Marxist versus Nationalist. To fulfill his mission of peace, Gülen worked to promote dialogue by meeting with noted leaders and bringing them together. Many religious leaders, university educators, civic leaders, and well-known journalists, as well as prominent businessmen responded to Gülen's call for dialogue. As a further example of his interfaith dialogue initiative, Gülen had a meeting with Pope John Paul II at the Vatican, in

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18 Ibid., p. 38.
21 Ibid. p. 71. Here, Gülen refers to the Qur’anic story of Abraham (Qur’an 21:52–70) when he smashed idols and asked people to worship only one God. Gülen suggests that as Abraham had outer idols we have inner idols and we need to have the courage to smash them.
February of 1997, where they agreed to develop a dialogue between Catholics and Muslims. He also met with the Greek Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew and Israeli Sephardic Chief Rabbi Eliyahu Bakshy Bar.

After leaving Turkey in 1999, he started to promote interfaith dialogue in the United States. His efforts in Turkey remained highly limited due to the strong but shadowy presence of the military. Gümüş continued to advocate strongly for interfaith dialogue despite the criticism he received in Turkey from both the hardline ultra-secularist camp as well as various religious groups. Gümüş's strivings for further dialogue developed both locally and internationally. The movement named after him led to the establishment of centres for dialogue in major world capitals such as the Dialogue Society in London, the Rumi Forum for Interfaith Dialogue in Washington DC, and many other cities in the United States and around the world.²²

In the United States, many Turkish Americans are among the strongest supporters of Gümüş and his initiatives. One can find many institutions in major American cities that promote interfaith and intercultural dialogue inspired by Gümüş's teachings. For example, the Pacifica Institute in Los Angeles, the Niagara Foundation in Chicago, the Raindrop Foundation in Houston, and the Peace Islands Foundation in New York and the New Jersey area are just a few. People working for these institutions are generally volunteers who believe in the importance of dialogue.

Following Gümüş's line of thought, one can argue that his advocacy for dialogue has philosophical and religious roots rather than being circumstantial. One can see that he has a clear pattern with regard to his previous and current initiatives for dialogue and understanding. He has maintained the same message. What he said in 1992 is the same thing he says in 2012. For example, he strongly opposed Saddam Hussein's random attacks against Israel with long-range missiles due to the threat to civilians. For him, there was no difference between Israeli and Egyptian children. Such statements have led some groups to accuse him of Zionism.²³ In 2010, when the flotilla carrying aid to Gaza was attacked by Israeli soldiers and nine people were killed, Gümüş had the same thought. He strongly opposed methods which can lead to conflict and bloodshed and said that the organizers should have gained permission from Israel before their departure.²⁴ Gümüş took a great risk in the Gaza

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flotilla case when he openly opposed public opinion and was consistent in his approach where he said what he believed and not what was popular.

Gülen believes that his discourse of non-violence is more compatible with the practice of the Prophet of Islam who is presented as having had good dialogue with Christians and Jews. One can argue that many of Gülen’s predecessors in Islamic scholarship such as Jalal al-Din Rumi (d. 1272), and the more contemporary Said Nursi, are exemplary models for Gülen’s approach to non-violence and dialogue. For example, while Nursi strongly emphasized a dialogue between Christians and Muslims, Gülen enlarged on this concept by including all members of Abrahamic faiths, as well as adherents of Hinduism and Buddhism. He argued that the lack of dialogue creates ignorance about each other, and ignorance can easily result in animosity. Gülen says, ‘An imosity and hatred are seeds of hell that vicious souls have thrown among human beings. Against those who instigate animosity and hatred and want to turn the face of earth into a ditch of hell, there is a great need for help. We need to have forgiveness to defeat it’. Unlike many contemporary Muslim scholars who think that revivalism in Islam should be performed through politics, Gülen emphasizes the role of love. He says, ‘It should be noted that the revivalism of this age will be fulfilled through the reviving breaths of heroes of love who represent soft behaviour, soft manners, soft hearts, and soft words’.27

Gülen’s Alternative Discourse and Muslims

Gülen emphasizes that Muslims should be self-critical, and suggests that Islam should not be used as an ideology. He argues that Islam must be seen as a religion, to be exemplified in the mind, heart and daily life, and should not be a means of selfish partisanship, personal or national hatred, or feelings of enmity. One of Gülen’s self-criticisms can be found in the following statement:

As Muslims, we did not find the beautiful things going on around us; instead we focused on negative things. Through this, we ignored goodness and put evil forward. We went even further, to the extent that we sacrificed many universal human values for our imaginary political and ideological assumptions. As if our assumptions were the criteria for everything. A time came when just for the sake of popularity we declared a war against dialogue and understanding and we fueled hatred and animosity.28

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26 Gülen, Cev ve Nesil I.


28 Ibid.
Gülen’s discourse, while well-established among Turks, is still new to non-Turkish Muslim communities. His writings and his educational initiatives are highly regarded by many Muslims. In Turkey, despite opposition from various groups, Gülen’s views are welcomed by the majority of Muslims with different ethnic backgrounds. He has made significant efforts to search for a consensus among the community and has been able to bring various segments of Turkish society together. These have included liberal writers and journalists, such as Mehmet Altan, Ahmet Altan, Cengiz Candar, and Mehmet Barlas, who still have great influence in Turkey and admire Gülen’s efforts at dialogue. It seems to me that what made Gülen so appealing to these scholars and liberal authors was his moderate Islamic discourse. Occasionally, Gülen speaks of the importance of the human being, regardless of their ethnicity or ideological background. This discourse was something that was not heard from many religious figures in the country. Gülen’s emphasis on this made him appealing to this audience. Statistics suggest that the majority of the Turkish population is supportive of Gülen’s educational initiatives, due which he is greatly admired, not only by ethnic Turkish people, but also by many Kurdish community leaders and intellectuals. More recently, Gülen defended the rights of the Kurdish population to use their language freely and suggested that they should have access to education in their mother tongue. Gülen held that the Turkish government should have made such a decision much earlier.

At this juncture, it is important to speak of Muslims outside Turkey and their thoughts on Gülen. The Arabic-speaking world is becoming familiar with him through translations of his work. The founding of Hira, a monthly Arabic journal published by the admirers of Gülen, has contributed to Arab understanding of Gülen. In Egypt, Algeria, and Iraq his writings have been widely circulated. On 19–21 October 2009, an international conference on the Gülen Movement was titled, ‘Future of Reform in the Muslim World and Fethullah Gülen: Comparative Experiences with Fethullah Gülen’s Movement in Turkey’ held in Cairo. Scholars from Egypt, Morocco, Russia and the United States participated in this conference. Prominent figures from the Arab world expressed their thoughts regarding Gülen. These were scholars who are experts in their field and highly respected for their deep knowledge of Islamic studies, for example Muhammad al-Bayoumi from

29 Mehmet Altan is a professor of political science and a liberal writer currently writing for Tariq newspaper. Ahmet Altan is a journalist, probably one of the most important intellectuals who advocate for human rights, democracy, freedom of expression. He is also known as a liberal, currently writing for Tariq newspaper. Cengiz Candar is a prominent journalist who wrote extensively on Middle Eastern policies. He is also known as a liberal who currently writes for Radikal newspaper. Mehmet Barlas is a liberal who writes for Sabah newspaper. None of these figures were religious or affiliated with any religious institution but Gülen showed them a great respect for their stance on human rights and democracy and strongly advocated for a dialogue that includes all of them.

30 For further on this, see Markar Esayan, ‘Gülen and a new paradigm in the Kurdish issue’, Today’s Zaman, 27 October, 2011.
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Egypt, Fathi Malkawi from Jordan, and Samir Boudinar from Morocco. One of
the great admirers of Gülen in Algeria was the late Farid al-Ansari (d. 2009),
who wrote a novel in Arabic on Gülen entitled, **Awdat al-Fursan (The Return of
Cavaliers)**. The book speaks of Gülen as the beneficiary of a long tradition of
Islamic scholarship and spirituality. Similarly, Salmon al-Ouda, the famous Saudi
cleric and member of the International Union for Muslim Scholars, who is also
the director of the **Islam Today** website, spoke of Gülen in an interview broadcast
on NBC on 11 June 2009 entitled, 'Turkey: a New Experience'. The Saudi sheik
was impressed with the level of Gülen's knowledge of Islamic jurisprudence
and the life of the Prophet. Another prominent scholar and author from Iraq, Adib
Ibrahim al-Dabbagh, wrote a number of articles on Gülen in his native Arabic.
It seems that despite the short period since the translation of Gülen's writings,
many intellectual Arab readers have started reading Gülen's works. Another
international conference was held on 26 December 2001, jointly organized by
**Hira** magazine and the College of Literature and Humanities in Rabat, the capital
of Morocco. The conference discussed Gülen's work on the life of the Prophet,
which indicates an increasing interest in his work among the Arab Muslim world.
Similarly, **Hira** and **Yeni Ünit (New Hope)** organized another international
conference called 'Solutions from the Path of the Prophet to Social Problems' in
Gaziantep, an industrial city in south-eastern Turkey on 5–6 May 2012. Scholars
from 60 countries participated in this conference, among them were the Director
of Religious Affairs, and in Turkey Dr. Mehmet Gormez, the Mufti of Egypt, Ali
Jumaa, and many other scholars from Morocco to Pakistan and India. One of the
prominent figures who participated was Wahiduddin Khan, a noted Islamic scholar
and peace activist in India, who gave a very emotional speech praising the efforts
of Gülen with regard to education, as well as Gülen's new discourse on revivalism
in Islam. He strongly supported Gülen's view of dialogue for feature peace.
He suggested that Gülen himself was on the path of the Prophet.

While Gülen receives admiration from many intellectuals around the world
and in Turkey, a group of well-established ultra-secularist elements of the Turkish
government still regard him as a threat. Here a question arises, especially for
those who are not familiar with the history of politics in Turkey: where did this
ultra-secularist group come from? For a thorough picture of this situation we
need to look at the historical context. For a brief history, one should look to
the period from 1960–1980, when Turkey experienced three military coups, the
most dramatic of which was the 1960 coup d'état. The military junta hung the Prime
Minister, Adnan Menderes, the leader of the Democratic Party, on 17 September
1961 and the incident is still considered a black mark on Turkish democracy. Each

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31 Farid al-Ansari, **Awdat al-Fursan (Cairo, 2010)**
32 For the full text of these articles see www.ar.igülen.com/content/category/17/36/57/. Accessed 3 January 2012.
military coup would cause massive damage to Turkish democracy, human rights, political pluralism, and even the country's economy. After each military coup all political parties would be banned and thousands of people would go to jail; Gülen would receive his own share of persecution during this time.

From its foundation, until recently, the modern Turkish Republic rejected almost anything that related to religion. All non-official religious discourses were banned. Any religious activities that did not conform to the policies of the government were considered illegal, yet it was impossible to control religion totally, and therefore non-conformist religious discourses found a space in Turkish society. Turkish people patiently practised their religious traditions without confrontation with the government. One important religious opposition figure arguably played the most significant role in the success of this non-violent intellectual struggle against the policies of the government, namely Bediuzzaman Said Nursi. Nursi stated that the government should not force the people to love any government officials. The trend of opposition to Nursi by some deeply-rooted members of the government continues until today. The government has changed and many leaders who favoured Nursi may have come to power, but a group known as 'Deep State' has continued to monitor not only Nursi's writings but all religious issues. Members of this group, through various media channels accuse Gülen of having a hidden political agenda. Contrary to these accusations, Gülen would always say:

_We do not have any worldly demands, large or small. We do not have any interest in worldly politics and we have been consciously staying away from it. We believe that getting involved in worldly politics will taint our goal of pleasing God, and will negatively affect our relationship with God as his servants. For this reason, we stay away from political positions which can contaminate our heart and spiritual life._

One of the major criticisms of Gülen in Turkey is on his efforts at interfaith dialogue. Ironically, some politically inclined Islamists and the above-mentioned well-established secularist group have been cooperating in opposition to Gülen in this regard. In an attempt to degrade Gülen, the head of the Socialist Workers Party, Doğu Perinçek, accused him of promoting Christianity in Turkey. It is interesting that those who were accusing Gülen of going against the Qur’an and promoting Christianity were not themselves practising Muslims. Further, they were well-known followers of Marxism. It is believed that the main goal of the attacks on

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35 Nursi, Şolatur, p. 315
Gülen was to undermine the current trial of a well-organized underground group, known as Ergenekon, accused by the Turkish prosecutor of being a terrorist group attempting to change the government by force.38

It is not surprising to see that there are also some marginalized religious groups who strongly criticize Gülen’s efforts in the name of Islam, especially Gülen’s meetings with highly esteemed religious figures in Christianity and Judaism. For example, İbda-C, a Turkish terrorist organization, accused Gülen of being a tool of the United States, making him the cover story of their journal, Baran Dergisi, entitled ‘The End of the Pennsylvanian,’ referring to Gülen’s stay in Pennsylvania. They seized the moment after Gülen’s unpopular comments on Falstaff aid, quoting him: ‘My eyes are full of tears for the Jewish children’ and ‘a head covering for women is a secondary issue’.39

Criticisms of Gülen went beyond the borders of Turkey. It was interesting to see a strongly critical article in the Middle East Quarterly that accused him of having grand ambitions for political domination. The same journal had published an earlier article describing Gülen as ‘the moderate face of Islam’.40 In the later article, Rachel Sharon-Krespin entitled, ‘Fethullah Gülen’s Grand Ambition’, were several inaccurate accusations. One such inaccuracy was about Gülen’s alleged ambition to establish mosques.41 Ironically, while this article accused Gülen of establishing mosques, there were others Muslims who accused Gülen of establishing schools and serving American policies. It is well known that Gülen focuses on schools rather than mosques. Another accusation that Sharon-Krespin made against Gülen was that he was ‘an imam who considers himself a prophet’ and she misquotes Gülen in the article. Perhaps Sharon-Krespin was unaware of the Islamic theological belief that Muhammad was the last Prophet.

In response to these accusations, Gülen’s admirers strongly declare that the intention of these criticisms was not to find the truth but to defame Gülen in the eyes of the Turkish public. In 2011, an article was published based on research involving the criticisms of Gülen. According to this article, some of those who were criticizing Gülen had double standards. In Turkey, they accused him of being a Zionist or a CIA agent. Those same people criticized him in the US and accused him of being an Islamist who would like to establish a caliphate.42 Many people

38 For further information see the following article: http://www.todayzaman.com/news-270535-ilicale-gulen-movement-has-been-used-to-undermine-ergenekon-trial.html. Accessed 24 February 2012.
39 See Baran Dergisi, year 4, issue 195 (7 October 2010).
41 For this article, see Rachel Sharon-Krespin, ‘Fethullah Gülen’s Grand Ambition: Turkey’s Islamist Danger’, Middle East Quarterly (Winter 2009), pp. 55–66.
42 For details of these accusations of double standards see Dogan Koc, ‘Strategic Defamation of Fethullah Gülen: English vs. Turkish’, European Journal of Economic and Political Studies, 4/1 (Summer 2011), pp. 1–56.
responded to the accusations against Gülen. An editorial in *Today's Zaman* argued that Gülen strongly supported democracy and advocated for a democratically elected government when he spoke against the military coup attempts. The editorial praised the fact that military officials could be tried in Turkish courts and emphasized the fact that the Ergenekon trial was the first ever civil trial of military coup plotters in Turkey. Helen Rose Ebaugh, the author of *The Gülen Movement: A Sociological Analysis of a Civic Movement Rooted in Moderate Islam*, also responded to some accusations against Gülen. In an interview in the Turkish edition of *Zaman*, she said that she had received criticism from the opponents of Gülen in Turkey because of her writings on Gülen. She challenged those who accused her to show evidence of their claims, but they could not.\(^{43}\)

Some anti-Sufi groups, especially Wahhabis, criticize Gülen and his movement for being Sufi-oriented. Gülen's understanding of Islam seems more spirituality-oriented and is understood by many as a Sufi way of thought. In fact, one can link Gülen to the tradition of Sufism despite the fact that his understanding of spirituality is quite different from that of contemporary Sufi orders.\(^ {44}\) Those who are not familiar with the Sufi sainthood may not understand Gülen's Sufism, and think of him as a cult leader or a man with ambitions. However, in the mystical traditions of Islam, Sufi masters have been the centre of attention for their admirers and followers, both historically and currently. For example, respect for Sufi masters, such as Jalal al-Din Rumi (d. 1273) is so strong that some Wahhabis would consider it idolatry. All Sufi masters have received similar accusations, but Sufis would respond by saying their respect for the master is a sign of respect for God, because the master's are leading them on the right path as representatives of the prophets and therefore deserve love and respect. The respect his community has for Gülen can be understood in the same way, but it is known that Gülen frequently reminds his admirers to avoid exaggeration about his personality and remains humble. As an article in *Foreign Policy* magazine notes, 'Gülen is both revered and reviled in his native Turkey. To members of the Gülen movement, he is an inspirational leader who encourages a life guided by moderate Islamic principles.'\(^{45}\) Gülen's involvement in the mystical traditions of Islam apparently does not prevent him from contributing to social issues in the modern world. One of his greatest contributions to democracy is his encouragement to participate in the voting process during the last two elections in Turkey as indicated above. In fact, he was so emphatic about the importance of elections, some accused him of being too political. An accusation Gülen also responded to.\(^{46}\)

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\(^{44}\) See Zeki Sarılar, "Fethullah Gülen: A Sufi in His Own Way", in M. Hakan Yavuz and John L. Esposito (eds.), *Turkish Islam and the Secular State: The Gülen Movement* (Syracuse, New York, 2003), pp. 156–70.


Conclusion

There is no doubt that the Gülen Movement has become one of the most important phenomenon of recent Turkish history, and it seems that it will continue to be a part of contemporary Islamic discourse. As indicated above, Gülen’s Islamic discourse is not reactionary but proactive; instead of rejecting certain ideologies that are posed by the government, he brings new discourses to the stage and opens up the debate. His efforts for education have been understood as a new direction in Islamic discourse, and many Muslims view these efforts with great admiration. Though some are not happy due to the secular nature of the schools promoted by his movement. The same is true of attitudes towards his ideas about interfaith dialogue. Gülen’s strong background in Islamic scholarship gives him and the movement a certain authority that this moderate Islamic discourse is compatible with the overall teaching of the Qur’an. Those who criticize Gülen and his movement for their interfaith dialogue efforts are considerably in the minority within the Islamic community. Therefore, one can argue that Gülen’s efforts for dialogue, education, and building peace, which are essentially parts of the overall Islamic discourse, will receive even more admiration from Muslims, as well as people from other faiths, around the world.

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