

MERIA

THE FETHULLAH GULEN MOVEMENT

Bill Park*

The Gulen movement is attracting increasing and sometimes hostile attention both inside Turkey and beyond as a result of its increasing activity, wealth, and influence. Inspired by the thoughts of its founder, Sufi scholar Fethullah Gulen, it has established hundreds of educational institutions, as well as media outlets, dialogue platforms, and charities. Well-established in Turkey, it has expanded into the wider Turkic world and, increasingly, beyond. Yet its structure, ambitions, and size remain opaque, making assessment of its impact and power difficult.

INTRODUCTION

Recent developments have led to an upsurge of curiosity about the Turkish Sufi scholar Fethullah Gulen and his legion of followers, known as *Fethullahci*, both in his native country and abroad. One factor contributing to this attention was Gulen's summer 2008 election as the world's leading intellectual in a poll organized jointly by the British *Prospect* magazine and the U.S. publication *Foreign Policy*, in which over half a million votes were registered for a candidate who had hitherto been unknown to *Prospect's* editor.¹ *Prospect's* analysis of the poll highlighted how relatively high levels of Turkish internet use generated a specifically Turkish effect in such polls.² *Prospect* also identified in Gulen's victory the emergence of a new kind of intellectual, "one whose influence is expressed through a personal network, aided by the internet, rather than publications or institutions." These observations offer a penetrating insight into the mechanisms of Gulen's influence and the nature of the Gulen movement.

Prospect additionally noted how votes for Gulen mounted in the wake of publicity for the poll in the Gulen-inspired Turkish newspaper *Zaman* and a host of other Gulen websites. This testified to the legendary "efficiency and discipline" and "organizational ability" of the *Fethullahci*. There is a hint of something sinister in this

interpretation of Gulen's victory, implying as it does central direction rather than spontaneity. Secular Turks share such suspicions, and conspiracy theories abound in Turkey concerning both the source and level of the movement's funding and the nature of its ultimate ambitions. Indeed, both are obscure. It is often alleged that the Gulen movement receives funding, either alternatively or simultaneously, from the CIA, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the Turkish state.³ Gulen himself has lived in somewhat hermit-like exile in Pennsylvania since 1998, ostensibly due to ill-health but also as a consequence of fears for his freedom should he return to Turkey. He was charged in 1999 for "establishing an illegal organization in order to change the secular structure of the state and to establish a state based on religious rules."⁴ Although he was acquitted in 2006, the judgment was appealed, and it was not until June 2008 that the acquittal was finally upheld, thus clearing the way for his safe return to Turkey.⁵

In the West, most would probably concur with *The Economist*, which has noted the generally good reception received there by the Gulen movement, whose security services "have not detected any hidden ties with extremism."⁶ On the other hand, according to the American "neo-conservative" Michael Rubin, if Gulen does return to Turkey "Istanbul 2008 may very well look like Tehran 1979."⁷ Rubin

anticipates millions turning out to greet Gulen on his return to Turkey, his issuing of *fatwas* (religious edicts) designed to distance Turkey from its official secularism, the restoration of the caliphate, and the subversion of the rule of law “to an imam’s conception of God.” In more measured fashion, Hakan Yavuz, a U.S.-based Turkish scholar of Islam in Turkey, has been quoted as asserting that the Gulen movement is “the most powerful movement right now in the country.... The point where they are today scares me. There is no other movement to balance them in society.”⁸ The movement’s activities abroad sometimes arouse comparable suspicions.⁹ The Russian authorities, fearful of any indications of Islamic or pan-Turkic revivalism within their borders, have recently tried to close down a Gulen school in St. Petersburg as part of a wider campaign against the movement’s activities and influences, a campaign which has included bans on the works of the Sufi teacher Said Nursi, from whom Gulen draws much of his inspiration.¹⁰ In light of all this, it is interesting to note that the U.S. authorities chose to reject Gulen’s application for the right of permanent residence in the United States on the grounds of his insufficient renown, a decision ruled improper by a federal judge in July 2008.¹¹

Clearly Gulen and the Fethullahci are divisive, but they have also been described by *The Economist* as “one of the most powerful and best-connected of the networks that are competing to influence Muslims round the globe.” In addition to its global activism, the movement constitutes a major part of Turkey’s current social and political evolution, signified by the electoral fortunes of the ruling Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi, AKP), with which it overlaps.¹² Yet it remains opaque. This article will seek to throw such light as can be thrown on the movement, and offer a critical assessment of its values, nature, and impact. It will in part draw on this author’s experiences and observations during a week spent in Istanbul in July 2008 as a guest of the Gulen-inspired and UK-based Dialogue

Society (<http://www.dialoguesociety.org>), during which various aspects of the ideas and activities of the movement were discussed, and Gulen-inspired businessmen’s associations, media outlets, educational establishments, and the like were visited.

GULEN’S THINKING

One cannot understand the nature of the movement without some mention of Fethullah Gulen’s thinking.¹³ Although this has evolved towards more universalistic, pluralistic, liberal, and democratic values,¹⁴ in large measure it remains rooted in Turkey’s particular circumstances and experiences. For Gulen, Kemalist Turkey’s “top-down” imposition of a dogmatic secularism has distanced swathes of Turkish society from the governing elite. Gulen prefers to draw inspiration from the Ottoman model of state-society relationships. Although the empire’s rulers were guided by their faith, the Ottoman system of governance was not theocratic. Public laws were formulated on the basis of the state’s needs rather than in accordance with Islamic law (Shari’a). For Gulen, the state has a functionally secular responsibility to provide internal and external security and stability for its citizens. Gulen’s state-centrism even led him to sympathize with Turkey’s 1980 military coup, regarding it as appropriate that the state protect itself and its citizens against the chaos that was threatening to engulf Turkish society. Thus, Gulen is not in favor of the political implementation of Shari’a, though the freedom to express one’s faith should be respected. He is opposed to “political Islam,” and even sympathized with Turkey’s 1997 “post-modern coup” that removed Necmettin Erbakan’s Welfare Party from power, although Gulen was himself caught up in the crackdown on religious activity that came in its wake. He believed that Erbakan and his followers were embarked on the first steps towards an “Iranianization” of Turkish political and social life.

Gulen believes that there is no necessary contradiction between Islam and modernity. Indeed, Turkish Islam's more adaptable and less doctrinal *Sufi* traditions have enabled Turkey, with its democratization, free market economy, and secular political system, to incorporate aspects of modernity barely found elsewhere in the Muslim world. A key to his thinking is that Islam should positively embrace science, reason, democratization, and tolerance. It should not shield itself from other faiths, other ideas, or from scientific and technological progress. Gulen believes that the relative (to the West) economic and moral poverty of so much of the Islamic world is explained by its attachment to misplaced and dogmatic interpretations of Islam, not Islam per se. Indeed, he believes Turkey can lead the Islamic world toward this realization, and for all his proclaimed universalism there is also a pronounced "Turkishness" to his thinking. Turkish society is nationalistic, and some of this flavor has been absorbed by Gulen and the Fethullahci.

For Gulen, the key to Islam's adaptation to the modern world does not lie in direct political activity and organization. Rather, Gulen propagates a kind of "educational Islamism" as opposed to a "political Islamism."¹⁵ Thus, educational curricula should emphasize science, technology, and instruction in the English language. In place of faith teaching Gulen advocates the cultivation of spiritual, moral, and behavioral values, of tolerance, respect, openness, and the like. Indeed, Gulen feels that the West has forsaken the spiritual dimension of human existence. Through the internalized spiritual transformation of individuals, a wider social transformation will evolve and, indirectly, a (re-) "Islamized" version of modernity. Thus, politics should be "Islamized" only via a bottom-up process and indirectly, in which people and state are reconnected through a shared attachment to and internalization of values. It is an approach that resembles a kind of "long march through the institutions." In this sense, Gulen's mission

can be said to be a political project, but one that aspires to achieve its goals indirectly. People of faith as well as learning, a "Golden Generation," should be cultivated and encouraged to dedicate their lives to the service (*hizmet*) of the people and to inspire them towards the movement's objectives.

The emphasis on spirituality in Gulen's thinking is partly explained by his attachment to Turkey's "folk Islam," Sufism.¹⁶ Specifically, Gulen derives inspiration from the writings of the prominent Kurdish religious authority Said Nursi (1877-1961). His Nur (Light) movement was similarly distinguished by its advocacy of reason, progress, and tolerance, and its quietism towards direct political involvement. Even if Turkish Islam's uniqueness is sometimes exaggerated,¹⁷ there is little doubt that its sects, saints, and eclecticism can be offensive to other Muslims, as can its "moderation." Sufism also typically features the kind of master-disciple relationships replicated today by the inspiration Gulen provides his followers. Widespread membership of Sufi sects has long persisted in secular Turkey, generally concealed from the country's suspicious rulers.

Gulen has also advocated both local and global interfaith and intercivilizational dialogue, and to this end met with Pope John Paul II in Rome in 1998, and inside Turkey with Patriarch Bartholomeos, head of the Greek Orthodox Fener Patriarchate in Istanbul, the former Chief Rabbi of Turkey's Jewish community David Aseo, as well as with numerous other high-profile Jewish and Christian figures.¹⁸ In its support for and sponsorship of such activities, the Gulen movement seeks both to counter the impact of the more violent fundamentalist strains in modern Islam -- Gulen has repeatedly condemned terrorism as "un-Islamic"--and to undermine wherever it can Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations" thesis.¹⁹ Gulen's championing of interfaith dialogue springs in part from his recognition of the shared theological origins of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism--although in his appeal for

interfaith dialogue and tolerance Gulen incorporates Buddhism and Hinduism too--and Muhammad's injunction to respect the "people of the book." The transcendental quality of faith is for Gulen a unifying force that outweighs theological differences. His commitment to dialogue with the Judeo-Christian world is also related to his admiration for Western modernity, liberalism, and technological and economic prowess. Gulen's frequent and approving references to the "Global Village" express his perception that the phenomena of globalization have so bound together the fates of peoples that conflict between them serves nobody's interests. Characteristically, he again draws upon the multifaith and multicultural example of the Ottoman Empire, which he adduces as evidence of the capacity of diverse peoples to live together harmoniously.

The flavor of Gulen's thinking is then distinctly moderate, and offers little credence to some of the wilder accusations against him; but what of the movement that takes his name?

THE FETHULLAHCI²⁰

In the wake of Gulen's appointment as a state-employed religious preacher to Izmir in 1966, a loose network of students, teachers, professionals, businessmen, and the like began to gather around him and to coalesce as a spontaneous "social movement" inspired by Gulen's example. Its first venture into the wider propagation of its philosophy came in the form of summer schools, from which it progressed to the establishment of teaching centers (*dershane*), often dormitories, to prepare religious students for university admission. These remain an important element in the inculcation of Gulen's values, not least through a "mentoring" system found throughout the movement's educational establishments and its wider "structure." The *dershane* are also a prime source of recruits. As it blossomed, so it attracted the attention of Turkey's secularist state establishment.

Gulen himself served a seven-month spell in prison in the early 1970s for propagating religion, and again attracted uncomfortable attention both during the 1980s and, as already noted, in the late 1990s. The network did not openly blossom as a major educational, social, and religious movement until the early 1980s, when in the wake of the military coup of 1980 the space for religious activity was expanded, a policy inspired by the so-called "Turkish-Islamic synthesis." This advocated a fusion between Turkish national identity and the Islamic faith, in the hope that a (state-managed) religiosity would offer a politically less threatening antidote to the leftism that had contributed to the social chaos of the preceding decade.

It has been argued that "the rural and pious masses of Anatolia remained largely unaffected by the cultural re-engineering" of Kemalism,²¹ and that Turkey has remained a "torn" society *a la* Huntington. The wider "democratization" and opening up of social, economic, and political life in Turkey after 1983 reinforced this "center-periphery" encapsulation of Turkish politics and society. Turkey's increased pluralism has enabled its more devout and conservative provincial hinterland to challenge the Kemalist, secular, "Westernizing" and urban center.²² This ideological rift has been reinforced by the ascendance of a more traditional, pious Anatolian business and professional class. The Gulen movement also profited from this post-1980 liberalization, which created a space for its media, educational, and financial activities free from the control of the statist secular establishment and which was accompanied by, and contributed to, a more general "Islamization" of Turkish public life.²³

Turkey's "new" class of businessmen, professionals, teachers, and intellectuals form the core of the Fethullahci. This middle class profile is not quite coincident with the newly-urbanized working class or the rural poor who provide the backbone of the AKP's electoral support. Gulen followers range from extremely pious individuals--

often teachers and preachers and those engaged in the movement's dialogue activities, who are inspired by the Islamic principle of *hizmet*, and whose lives are dedicated to the propagation of the values and ideas of Fethullah Gulen--to the more occasional and more pragmatic sympathizers, such as businessmen, politicians, journalists, and increasingly even officials of the supposedly secular Kemalist state. Collectively, these might be regarded as Gulen's "Golden Generation." The movement's pious activists are inclined towards constant and somewhat uncritical reference to Gulen's writings. Such "true believers" can convey the impression of "cultism,"²⁴ and can perhaps be likened to early Christian sects, certainly in their motivation but perhaps also in their spontaneity.

There seems little reason to doubt the debt of the movement's business backers to Gulen's philosophy, the sincerity of their Islamic approach to their wider social and moral obligations, their desire to please God, and their voluntarism. *Zakat* is one of the five pillars of Islam, and obliges Muslims to donate 2.5 percent of their wealth to worthy causes. *Sadaqa*, or voluntary charity, can inspire the wealthy to donate in excess of this minimum. Many rich Gulen sympathizers do indeed donate a large percentage of their personal wealth, as expressions of their commitment. Businessmen, typically forming tightly-knit circles drawn from a particular town or locality and whose relationships rely heavily on mutual trust, donate--in money or in kind--to the building of schools and the like as acts of Islamic charity. Such "giving" might also bring a commercial return in the form of contracts or "profits" from a venture's revenue-raising capacity,²⁵ although the general principle is that ventures should be self-financing and that any surplus funds be ploughed back.

Initially benefitting from some protective cover from Prime Minister Turgut Ozal, reckoned to be a sympathizer, the movement has since gone on to open around 200

schools in Turkey since its first was established in 1982, universities such as Fatih in Istanbul, hospitals, charities, a television channel (Samanyolu TV)--which now has plans to broadcast to the Turkish community in Germany--a radio station (Burc FM), a mass-circulation daily newspaper (*Zaman*)--which in addition to its online English-language edition also publishes elsewhere in the Turkic world such as Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Bashkortostan in the Russian Federation--and several other periodicals. In 1996 it established a bank, Asya Finans, operating on the basis of Islamic principles such as interest-free banking and initially tasked to raise investment funds for the newly-independent Turkic republics. Its activities are now extensive and global. The network also spawned a Journalists and Writers Foundation (<http://www.gyv.org.tr/>), largely to facilitate dialogue activities, and a Teachers Foundation, each of which publishes journals and organizes symposiums and conferences--frequently abroad--and provides an umbrella for a host of dialogue groups and charitable organizations.

Cooperation between and overlapping membership of these various institutions is extensive and confusing--largely because Gulen-inspired institutions rarely own up to that fact. The websites of its schools, universities, media outlets, charities, and dialogue groups almost never directly refer to Gulen's inspiration. To offer just a few examples, one searches in vain for any sign either of Gulen's inspiration or of any notable religious focus on the website of the Gulen-sourced Virginia International University in the United States (<http://www.viu.edu>), or of the Dialogue Society that hosted this author in Istanbul, or of *Zaman* newspaper, or of Fatih University in Istanbul (<http://www.fatih.edu.tr>), or of the Confederation of Businessmen and Industrialists in Turkey (TUKSON) (<http://www.tukson.org>), or of charities such as Kimse Yok Mu (<http://www.kimseyokmu.org.tr>). Yet all are

part of the Gulen network. This explains why estimates of the number of schools and other educational institutions run by the movement can vary, though a figure of around 500 establishments within and beyond Turkey probably represents a conservative estimate.

Furthermore, the movement is loosely structured and decentralized, and each of its ventures are individually financed (and usually self-financing), and run on a voluntary basis by sympathizers with the network. The movement consists of numerous businessmen's associations, education trusts, and the like--each acting independently. Nor does it have a membership as such, and Fethullahci are often loath to declare themselves openly as such. Indeed, the distinction between members, followers, sympathizers, and collaborators is blurred, and the movement is coy about revealing its scale--which it might not accurately know. As a consequence, estimates of the movement's "membership" vary considerably. One source suggested a figure anywhere between 200,000 and four million Turks.²⁶ More recently, *Prospect* offered a figure of five million. This "structure," or lack of it, raises the question of whether so devolved, publicity-shy and voluntaristic a movement can exhibit the sense of purpose and discipline sometimes attributed to it, but it also adds to the suspicion with which it is regarded.

It is an internet-connected, informal and word-of-mouth set of overlapping networks that is more social movement than organization. It fuses faith with practical activity in a way that empirical and material analysis finds hard to grasp. It is undoubtedly well-resourced, interconnected, effective, and extensive, with tentacles throughout society and sympathizers within the political and bureaucratic elite. Indeed, Gulen sympathizers can increasingly be found in government service. A Turkish interior minister once suggested that as many as 70 percent of the nation's police force are Gulen sympathizers.²⁷ This is the kind of development that aggravates Turkey's

secularists. After all, the judicial case against Gulen in the late 1990s was based on a tape in which he seemed to be urging his followers to take over the state by stealth. This chimes with the mission with which Gulen's "Golden Generation" is tasked--to re-Islamize society from below. Overall, the impression is of a parallel structure and society that sits uneasily alongside Turkey's officially secular state institutions and ruling elite, providing a silent, amorphous, and ungraspable challenge.

THE GULEN MOVEMENT'S EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES

Overt religious teaching, and even explicit mention of Fethullah Gulen, is generally absent from Gulen educational establishments, both in Turkey and abroad. This is partly explained by the need to tread carefully in the presence of political authorities suspicious of religious (or on occasion for Gulen ventures abroad, foreign) activities. It also reflects Gulen's educational philosophy, which stresses teaching "by example" and the cultivation of "good behavior" rather than religious devotion. In any case, matters of faith can be left to extra-curricula classes and the "mentoring" system, conducted by a teaching staff invariably made up of Gulen devotees. Gulen schools everywhere abide by local curricula, and both in Turkey and abroad they are immensely popular due to the strong reputation they have acquired for the quality of their technical and scientific teaching, for their English language instruction, and the high behavioral standards they set. This is true too of Gulen schools that serve the West's Turkish communities.²⁸ As a result, fees and entrance requirements are usually high, although schemes are sometimes in place for assisting able but poorer children.

Around half of Gulen schools are located abroad, and of those the majority are found in Turkic Central Asia and Azerbaijan, where there are also half a dozen Gulen-sponsored universities and numerous other educational, welfare, and economic

institutions and activities. Indeed, the movement's focus is on Turkic communities, including those of the Russian Federation such as Dagestan, Karachay-Cherkessia, Tatarstan, and Bashkortostan, and other former Soviet states containing Turkic or formerly Ottoman Muslim minorities such as Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova, and in the Balkans. One can readily see why the movement targeted Turkic Central Asia and Azerbaijan for the main thrust of its activities. After all, many in Turkey's political class made a similar assessment of Turkish prospects in the region in the immediate aftermath of the Soviet collapse.²⁹ It shares a linguistic and ethnic root with Turkey, and a "folk Islam" that, as in Turkey, incorporates numerous Sufi sects and has absorbed pre-Islamic traditions, beliefs, and rituals. Furthermore, the Soviet era left behind a legacy of secular education and a commitment to science and modernity that broadly corresponds with the Gulen movement's aspirations.³⁰

The movement's activities in the wider Turkic world are additionally explained by its "commitment to Gulen's Turko-Islamic worldview."³¹ As one observer has expressed it, "...the followers of the Gulen community aspire to reconnect Central Asians with their Turkic origins by spreading Turkish Muslim culture and morality to that region."³² Even in Iraq, the Gulen schools' pupils are usually ethnic Turkmen, although Iraq's Turkmen are predominantly Shi'a rather than Sunni.³³ Interestingly, Gulen has claimed that his movement was denied permission to open a school in an Azeri (Turkic) region of Iran due to Tehran's suspicion of its pan-Turkic aspirations.³⁴ Indeed, there may have been a greater receptivity to the "Turkism" of Gulen establishments located in Turkic regions rather than to their Islam.³⁵ Turkish is used extensively, in addition to local languages where necessary. Furthermore, the overwhelming majority of the teachers and administrators in the movement's institutions abroad are Turks from Turkey rather than locals,³⁶ although this could change as the

movement spawns indigenous Gulen devotees.

As the movement has matured, so it appears to have shifted from its Turco-centrism to "global educational activities that encourage the national identities of the countries in which it is operating."³⁷ Today, Gulen schools and other educational establishments are globally far-flung, and can be found in locations as diverse as Russia, Armenia, the United States, Australia, China, Cambodia, sub-Saharan Africa, India, Pakistan, and in Western countries where Turkish minorities are located, notably Germany. The intake of Gulen schools is mostly, though not exclusively, aimed at local Muslim populations. Interestingly though, even in decidedly non-Turkic countries such as India and in African states, portraits of Atatürk are on show, Turkish is taught, and the Turkish national anthem sung. Again, the Turkishness of Gulen schools seems more evident than their Islamism. This emphasis on Turkish language and culture has even won over some of the usually suspicious representatives of Turkey's secularist political class.³⁸ Some Gulen schools do not even have a majority Muslim intake, and might be located in zones of interreligious strife. Thus, in the Philippines, in an area where the denominational split between Muslims and Christians is roughly half and half, a Gulen school employs many Filipino teachers (some of whom are Christian) and admits many Christian students. Furthermore, and in keeping with the movement's commitment to interfaith dialogue, strong and healthy links are maintained with nearby Christian institutions. Even in Central Asia, non-Muslim students might be granted admission to Gulen establishments.³⁹

INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

Tracing the range of interfaith activities of the Gulen movement is difficult, given its devolved nature and its coy approach to self-publicity. The movement has sponsored or

contributed to a confusing diversity of often overlapping interfaith organizations that operate both at the global or transnational and at the local intrasocietal level. Unsurprisingly, the Gulen movement is seen by many non-Muslims as a particularly congenial Islamic dialogue partner. Amongst the numerous U.S.-based Gulen organizations are the Institute of InterFaith Dialog (<http://www.interfaithdialog.org>) and the InterFaith Cultural Organization (<http://www.uga.edu/ifco>). The movement takes the credit for organizing the Inter-Civilization Dialogue Conference in 1997, and in 1998, it initiated the annual Eurasian Meetings, focusing on Central Asia and Russia. It also claims to have provided the inspiration for the European Union Organization of Islamic Conference summit in Istanbul in 2002, in the wake of the September 11 attacks.⁴⁰ In Turkey it has brought together leaders of the three Abrahamic religious communities, and initiated dialogues with Kurds and Alevis. Its activists and offices in Turkey have been subjected to threats and violent attacks in reaction to such endeavors. Another method adopted by the movement as a means of interfaith dialogue is the so-called *Iftar*, or fast-breaking, meals, which bring together peoples of different faiths and communities. These enable a more low-key and localized approach to interfaith and intercommunal understanding, not least to address the more local ramifications of global interfaith tension.⁴¹

Since its formation in 2007, the Intercultural Dialogue Center (Kurturler Arasi Diyalog Merkezi, KADIM) (<http://www.gyv.org.tr>) has functioned as a kind of clearing house for much of the movement's dialogue activity. It brings together a range of other dialogue platforms, such as the Abant Platform of the Journalists and Writers Foundations, the Intercultural Dialogue Platform, and the Dialogue Eurasia Platform. In its various meetings, conferences, panels, publications, and other fora, these platforms seek to propagate Gulen's advocacy of tolerance and

modernity, and bring together intellectuals, writers, activists, and others to discuss a wide range of current issues--some of them domestic. For example, early in 2007 Abant organized a panel in Turkey aimed at encouraging dialogue between the Sunni majority and the Alevi minority. The Platform's first meeting was held in Abant in Turkey in 1998, but in 2004 it held its first annual meeting abroad, in Washington D.C., followed by Brussels and Paris. It was not until February 2007 that it held its first international meeting in the Islamic world, in Egypt.

ASSESSMENT

It is not possible to offer a definitive assessment of the Gulen movement's impact, either in Turkey or abroad. Its activities are too diverse both in their content and context, too devolved, and too disguised. Furthermore, the movement is a "work-in-progress," as it continues to evolve, expand, and influence. Much depends on the perspective one adopts. Certainly in the Turkish context, the more one perceives the movement as a more-or-less hierarchical, disciplined, and "conspiratorial" organization that seeks to penetrate and undermine the Turkish state and society from within, the more one is inclined to adopt an essentially political interpretation of the movement's activities. This is precisely the model of the Gulen movement that many in Turkey's elite hold, and fear. On the other hand, although the movement's lack of transparency and the weakness of its internal democracy and capacity for self-criticism are unsettling, this does not necessarily render it an extremist phenomenon. Neither Gulen nor the movement that takes his name is overtly politicized, and in the absence of hard evidence to the contrary, the movement will seem benign to many--unless of course one is ideologically opposed to challenges to Turkey's existing order, as many in Turkey are, or inherently uneasy about any faith-inspired movement.

A similar inconclusiveness emerges from an analysis of the movement's educational ventures. Although revenues raised by school fees are often used to enable access by less-privileged students, it remains an inescapable fact that the movement's educational model is elitist. In Turkey this is contributing to the creation of a parallel and Gulen-inspired elite. In post-communist Central Asia, the main location of Gulen's overseas educational activities, successful applicants are usually the children either of the wealthy or of government officials.⁴² This has to be appreciated against the background of a collapsed educational, social, and economic infrastructure throughout much of the region. State spending on education has plummeted throughout the region, leading to school closures, a shortage of teachers, a degradation of the physical infrastructure, and widespread corruption surrounding school and college admissions and test results.⁴³ There is scope here for resentment of the "Turkish" schools. Although Gulen schools represent only around ten percent of Central Asia's education system,⁴⁴ it could be that--in a tacit partnership with the Turkish state--the movement's activities will over the longer term intensify the emotive and material bonds between Turkic peoples--or their elites--and states.⁴⁵ The Gulen network's Central Asian elites could in time take on the forms of their Turkish counterparts, thereby encouraging the emergence of a pan-Turkic world linked by overlapping and fused identities. This could in turn ease the development of economic interactions, and even encourage closer state-to-state relationships. Such an evolution would not quite accord with the kind of "Turkish model" that Ankara's secularists have sometimes hoped might be adopted in Central Asia, but it might dovetail with the pan-Turkic aspirations of nationalist elements in Turkey.

However, there are indications that a shared Turkic ethnic and linguistic root might not be sufficient to remove all barriers to a fuller interpenetration. The movement's educational establishments in the region are frequently referred to simply as "Turkish

schools," and at least initially some local inhabitants seem to have resented the speed with which Turkish institutions replaced Soviet/Russian ones after 1991.⁴⁶ Furthermore, there have been indications of a distasteful Turkish chauvinism and "big brother" attitude toward the Turkic peoples of Central Asia. This sense of a "foreign" and intrusive penetration has occasionally combined with a dislike of the perceived missionary self-righteousness of the movement's teachers, whose piety and dedication can grate with more secular, non-believing and frequently dispossessed Central Asians.⁴⁷

In addition, the autocratic secularity of the region's political leaderships, and their post-Soviet sensitivity to anything they perceive as external meddling, puts the Gulen movement's reception in the Turkic world very much at the mercy of the region's governments. During the 1990s, Uzbek President Islam Karimov cracked down on the movement's activities in his country, including a ban on the distribution of *Zaman*. The movement has minimal presence there today. It is unclear whether this was a reaction to the presence in his country of a religious group that he did not control, or whether it indicated retaliation against the Turkish state's harboring of Uzbek opposition leaders.⁴⁸ In 2005, Turkish teaching staff at the Islamic theology school at a university in Turkmenistan was sacked by the country's autocratic leader President Saparmurat Niazov. It seems that the Turkmen regime was becoming increasingly unhappy about both the pan-Turkic and Islamic ideology of the Gulen network in the country.⁴⁹ Beyond former Soviet Central Asia, the Taliban regime terminated the Gulen movement's activities in Afghanistan in the late 1990s owing to its disapproval both of its brand of Islam and of external interference in the country.⁵⁰ Notwithstanding the movement's non-governmental status, incidents such as these can set back Ankara's relations with other states.

Assessments of the movement's educational activities in the non-Turkic world require a different approach. Although Gulen schools retain their elitism, receptivity to their "Turkishness"--the Turkish teachers, the Ataturk portraits, the learning of the Turkish language, and the singing of the Turkish anthem--will of course vary. Perhaps the movement's activities in non-Turkic parts of the world might be likened to the work of the cultural agencies of the major globally-active Western powers such as the United States, the UK, and France. It is unlikely to do harm to Turkey's image and interests abroad, or to the more general cause of global understanding and tolerance. On the other hand, the relative scale of the Gulen movement's presence is so small, and Turkey's broader military, political, technological and economic footprint in such regions so light, that it is hard to see what measurable good it might do either. Yet, again, it might be wise not to rush to judgment. After all, Turkey's global profile and "soft power" is expanding, and the existence of well-educated individuals with a knowledge of and sympathy with Turkish culture might further facilitate it. Perhaps too the movement has matured to the point that "activism through good deeds" is enough.⁵¹

As Gulen schools host a primarily Muslim intake and its media outlets target primarily Muslim audiences, the movement's activities feed into its global contestation over what Islam is and what role it should play. Its message could hardly be more at odds with that brand of Islam typically dubbed "fundamentalist," notwithstanding the ire of commentators such as Rubin.⁵² Gulen's teaching might increase Muslim receptivity to the idea of a Turkish-style fusion of modernity and Islam, and might generate local bulwarks against Islamist fundamentalism. Yet it is in precisely those regions most susceptible to fundamentalist Islamism that resistance to Gulen is at its strongest. In an apparent paradox, the Gulen movement's slightest presence is in the neighboring Arab and Iranian Muslim worlds. This is explained by

its occasionally dismissive attitude towards the practice of Islam in these countries,⁵³ and by its pro-Turkic and somewhat anti-Arab attitude. General Arab mistrust of Turkey in particular, external interference in general, and suspicion of alternative forms of Islam, is in any case discouraging. Shi'i Iran's refusal to permit the establishment of (Sunni) Gulen schools in its (Turkic) areas has also ensured that barriers to the Gulen message remain in place. Even so, overtures to the Arab and Iranian worlds occur, and may be intensifying. It appears that Gulen schools can now be found in Egypt, Jordan, Yemen, and Tunisia.⁵⁴

The relative absence of interaction with the Arab and Iranian worlds leads to an observation about the movement's global interfaith activities too. In the present atmosphere, the movement's championing of interfaith and intercivilizational dialogue is surely welcome as an antidote to those who seem determined to prove Huntington right. However, those engaged in interfaith dialogue are preaching largely to the converted--to each other. In a battle for hearts and minds, it is requisite to engage with precisely those variants of Islam that are disproportionately to be found in those areas of the world where the Gulen movement's footprint is at its lightest. Its venture into the Arab world, in the form of a Gulen-inspired Arabic magazine, *Hira*, first published in December 2005,⁵⁵ and occasional meetings with like-minded Egyptian intellectuals, is unlikely to impress the region's radicals. On the other hand, this is a process--not an event--that produces winners and losers. As such, it is not and may never be possible to assess definitively the impact of the Gulen movement's transnational interfaith engagement.

Gulen schools in the West have served to reinforce or preserve Turkish and Muslim identities otherwise vulnerable to dilution as a result of interaction with host societies, although the simultaneous commitment to accommodation to and tolerance of host country customs is strong.⁵⁶ Whether such impulses are compatible is a moot point, of

course. Overall though, the emphasis placed on integration in the Gulen's Turkish minority schools in the West, and the contribution to intercommunal relations where Gulen schools serve divided communities, perhaps permit a more positive assessment of the contribution the movement makes to more localized interfaith and intercommunal dialogue and tolerance.

CONCLUSION

The Gulen movement eludes definition. Deeply Turkish, it is globally engaged. It is apolitical, yet constitutes an existential political threat to Turkey's officially secularist order, not least through its penetration of the state's machinery. It is opposed by the Kemalist state, yet it enhances Turkey's "soft power," its external trade, and its pan-Turkic links. It provides a challenge both to harsher forms of Islam and to those suspicious of any faith-based, and especially Islam-inspired, phenomena. Espousing democracy and openness, it remains secretive and publicity-shy. Spiritually based, it is extremely wealthy. It is a "cult" of sorts, yet it is becoming increasingly mainstream. More a unifying set of values than an organization perhaps, its tentacles expand relentlessly nevertheless. It may over-reach itself, but it is a "work-in-progress," metamorphosing as it grows. Along with other faith-inspired political and social movements, it is changing Turkey's profile and will continue to do so. Turkey's assertively secularist elite are right to be concerned.

**Bill Park is a Senior Lecturer in the Defence Studies Department, King's College, London University.*

NOTES

¹ Quoted in Robert Tait, "Islamic Scholar Voted World's No. 1 Thinker," *The Guardian*, June 23, 2008. The poll results can be found at <http://www.prospect-magazine.co.uk>.

² Tom Nuttall, "How Gulen Triumphed," *Prospect*, July 2008.

³ For example, see "Court Documents Shed Light on CIA Illegal Operations in Central Asia Using Islam & Madrassas," http://www.libertyforum.org/showflat.php?Cat=&Board=news_news&Number=296370649 (accessed August 24, 2008).

⁴ For details of the allegations against Gulen, see Elizabeth Ozdalga, "Redeemer or Outsider? The Gulen Community in the Civilizing Process," *The Muslim World*, Vol. 95, No. 3 (July 2005), pp. 439-40.

⁵ "Court of Appeals Clears Gulen of All Allegations," *Today's Zaman*, June 26, 2008.

⁶ "Global Muslim Networks: How Far They Have Travelled," *The Economist*, March 8, 2008.

⁷ Michael Rubin, "Turkey's Turning Point: Could There Be an Islamic Revolution in Turkey?" April 14, 2008, <http://www.meforum.org/article/1882> (accessed May 7, 2008).

⁸ In Alexandra Hudson, "Turkish Islamic Preacher--Threat or Benefactor?" Reuters UK, May 14, 2008, <http://www.uk.reuters.com/article/featuresNews/idUKL0939033920080514?pageNumber=3&virtualBrandChannel=0> (accessed August 6, 2008).

⁹ For an analysis of the movement's external activities, see Bill Park, "The Fethullah Gulen Movement as a Transnational Phenomenon," in *Muslim World in Transition: Contributions of the Gulen Movement* (Leeds: Leeds Metropolitan University Press, October 2007), pp. 46-59.

¹⁰ "St. Petersburg Turkish College Wins Case, Resumes Services," *Today's Zaman*, August 24, 2008; Geraldine Fagan, "Russia: Said Nursi Ban Brands Moderate Muslims as Extremist," *Forum 18*, June 27, 2007, reproduced in *World Wide Religious News (WWRN)*, <http://www.wwrn.org/article.php?idd=25508&sec=33&cont=7> (accessed August 24, 2008).

¹¹ "Court Orders U.S. to Reverse Immigration Decision for Prominent Turkish Religious

Leader,” *International Herald Tribune*, July 18, 2008.

¹² For comment on this, see Ahmet T. Kuru, “Changing Perspectives on Islamism and Secularism in Turkey: The Gulen Movement and the AK Party,” in *Muslim World in Transition*, pp. 140-51.

¹³ Articles, speeches, interviews, etc. by Fethullah Gulen can be found at the movement’s website at <http://www.fgulen.org>. The website also reproduces online *Muslim World in Transition*; and *Peaceful Co-Existence: Fethullah Gulen’s Initiatives in the Contemporary World* (Leeds: Leeds Metropolitan University Press, November 2007). This passage represents a distillation from these sources. For further reading, also see M. Hakan Yavuz and John L. Esposito (eds.), *Turkish Islam and the Secular State: The Gulen Movement* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2003); Robert A. Hunt and Yuksel A. Aslandogan (eds.), *Muslim Citizens of the Globalized World: Contributions of the Gulen Movement* (Somerset, NJ: The Light, Inc. and IID Press, 2006); *The Muslim World*, Vol. 95, No. 3 (July 2005): Special Issue; *Islam in Contemporary Turkey: the Contributions of Fethullah Gulen*, <http://www.fethullahgulen.org/press-room/islam-in-contemporary-turkey.html>; W. Jefferson West II, “Religion as Dissident Politics? Geopolitical Discussions Within the Recent Publications of Fethullah Gulen,” *Geopolitics*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (2006), pp. 280-99; Bulent Aras and Omer Caha, “Fethullah Gulen and His Liberal ‘Turkish Islam’ Movement,” *Middle East Review of International Affairs (MERIA)*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (December 2000), pp. 30-42, <http://meria.idc.ac.il/journal/2000/issue4/aras-caha.pdf>.

¹⁴ M. Hakan Yavuz, “The Gulen Movement: The Turkish Puritans,” in Yavuz and Esposito (eds.), *Turkish Islam and the Secular State*, p. 45.

¹⁵ A term used by Bekim Agai, p. 50, in “The Gulen Movement’s Islamic Ethic of Education,” in Yavuz and Esposito (eds.), *Turkish Islam and the Secular State*, pp. 48-

68. For Gulen’s approach to education, see also Thomas Michel, “Fethullah Gulen as Educator,” in Yavuz and Esposito (eds.), *Turkish Islam and the Secular State*, pp. 69-84; and Yuksel A. Aslandogan and Muhammed Cetin, “The Educational Philosophy of Gulen in Thought and Practice,” in Hunt and Aslandogan (eds.), *Muslim Citizens of the Globalized World*, pp. 31-54.

¹⁶ For more on this, see Mustafa Gokcek, “Fethullah Gulen and Sufism: A Historical Perspective,” in Hunt and Aslandogan (eds.), *Muslim Citizens of the Globalized World*, pp. 165-75; Thomas Michel, “Sufism and Modernity in the Thought of Fethullah Gulen,” *The Muslim World*, Vol. 95, No. 3 (July 2005), pp. 341-58; Zeki Saritoprak, “Fethullah Gulen: A Sufi in His Own Way,” in Yavuz and Esposito (eds.), *Turkish Islam and the Secular State*, pp. 156-69; M. Hakan Yavuz, “Is There a Turkish Islam? The Emergence of Convergence and Consensus,” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (October 2004), pp. 213-32.

¹⁷ Elizabeth Ozdalga, “The Hidden Arab: A Critical Reading of the Notion of ‘Turkish Islam’,” *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 4 (July 2006), pp. 551-70.

¹⁸ The November 2007 Rotterdam conference proceedings offer many insights into Gulen’s thinking on this. See *Peaceful Co-existence*. See also Zeki Sarotoprak and Sidney Griffith, “Fethullah Gulen and the ‘People of the Book’: A Voice from Turkey for Interfaith Dialogue,” *The Muslim World*, Vol. 95, No. 1 (July 2005), pp. 329-40; Paul Weller, “Fethullah Gulen, Religions, Globalization and Dialogue,” in Hunt and Aslandogan (eds.), *Muslim Citizens of the Globalized World*, pp. 75-88.

¹⁹ Richard Penaskovic, “Fethullah Gulen’s Response to the ‘Clash of Civilizations’ Thesis,” *Muslim World in Transition*, pp. 407-18.

²⁰ For the factors behind the movement’s emergence, see Mustafa Akyol, “What Made the Gulen Movement Possible?” *Muslim World in Transition*, pp. 22-32.

²¹ Omer Taspiner, "The Old Turks' Revolt: When Radical Secularism Endangers Democracy," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 86, No. 6 (November-December 2007), p. 118.

²² This conceptualization of Turkish politics was first enunciated by Serif Mardin, "Centre-Periphery Relations: A Key to Turkish Politics?" *Daedalus*, Vol. 102, No. 1 (1973).

²³ Nilufer Narli, "The Rise of the Islamist Movement in Turkey," *MERIA*, Vol. 3, No. 3, (September 1999), pp. 38-48, <http://meria.idc.ac.il/journal/1999/issue3/narli.pdf>.

²⁴ For a consideration of the movement as a "cult," see Muhammed Cetin, "The Gulen Movement: Its Nature and Identity," *Muslim World in Transition*, pp. 377-90.

²⁵ For an insight into Gulen's funding, see Helen Rose Ebaugh and Dogan Koc, "Funding Gulen-Inspired Good Works: Demonstrating and Generating Commitment to the Movement," in *Muslim World in Transition*, pp. 539-51.

²⁶ Aras and Caha, "Fethullah Gulen and His Liberal 'Turkish Islam' Movement," p. 33.

²⁷ See "A Farm Boy on the World Stage," *The Economist*, March 8, 2008.

²⁸ For example, by the Wisdom school in north London, visited by this author.

²⁹ See Idris Bal, *Turkey's Relations with the West and the Turkic Republics: The Rise and Fall of the "Turkish Model"* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000).

³⁰ Yavuz, "The Gulen Movement: The Turkish Puritans," pp. 39-40.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

³² Bema Turam, "National Loyalties and International Undertakings: The Case of the Gülen Community in Kazakhstan," in Yavuz and Esposito (eds.), *Turkish Islam and the Secular State*, p. 187.

³³ Bayram Balci, "Fethullah Gulen's Missionary Schools in Central Asia and Their Role in the Spreading of Turkism and Islam," *Religion, State & Society*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (2003), p. 156.

³⁴ Hasan Kosebalaban, "The Making of Enemy and Friend: Fethullah Gulen's National Security Identity," in Yavuz and Esposito

(eds.), *Turkish Islam and the Secular State*, pp. 179-80.

³⁵ Balci, "Fethullah Gulen's Missionary Schools," p. 153; Bema Turam, "A Bargain Between the Secular State and Turkish Islam: Politics of Ethnicity in Central Asia," *Nations and Nationalism*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (2004), pp. 353-74.

³⁶ Bayram Balci, "Central Asia: Fethullah Gulen's Missionary Schools," *ISIM Newsletter*, Vol. 9, No. 2, April 11, 2003, http://www.religioscope.com/info/articles/007_fetullahci (accessed March 19, 2007).

³⁷ Agai, "The Gulen Movement's Islamic Ethic of Education," p. 63.

³⁸ "CHP Deputies: Turkish Schools Abroad Are a Source of Pride," *Today's Zaman*, March 21, 2007.

³⁹ Michel, "Fethullah Gulen as Educator," pp. 69-84.

⁴⁰ Kosebalaban, "The Making of Enemy and Friend," pp. 181-82.

⁴¹ For a consideration of the Singaporean example, see Muhammad Nawab Osman, "Gulen's Contribution to a Moderate Islam in Southeast Asia," in *Muslim World in Transition*, pp. 334-46.

⁴² Balci, "Fethullah Gulen's Missionary Schools," pp. 164-65; Kevin Miller Jr., "Islam in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan: The Nurcu Movement," *The Eurasian World*, December 23 2003, http://www.amerAsianworld.com/islam_in_kazakhstan (accessed March 19, 2007).

⁴³ Iveta Silova, Mark S. Johnson, and Stephen P. Heyneman, "Education and the Crisis of Social Cohesion in Azerbaijan and Central Asia," *Comparative Education Review*, Vol. 51, No. 2 (May 2007), pp. 159-80.

⁴⁴ Jean-Christophe Peuch, "Turkey: Fethullahci Schools--A Greenhouse for Central Asian Elites?" June 8, 2004, <http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticleprint/2004/06/413c394a-c79a-438> (accessed March 19 2007).

⁴⁵ Balci, "Fethullah Gulen's Missionary Schools," pp. 166-67.

⁴⁶ Peuch, "Turkey."

⁴⁷ Miller, "Islam in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan."

⁴⁸ Aras and Caha, "Fethullah Gulen and His Liberal 'Turkish Islam' Movement," p. 28; Balci, "Fethullah Gulen's Missionary Schools," pp. 155-57; Peuch, "Turkey."

⁴⁹ Institute for War and Peace Reporting, London, "Clampdown on Islamic Teaching in Turkmenistan," *Reporting Central Asia*, No. 401, August 4, 2005.

⁵⁰ Ahmet T. Kuru, "Globalization and Diversification of Islamic Movements: Three Turkish Cases," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 120, No. 2 (2005), p. 262.

⁵¹ Elizabeth Ozdalga, "Secularizing Trends in Fethullah Gulen's Movement: Impasse or Opportunity for Further Renewal?" *Critical Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (Spring 2003), pp. 61-73.

⁵² Rubin, "Turkey's Turning Point." For globally competing approaches to Islam, see Joshua D. Hendrick, "The Regulated Potential of Kinetic Islam: Antitheses in Global Islamic Activism," pp. 11-29, in Hunt and Aslandogan (eds.), *Muslim Citizens of the Globalized World*. For an account of the difficulties encountered by Gulen schools in less "moderate" Pakistan, see Sabrina Tavernise, "Turkish Schools Offer Pakistan a Gentler Vision of Islam," *New York Times*, May 4, 2008.

⁵³ West, "Religion as Dissident Politics?" p. 292.

⁵⁴ For an account of the Gulen movement's difficulties elsewhere in the Muslim world, see Ozcan Keles, "Promoting Human Rights Values in the Muslim World: Towards an Inclusive Civilization in Gulen's Thought and Practice," *Muslim World in Transition*, pp. 447-70.

⁵⁵ For more on *Hira*, see Paul L. Heck, "Turkish in the Language of the Qur'an: *Hira*," *Muslim World in Transition*, pp. 643-49.

⁵⁶ Unal Bilir, "'Turkey-Islam': Recipe for Success or Hindrance to the Integration of the Turkish Diaspora Community in Germany?" *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (October 2004), pp. 259-83. Jill Irvine,

"The Gulen Movement and Turkish Integration in Germany" in Hunt and Aslandogan (eds.), *Muslim Citizens of the Globalized World*, pp. 55-74.