

## 2. NONMILITARY SECURITY

# THE ROLE OF THE GÜLEN MOVEMENT IN SOCIAL AND POLITICAL LIFE IN TURKEY BEFORE THE FAILED COUP ATTEMPT IN 2016

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### ABSTRACT

The main purpose of this paper is to show the role of the Hizmet movement led by Fethullah Gülen in the public life in Turkey before the failed coup attempt of 15 July, 2016. The leader of this group was a former ally of the Turkish president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and one of the country's most powerful person in the country. The present study investigated whether the movement threatened democracy and security in Turkey or it helped to strengthen it? The implementation of the article will bring important findings on the relationship between religion and politics.

### KEY WORDS

Islam, Turkey, Security, Religion, Politics.

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## Introduction

The July 15, 2016, became a crucial moment in the modern history of the Turkish Republic. At that time a group of soldiers were trying to overthrow the legal elected President of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Soon after the Turkish government blamed the unsuccessful coup attempt on Islamist movement Hizmet led by Fethullah Gülen. At the beginning of the XX century a leader of this group led a significant role in the public life of this country. It helped elect Erdoğan and his AK Party (Justice and Development Party), increase their representation in many public institutions in the Turkey among others in police, judiciary and military. According to opposition, Gülen, in co-

operation with the AKP, sought to Islamise Turkey and restore the relationship between religion and the state, which existed in the Ottoman era. Gülen's supporters disagree with these accusations. They claim that the movement has no political aspirations and supports the separation of the state from the religious life. Through dialogue and tolerance, they contribute to the strengthening of democratic institutions in the country and Turkey's economic development. So what is the role of the Gülen movement in public life in Turkey? Does it threaten democracy and security in Turkey or, on the contrary, contributes to its consolidation?

## Historical Background

Fethullah Gülen was born in the eastern part of Turkey in 1941. He grew up in the conservative family. His career as a preacher began in Izmir, which is considered as a bastion of secularism in Turkey. The fame of the teacher (Hocaefendi) brought him lectures, which he conducted in schools, mosques, but also in public places such as cafés and traditional teehouses (Cajtane). In the 1970s, a group of his sympathizers began to meet regularly in homes and flats called "Light Houses" (Isik Evleri). In 1971, the Turkish authorities considered that Gülen activities constitute a threat to the state and arrested him for several months. After release from the prison, Gülen received support from the authorities in building up his organization. In 1978, his movement established the first studio centres (Dersane) to prepare students for the entrance exams for higher education. A year later, he began to publish a journal "Sizinti", which promoted synthesis of knowledge about Islam. Also, in his media – mainly video and cassette tapes – he expressed his support of the military regime, referred to the Islamic traditions, and criticised leftists and Iran (Yılmaz, Weller, Barton, 2013; Ebaugh, 2014).

The movement flourished after another military coup in 1980. At that time the military authorities considered that the movement no longer poses a threat to the state and allowed them to promote the Turkish-Islamic synthesis of the state. Private schools called "houses of light" run by Gülen's supporters gained the status of state educational institutions. Moreover, thanks to the intercession of the authorities, the number of Gülen schools started to grow. In the 80's and 90's there were already 150 private schools and 150 dersanes in the country. Also, the liberalisation of public life in Turkey allowed the movement to make ef-

forts to spread its activities abroad, mainly in the post-communist countries in the Balkans and the post-Soviet republics in the Central Asia. At the same time, Gülen distanced himself from radical Islamists. He supported a military coup in 1997 that led to the collapse of the pro-Islamic government of Necmetin Erbakan – an advocate of rapprochement with Arab states and an opponent of Turkey's integration with the European Union (EU) (Ali Saleem, 2017).

The relations between the state and the Gülen movement reached its contentious apex in 1998. The national-secular establishment began to treat the movement as a threat. They started to consider schools run by Gülenists as a pro-Islamic and radical institutions. Gülen, accused of attempting to build the foundations of the Islamic government, decided emigrated to the United States. Officially, he left the country due to health reasons. The state security tribunal issued a Gülen arrest warrant, and the prosecutor's office accused him of inciting his followers to overthrow the Turkish government. Despite this, the authorities did not seek extradition. Gülen was tried in absentia in 2000, acquitted in 2006.

During his stay in US, Gülen continued to maintain close contacts with Turkey. His movement was constantly developing. At the beginning of the 20th century there were over 500 Gülen schools around the world (half of them were outside of Turkey). The Gülen movement also had its own universities, a large network of non-governmental organizations and media (among others Fez media group, which includes the Turkish daily Zaman, Sizinti magazine, Nowa Umit, Fontanna, Samanyol TV, Mehtap, Ebru English satellite channel TV based in New Jersey, or Burc FM radio station). Gülen's empire also included hotels and the banks such as Asya, Cihan Haber Ajansı (Ali Saleem, 2017).

## Assumptions of Hizmet Movement

On religious issues, Gülen was an advocate of moderate Islam. He condemned fundamentalism and religious fanaticism, believes that religion is a private matter, and its requirements should not be imposed on anyone. He opposed the implementation of a Koranic law in a state along the lines of Iran or Saudi Arabia. Its philosophy was based primarily on dialogue and tolerance. It is strongly focused on love for one's neighbour, positive thinking or charity. Regarding this matter, many researchers say that Gülen was inspired by the philosophy of the Sufi poet and mystic Mevlan Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Rumi. Others even suppose that within his movement he created a neo-sufi Tariqat. Despite this, Gülen denies that he has ever belonged to the Sufic Order and has no relations with the members of this movement. However, he believes that Sufism is an integral part of Islam and praises the members of Sufism for being spiritual leaders of Islam and have shown generations of Muslims how to follow the path to human perfection.

One of the fundamental pillars of Gülen's philosophy was also education. His main goal was to create a "golden generation of Muslims" who will be successful in many parts of the Muslim world (Hendrick: 2013). The Gülen schools used to play a key role in this process. Students were to acquire modern knowledge that would allow them to develop their skills and climb the career ladder. The curriculum of these schools was based on principles such as piety, kindness, honesty and diligence. It dissociates itself from extreme nationalistic ideology. However, it is not devoid of nationalistic elements – it promotes Turkishness in a moderate way. Gülen's schools do not spread proselitism either – religion

is taught once a week, and in some cases almost never at all.

Moreover, Gülen also sees a strong need of democratisation of Turkey. He claimed that, despite the many drawbacks, democracy is now the only possible system and that people should try to modernise and consolidate democratic institutions in order to build a society where individual rights and freedoms will be respected and protected, where equal opportunities for all will be more than just a dream. Believes that, standards of democracy and justice in Turkey must be raised to the level of Western countries (Gülen: 2004). Gülen was also open to the liberal economy. He encouraged his members to become involved in capitalist activities. However, it warns its members against excessive, empty materialism. This pro-business attitude makes some researchers perceive the Gülen movement as an Islamic version of Calvinism (Softic, 2014).

## Supporters of Gülen

In relatively very short time Gülen's ideas became very popular in the country. It is estimated that there were about 7 million supporters of the Gülen movement all over the world. Among his supporters were large people who saw the need to restore the greatness of the Ottoman Empire in Turkey, the so-called Ottoman-Nostalgic people. Also, he was popular among the conservative Turks, by those who were rejected by the secularists or by minorities such as Alevis or Kurds, who had been subject to discrimination for years. Gülen also convinced a large number of Turkish businessmen, often referred to in Turkey as "Anatolian Tigers" or "Green Capital", who made their fortunes during the economic boom of the 1980s. Thanks to their help the movement gained financial support in the development of its activities (Pitel, 2017).

His supporters include also many members of the AK Party, which has been in power in Turkey continuously since 2002. It is estimated that half of them identify with Gülen's ideas. The President of Turkey, Abdullah Gul and the Turkish Foreign Minister Davutoglu were considered to be the biggest supporters of Gülen (MacLean, 2014). Recep Erdoğan, the Prime Minister of Turkey, was also credited with strong ties with the Gülen movement. However, he belonged to the more conservative wing in the AKP. As a student of the Islamic school *imam hatip* he represented more conservative position in social and religious matters. Also, he admired panislamic movement such as Muslim Brothers and tried to postpone democratic reforms in Turkey.

Despite these differences, Erdoğan derives significant political benefits from cooperation with Gülen. In the country, Gülen's media have consolidated positive image of Erdoğan. Abroad, however, they presented him as a democrat and moderate Muslim. In addition, Gülen's schools and organisations support the Turkish government's efforts to expand Turkey's influence in the world. In the USA, for example, the Gülen movement was Turkey's strongest lobby.

The cooperation between the Gülen movement and Erdogan was also related to home affairs. Turkish opposition claimed that both of them seek to restrict freedom of expression and marginalise the role of the opposition in public life. One of the victims of this policy could be Nedim Sener, a reporter of the *Milliyet* daily, who in his publications showed the backstage of cooperation between the AKP and Gülenists. Another well-known reporter detained by the police was Ahmet Şık, a journalist from the "Radikal" magazine, who prepared his book on the activities of the Gülenists under the title "Imamin Ordus" (Imam Army).

## Tensions Between Erdoğan and Gülen

Despite the common interests between allies, tensions between Gülen and Erdoğan became more and more frequent. Particularly the Kurdish issue caused a difference of opinion. The Gülen movement was in favour of a peaceful solution of this problem. They believed that education of Kurdish people will help to integrate with Turkish society. For that purpose, movement sponsored free scientific centres that provide tutoring to poor students of Kurdish origin from rural areas or ghettos in large cities. Gülen also urged the government to implement the rights of the Kurdish people according to European Union standards. He also claimed that the Kurds have the right to teach their mother tongue in state schools. Moreover, journalists and writers associated with the movement (e.g. GYV Civic Foundation) proposed the introduction of Turkish-Kurdish education in the draft new constitution. Some of members of the Gülen movement (including journalists associated with the daily "Zaman") suggested even to release the leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), Abdullah Öcalan, and put him under house arrest. However, on the Kurdish issue, Erdoğan took a much more conservative stance. He was much less inclined to make concessions on this issue (Babahan, 2011).

The conflict of interests between Gülenists and Erdoğanists can also be seen in foreign policy matters. Gülen was a strong supporter of Turkey's full membership of the European Union (EU). He claimed that membership will bring many benefits to both Turkey and the EU. This position he promotes in media, and thus strengthen pro-EU sentiments among Turkish society. Also, he advocated close cooperation with the United States and Israel. Erdoğan, on

the other hand, was in favor of relaxing relations with the United States and Israel. The first tensions between Erdoğan and Gülden on this issue occurred during the Economic Forum in Davos in 2009, during which the Turkish Prime Minister criticized Israeli President, Shimon Peres, for his military operations in Gaza. Once again, the difference in interests between Gülen and Erdoğan was evident shortly after the attack by Israeli soldiers on the "Mavi Marmara" in 2010, which killed nine Turkish citizens. In response, Erdoğan took a firm line towards Israel, expelling the Israeli ambassador and suspending military cooperation. Gülen's acceptance of such action was received critically. He considered that the responsibility for the tragedy also lies with the Turkish authorities, while the ship "Mavi Marmara" should not leave Turkish ports without Israel's consent.

Moreover, Iran became a source of misunderstanding between Gülenists and Erdoğanists. Regarding this issue, Gülen has been very critical of this country. He believed that Iran is a "sick part of Islam" and Turkey's relations with Iran were always problematic and complicated. Moreover, Gülen treated this country as the source of the greatest evil in the Middle East and Central Asia. He pointed out that he is against rapprochement with Iran and advocates that Turkey should effectively limit the country's influence in the region. Erdoğan, on the other hand, took a more moderate stance towards Iran. He was in favour of lifting the sanctions imposed by the EU, Israel and the United States against this country and developing economic cooperation.

It became clear that the cooperation between these groups sooner or later will be broken. Finally, during the presidential election in 2015 financial scandal broke out. Media controlled by Gülen have published disgraceful tapes on which the Turkish

Prime Minister, with the help of his son Bilal, makes illegal financial transactions. However, the corruption scandal did not harm Erdoğan. He was re-elected President and hastily started to reduce the Gülen in the public institutions. Moreover, the Movement has been recognised as a terrorist organisation and all its institutions have been closed. The authorities have also carried out arrests among the leading leaders of the movement. Despite this, many of Hizmet followers still remain in their public positions, among others at universities, judiciary or police. Erdoğan, however, despite his strong position in the country was still unable to carry out a legal purge that would have allowed him to take full control of the state institutions. The situation has changed until the failed putsch of 2016. The government blamed the coup attempt on Gülenists and undertook mass arrests of its members. However, the question of whether Gülen was really responsible for organisation of the failed coup remains open.

## Conclusions

The Hizmet movement led by the Gülen is a synthesis of Islam, nationalism and social conservatism. It is strongly rooted in the tradition of the Anatolian countryside, above all in Sufism. Since the last two decades the movement gained popularity among Turkish people thanks to the Neo-Ottoman revival in public and cultural life. Despite the apolitical assurances of the Hizmet leaders, it does not lack political ambition. Its members have been active in many spheres of social life. They supported each other and played an increasingly important role in police, army, education or judiciary. However, they do not seem to have sought to transform Turkey into an Islamic country like Iran. On the contrary, they tried to limit the influence of radical

Islam both at home and abroad. They were keen supporters of Turkey's political transformation. Their aim was also to limit the role of the secular establishment. In order to achieve this goal, Hizmet followers could use some undemocratic measures. In foreign policy, however, the Hizmet movement was in favour of maintaining close relations with the United States and Israel. It was trying to strengthen the pro-European course in Turkish society and limit Iran's role in the Middle. In order to implement all these principles in foreign and domestic policy, it has established close cooperation with the Prime Minister of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. However, it ended tragically for the movement as a whole. Erdoğan had a completely different vision of Turkey, and wanted to take full control of the power apparatus. He decided to gradually reduce the role of the movement in public life. Finally, the purges in the power apparatus took place after the failed coup in 2016. Since then, the Gülen movement in Turkey has practically ceased to exist and its followers in the world have been persecuted and sought after Turkish services.

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