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# The Gülen Movement and Turkish Soft Power

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Article

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For more than a decade, Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) has enjoyed unwavering support from the religious and social movement of Fethullah Gülen, a Turkish Islamic scholar. Through a unique, transnational approach, Gülen and his followers have built up a global web of influence, creating schools, business associations, and cultural institutions on virtually every continent.

This vast network has allowed the Gülen movement to become a global representative of both conservative Islamic values and "Turkishness," spreading the country's language and culture abroad. It has benefitted Turkey by consolidating Turkish soft power and advancing Ankara's interests around the world, all while increasing the Gülen movement's popularity and prestige in both in Turkey and on the international stage.

But over the past few years, cracks have begun to appear in the AKP–Gülen movement alliance, revealing deep tensions and bringing Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan into direct conflict with Fethullah Gülen. Now, these erstwhile allies are locked in a power struggle and on the verge of becoming bitter enemies. And the Gülen movement's robust transnational network of support and influence, once an asset to the AKP, could provide Gülen and his supporters an avenue to confront the Turkish government.

## The Gülen Approach

The Gülen movement is the single most influential socioreligious movement that Turkey has ever seen, but it is certainly not the first. In the 1970s and 1980s, several Turkish Islamic organizations, as well as Alevi and Kurdish associations, took root in Europe, where they almost exclusively addressed the needs of Turkish migrants, providing various educational, cultural, and religious services to help these Turks preserve their religious and cultural identities.

In supporting Turkish migrants, these organizations found themselves working either in conjunction or in competition with the Turkish state, which used its own system of aid to maintain a certain level of control over its expatriate communities. To avoid conflict with Ankara, these private initiatives focused exclusively on improving the lives of Turkish migrants and had no real contact or interaction with the authorities of host countries.

Gülen's movement, which emerged in the international sphere in the early 1990s, took a different approach and adopted a global strategy that set it apart from existing Turkish organizations. Unlike its predecessors, the Gülen movement's ambition from the outset was to move beyond local or expatriate Turks in order to reach and include the entire host society. It did so by establishing a presence in a range of areas—from education to commerce to culture—and creating institutions intended to benefit both members of host communities and Turkish migrants.

In addition, the movement adopted a unique action plan that largely surpassed the religious sphere to which previous organizations had limited themselves. It opted to tailor its strategy to the customs, needs, and expectations of its host countries, determining references to religion and Turkishness on a case-by-case basis according to local sensibilities, the social and ideological environment, and the degree of openness and acceptance encountered on the ground, which may vary within the same country. As a

result, unlike other Turkish Islamic movements, the Gülenists have never sought to build mosques and Islamic schools or to openly preach on Fridays. The Gülen movement refrains from such overtly religious pursuits even in Muslim countries in Central Asia and Africa, and in Europe and the United States its religious nature is almost totally obscured.

For the same reason, the Gülen movement does not participate in the stormy debates on headscarves or the place of Islam in Western societies, even when these subjects polarize European societies with large Islamic communities. To the contrary, Gülen associations in the West seek to forge closer ties with Christian and Jewish organizations than with Islamic organizations. This strategy makes it easier for Gülenists to put down roots in societies that often saddle Islamic entities with negative connotations. It also helps them establish special ties with local political, cultural, and religious figures and with institutions that offer backing and political support for their integration into host communities. Indeed, working with non-Islamic organizations that are well established in a given society often benefits Gülen movement institutions more than trying to cooperate with Turkish religious associations that may enjoy little influence or be competitors.

This strategy has proved effective, adaptable, and easily exported. Host countries have welcomed the Gülen community because it offers institutions and services that benefit local populations without attaching religious strings.

In addition, the movement has won the approval of Turkish diplomats, who have seen Turkey's soft power increase as the Gülen movement finds success in new countries. Gülenists have proved particularly adept at spreading the Turkish language and culture through their educational initiatives, which form the crux of the movement's growing transnational network.

## A Focus on Education

Since its founding, the Gülen movement's primary emphasis has been on education, which plays a central role in its identity and contributes to its increasing power around the world. The movement devotes the largest share of its human and financial resources to the establishment of various educational centers, schools, universities, and campus residence halls.

The Gülen approach to education aptly demonstrates the group's global strategy—Gülen movement schools are open to both Turkish migrants and citizens of host countries, and they avoid advancing a religious agenda. These schools aim to help Turkish migrants succeed in their host societies without losing sight of their Turkish roots, and at the same time they promote social unity by serving the needs of migrants and local students alike. The success of Gülen movement schools stems both from the success of the students (and the satisfaction of the parents) and from the prestige and goodwill they enjoy among local and political authorities for promoting integration and acting as a social mediator.

These schools also afford the Gülen movement sway over host societies. The movement has no contemporary equivalent in the Muslim world in terms of the social influence it wields in educating new elites. Of course, it is difficult to measure the success of its attempts to educate new elites, but the many alumni of Gülen schools enrolled at Turkish as well as American universities—not to mention the fact that a number of these students, after completing their university studies, obtain influential positions at diplomatic or international institutions—suggest that the group's objectives are being met.

Gülen movement schools are often more successful at spreading the tenets of Turkishness, such as the Turkish language and culture, than educational initiatives sponsored by the Turkish government itself. Most Gülen schools are boarding schools, so even outside of classroom hours students are surrounded by their Turkish teachers and tutors. In comparison, the Turkish government—which runs two universities, one in Bishkek and one in Almaty, and a handful of secondary schools—targets older teens and young adults in school or university settings and therefore cannot compete in terms of impact.

The movement's success in this area is fundamental to understanding its influence in Turkey. Gülenists have managed to tap into a sense of Turkish nationalism by spreading the country's language and culture around the world, and this has earned them respect and legitimacy among the Turkish public, well beyond Gülen's followers. Unlike English, Spanish, or even Arabic, Turkish is not a widely spoken language, but the proliferation of Gülen schools has increased the language's prominence and popularity around the world. Even Turks who are secular and rather hostile to Fethullah Gülen have been seen shedding tears of emotion upon hearing the songs of their youth sung in Turkish by Kyrgyz or African children.

And to further win over Turkish public opinion, each year the movement sponsors a Turkish-language Olympiad in Turkey in which students from Gülen schools all over the world compete. Widely covered by

the media, this event advances a positive image of the movement among the Turkish public and political class as much as it promotes the Turkish language and culture.

## The Movement's Central Asian Roots

The efforts and foresight of Gülen's community in putting down strong roots in Central Asia contributed to the remarkable expansion of Turkish influence that has taken place in the Turkic republics of Central Asia since 1991. In fact, the Gülen movement contributes the most to Turkey's soft power in this vital Central Asian region, where Ankara has not been as successful as it had hoped in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse.

The Gülen movement developed alongside the emergence of new nations with populations that spoke either Turkish or another language in the Turkic linguistic family. These countries created for Turkey a potentially natural sphere of influence extending from the Mediterranean to the Chinese border. Central Asia became the first laboratory for the Gülen movement, which seized the historic moment and became massively involved in education, economics, and media in this region.

In a reflection of the movement's larger priorities, the Gülen community has invested heavily in its educational endeavors in Central Asia. Gülen movement schools are helping meet the region's demand for new elites, and they are also spreading Gülen's vision of Turkishness.

The Gülen movement currently runs some 30 primary and secondary schools in Kazakhstan, about fifteen in Kyrgyzstan, at least as many in Azerbaijan, and about ten in Tajikistan. Uzbekistan had more than fifteen Gülen schools until they were completely shut down in 2001 following a general deterioration in Turkish-Uzbek relations for reasons that largely had nothing to do with Gülen schools. In Turkmenistan in 2011, only two of the country's ten Gülen schools survived the Turkmen government's decision to reduce the movement's clout and reform the national public education system. Just outside the region, the Gülen movement also runs four high schools and one university in Georgia.

In addition, Central Asia has several private universities administered by figures who emerged from or are close to the Gülenists. Regardless of their location, these establishments are financially backed by hundreds of small- and medium-sized enterprises whose leaders are influenced to varying degrees by Fethullah Gülen's ideas.

The mission of Gülen schools in Central Asia is exclusively educational. They stress information technology and the sciences, which are taught in English. The social sciences and humanities are taught in vernacular languages, including Russian—still a lingua franca in Central Asia—and Turkish. Selective and elitist, they attract the best students, who are hand-picked and often hail from the highest levels of Central Asian society.

The quality of Gülen movement schools in the region is widely appreciated. The teachers' missionary spirit and dedication have placed Gülen's establishments among the most highly ranked schools in terms of students' success on college entrance exams in Central Asia. Most of their graduates attend the region's leading universities, and some even win scholarships to study in Turkey, Europe, or the United States. As a result, these schools win the trust and support of parents, who are often influential figures in their countries and thus guarantee the schools' continued prestige and the goodwill of Central Asian authorities.

In addition to schools, the Gülen network in Central Asia includes a number of business associations that contribute to the movement's success and increase economic ties between Turkey and the region. In the early 1990s, when Turkey was first discovering Central Asia, businessmen associated with the Gülen movement were already on the ground, striving to develop a whole network of joint ventures. The robust economic ties the Gülen movement created first in Central Asia and then around the world have made it easier for Turkey to open up to foreign countries. Ankara has done so in collaboration with business associations close to Gülen that can provide advice and contacts on the ground thanks to the Gülen schools and companies that are familiar with the terrain.

## Gülenists in Europe

The Gülen movement's success in Central Asia opened the door to other parts of the world, notably Western Europe. Gülen's community, the latest Turkish socioreligious movement to establish itself in the region, is also the most dynamic and best organized. Its activities in a variety of areas, including education, commerce, and culture, place the Gülen movement at the forefront of Turkish activism on the continent.

The Gülen movement's commitment to not flaunting its Islamic identity has been crucial to its success in Europe. Other Turkish movements center their efforts in Europe on Islam, such as the Suleymanci community, which was founded by twentieth-century Islamic scholar Süleyman Tunahan, or Millî Görüş, an organization inspired by Turkish Islamist politician Necmettin Erbakan. They run mosques and provide religious services to Turkish migrants. The Gülen community, by contrast, invests in the management of schools and cultural centers rather than mosques. It also targets an audience that is not limited to Turkish migrants, fostering interaction and the integration of Turks in Europe by opening all of its establishments to anyone without discrimination.

Foremost among these institutions are Gülen movement schools. Entrepreneurs influenced by Gülen's ideas have created private schools throughout Europe. Germany has a dozen of these Gülen private schools, and similar establishments operate in France, Belgium, the Netherlands, and northern Europe. They provide a secular education in accordance with the standards, curricula, and laws established by the authorities of each host country.

The Gülen movement's educational network in Europe also includes hundreds of *dershane*, or private centers that tutor secondary-school students to improve their academic performance and prepare them for university entrance exams. These institutions frequently offer weekend classes to assist vulnerable children from underprivileged social backgrounds, hailing often but not only from Turkish immigrant families. The *dershane* thus make it possible for these vulnerable young people to go to college while simultaneously helping Turkish migrants integrate into their host societies.

In tandem with these educational endeavors, Turkish entrepreneurs and businessmen affiliated with the Gülen movement have organized associations in practically every European country to encourage economic cooperation with Turkey. In France, they have formed the French-Turkish Businessmen Society to foster professional collaboration between entrepreneurs from both nations. Similar organizations exist in the Netherlands and other European countries.

The Confederation of Businessmen and Industrialists of Turkey (TUSKON), an employer organization affiliated with the Gülen movement, has offices around the world, including in Brussels. While less influential than the Turkish Industry and Business Association, a similarly multinational organization that promotes public enterprise but that is decidedly secular, TUSKON is nonetheless conducting successful activism on behalf of Turkish companies. In Europe, it supports small associations of Turkish entrepreneurs that regularly organize meetings, forums, and trips to Turkey, thereby facilitating investments between Europe and Turkey.

In the cultural sphere, the Gülen community in Europe has opened a number of interreligious dialogue centers to promote Turkey and the ideas of Fethullah Gülen. The Plateforme de Paris in France and several similar associations in Germany and Belgium regularly host lectures and debates in which academics, religious figures, politicians, local elected officials, and journalists speak about various subjects. These centers often hold events during Ramadan—particularly fast-breaking evening meals, or *iftar*—as well as dinners and luncheons throughout the year that allow Turks and Europeans to meet, establish ties, and engage in intercultural dialogue. In addition, since 2010 there has been a Fethullah Gülen Chair for Intercultural Studies at the University of Leuven in Belgium whose mission consists of promoting Gülen's ideas through various initiatives, such as conferences and publications.

All told, the Gülen movement's activities in Europe allow it to effectively promote Turkish soft power in the region. This is particularly important to Ankara because Europe—even though it continues to block Turkey's candidacy to the EU—remains Ankara's neighbor and essential partner.

## Complicated Activism in the United States

The presence and activism of the Gülen movement is even more complex and intense in the United States than it is in Europe. This is due in part to the large number of Gülen establishments, but it is also due to the presence of Gülen himself.

Fethullah Gülen arrived in the United States in 1999, ostensibly for health reasons but also to escape a political atmosphere in which the Turkish military was cracking down on various religious groups. Since then, he has been living in Pennsylvania. His choice to live out his self-imposed exile in the United States can be explained by the large number of his followers who were already in America at the time and by the opportunities the country's open, liberal democracy offers to Gülen and his movement to amass influence through powerful lobbying instruments in Washington.

In the United States as elsewhere, Gülenists' primary focus is on education. But the Gülen movement's educational initiatives in the United States have proved more controversial than virtually any of the institutions emanating from or inspired by Gülen's ideas around the world.

There are more than 140 charter schools in the United States, located across the country and especially in Texas, that are linked to the Gülen movement. These charter schools are troubled public schools that have been turned over—some would say sold—to private operators, which may be corporations, associations, churches, or, in the case at hand, companies whose leaders are known for their adherence to Gülen's ideas. However, it is difficult to prove that these schools belong to the Gülen movement because many of the individuals operating them deny any links to Fethullah Gülen.

The Turkish companies that run these charter schools also insist that there is no reason to call them "Gülenist" because the teachers keep their religious convictions to themselves. Indeed, even some of the parents of the young Americans who attend these schools appear to be completely oblivious to the religious and cultural nature of the movement.

The lack of transparency with which many of these schools operate has given rise to several FBI investigations, notably on the exclusive and wrongful recruitment of teachers from Turkey. However, accusations of wrongdoing and irregularities in visa applications for Turkish teachers have all proved unfounded, and currently all charter schools with suspected ties to Gülen continue to operate.

Outside the educational arena, the Gülen movement participates in economic, cultural, and political activism in the United States. An economic showcase for the movement worldwide, TUSKON has an office in Washington, DC, that hosts forums and facilitates cooperation between Turkish and American entrepreneurs. In addition, the movement has created numerous organizations that help promote its lobbying efforts in the United States by spreading Gülen's ideas in Washington.

Gülen movement supporters founded the Turkic American Alliance, which is headquartered in downtown Washington, as an umbrella organization to gather hundreds of Turkish-American cultural and educational associations nationwide. These organizations regularly host cultural events and sometimes conferences on Turkey or Turkish-American relations. As its name indicates—"Turkic" rather than "Turkish"—it aims to expand its activities to the other Turkic republics. On December 11, 2013, for example, it hosted the United States–Kazakhstan Convention in partnership with the Kazakh embassy. Although a recent creation (it was established in 2010), the Turkic-American Alliance is much more active and visible than the Assembly of Turkish-American Associations, an umbrella movement founded by the first Turkish expatriates and considered to be more secular.

The Rumi Forum, another DC-based organization with close ties to the Gülen movement, features regular lectures and debates on religious, political, and cultural topics. Once a year, in conjunction with other organizations affiliated with the movement, this forum—initially devoted to promoting interreligious dialogue—hosts a major conference on Gülen's ideas. These conferences are often prepared with the Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University, a Jesuit institution that has long provided support to Gülen, with the assistance of academics such as John Voll, John Esposito, and Father Thomas Michel.

The boards of directors of both the Turkic American Alliance and the Rumi Forum, as well as the guests they attract, include prestigious and influential academics, businessmen, and elected officials. These groups also organize regular trips to Turkey in which journalists, researchers, and sometimes even politicians are welcomed in different towns in a full-on charm offensive promoting both the country and the movement.

A more recently established Gülen think tank, the Rethink Institute, is also advancing Gülen's ideas in Washington. The institute promotes both the country and the movement through research and debates on hot-button Turkish issues, and it organizes seminars and conferences that defend the Gülen movement's point of view on these matters.

These various instruments have afforded the Gülen movement a level of political influence in Washington that secular and government-affiliated Turkish organizations cannot rival. The Gülen movement's lobbying instruments have proved more capable of attracting high-level U.S. officials to their many social and cultural events than organizations affiliated with the Turkish government, such as the Foundation for Political, Economic, and Social Research, a Washington-based think tank designed to promote U.S.-Turkey relations. This fact, especially when combined with its educational and economic activism in the United States, gives the Gülen movement political leverage in Washington that Turkey cannot ignore.

## New Frontiers in Africa

Africa, which holds for Turkey the promise of both new economic opportunities in emerging markets and potential political allies in the United Nations, is the most recent target of Gülen movement activism. Both the Turkish government and the Gülen movement have dramatically expanded their influence in Africa over the past decade.

Turkey's interest in Africa is recent. The Ottoman Empire was influential for a time in North Africa but never had a presence in sub-Saharan Africa. In general, the Turkish Republic paid little attention to the continent in the years after its formation. Only in 1998 did the Turkish government inaugurate a new Africa policy.

This policy only really took off after the AKP government came to power in 2002. Between 2002 and 2013, the number of Turkish embassies in Africa grew from nineteen to 34. Several summit meetings with African leaders took place in Turkey, aimed mainly at strengthening trade.

Gülen's followers were in the vanguard of this Turkish soft-power offensive. It was the movement's establishment and successes on the continent that inspired Ankara to turn to Africa. Indeed, well before the AKP's rise to power, Gülenists had already opened schools in Africa, using the same model and strategy that had worked elsewhere.

Gülen associations now run nearly 40 Turkish schools throughout the continent, in both French- and English-speaking areas and among both Muslim and Christian populations. Like their educational programs elsewhere, these Gülen schools focus on providing an excellent, modern education, including in foreign languages and sciences, without the slightest religious content. Authorities and parents demand a quality secular education that teaches openness to the world. On the strength of their success, a Gülen university opened its doors in Kenya.

Both Turkish policy and Gülen's efforts in Africa are focused on training new elites and establishing economic relations with emerging countries, claiming that Turkey's objective on that continent is to cooperate, not to dominate. In reality, however, there is a certain resemblance between Western missionary schools, once numerous in Africa, and Gülen schools. Gülen movement schools may not engage in religious proselytism, but they do seek to promote a positive image of Islam and Turkey, in part by employing conservative Islamic teachers. In this, they boast the same spirit as Western missionary schools (albeit in a Turkish, moderate Islamic version).

On the economic front, more and more members of Gülen-affiliated businessmen's associations regularly travel between Turkey and Africa to facilitate trade. It is these associations that sponsored the first Turkish schools in Africa.

The movement has also invested heavily in humanitarian assistance in Africa, notably in Somalia, Niger, and South Africa. The humanitarian organization Kimse Yokmu, which is affiliated with the Gülen movement, has diverse projects in several African countries.

## What Gülen's Success Means for Turkey

In Ankara, the ruling AKP, not to mention Erdoğan himself, has recognized the formidable global influence of the Gülen community and the ways in which this influence benefits Turkey.

In this, the party follows in the footsteps of previous Turkish diplomats and officials. Even before the AKP came to power, Ankara recognized the political and economic pragmatism of cooperating with Gülen institutions that could help promote Turkey's interests abroad. During the early 1990s, even the most secular ambassadors to Central Asia, who would have been quick to criticize Gülen's ideas on ideological grounds, realized the amount of influence Gülenists enjoyed in the former Soviet states and generally supported their work.

Other Turkish officials, such as Turgut Özal, president of Turkey from 1989 to 1993, have been personally committed to Gülen schools. Özal urged Turkish authorities to facilitate Gülen's educational projects abroad. During their official visits to Central Asia and elsewhere, Özal's successors, whether secular or conservative, have never failed to visit Gülen schools and meet their students and the Turkish communities they serve.

Now, the Gülen movement's success on the international scene makes it even more difficult for officials in Ankara to snub or dismiss Fethullah Gülen and his legions of followers. As a result, many AKP officials openly participate in Gülen movement endeavors, increasingly associating themselves with events organized by Gülen schools and the entire Gülen network. Abroad, Turkish diplomats and Gülen networks work together to promote the interests of Turkey and mutually assist each other.

But not everyone is happy about this collaboration, which has begun to exacerbate an underlying rivalry between the Gülen movement and some secular and Kemalist circles in Ankara. These individuals recognize the movement's role in enhancing Turkish soft power, but they fear its conservatism—at least relative to their own secular values—and do not necessarily appreciate the image of Turkey it gives abroad. Above all, they mistrust the political clout that the Gülen movement's international success gives it on the national scene.

These concerns have led Ankara to ramp up its own efforts at creating an influential global network. In Central Asia, for instance, the Turkish government has endeavored to create its own web of influence. It founded an official network of Turkish cultural centers, Yunus Emre, in 2007, although this was well after the Gülen movement had established itself in the region. An influential leader of the movement recently affirmed during a private interview in Washington, DC, that the Yunus Emre centers were conceived by the AKP government to compete with the movement's activities abroad.

## An Uncertain Future

The desire of some AKP officials to check the Gülen movement's international influence has only increased with the current crisis between Erdoğan and Fethullah Gülen. The activities of the Gülen movement abroad may represent the best aspect of Turkey's soft power and help extend the country's influence beyond its borders, but these measures benefited the AKP only as long as the Gülen-Erdoğan team was functional. Now, their alliance has ended.

The power struggle between Gülen and Erdoğan will not be limited to the Turkish theater and will very likely extend abroad. But while the prime minister has considerable resources in Turkey to reduce the clout of the Gülen movement, he cannot compete with the movement's global influence. A fierce battle lies ahead, and it is hard to predict who will come out the winner.

Currently, the prime minister is facing an image crisis at home that may afford Gülen an advantage in this contest. Erdoğan has come to be perceived as an increasingly authoritarian head of state, particularly since the beginning of his third term. The Gülen movement, which has managed to keep its reputation intact by presenting itself as a champion in the fight against corruption and wrongdoing, could take advantage of Erdoğan's weakened position and emerge victorious in its contest with the government and the AKP. But that would be a major gamble.

Taking down Erdoğan would be a decisively political move, and one that could discredit the Gülen movement after decades of affirming that it is apolitical. Its carefully cultivated image as a civil society organization working for peace and intercultural and interreligious dialogue could shatter, and it would risk slowing or even halting the prodigious progress it has made over the past twenty years. It could cost Gülen the global network—and all the attendant international and domestic influence—he has spent two decades building.

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