



# The Gülen Movement and Turkish Soft Power in the South Caucasus and the Middle East

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## 8. *The Gülen Movement and Turkish Soft Power in the South Caucasus and the Middle East*

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This chapter focuses on a concrete case study in Turkey's close neighborhood. I examine the exceptional role played by a social and religious organization that is unique in the Muslim world, namely the movement of Fethullah Gülen. The following questions are addressed: To what extent did the Gülen movement contribute to the development of Turkey's soft power in both the South Caucasus and the Middle East? Reciprocally, how did the Gülen movement benefit from the government's support and prestige to develop its own influence? Finally, I question the durability of the bond between Gülen and Turkey's soft power through the lens of the clash between Gülen, the charismatic leader of the *bizmet* movement, and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the even more charismatic leader of the Turkish executive power since 2002.

Today's *bizmet* ("service") and yesterday's *cemaat* ("community" or "congregation") movements are rooted in movements dating back to the late 1960s. Born in 1938, Fethullah Gülen grew up in the eastern part of Turkey, where traditionally conservative and religious ideas are dominant. Like many of his contemporaries in the region living close to the Soviet border, Gülen also grew up with anti-communist sentiments. Significantly, he acquainted himself with the ideas of *naqshibendiyya*, a prestigious Sufi brotherhood of Central Asian origin that had become very influential in Turkey. Additionally, the ideas of Sait Nursi, a leading religious thinker and activist whose ideas and legacy are still very widespread in contemporary Turkey, deeply influenced Gülen's own beliefs. Gülen's career is strongly associated with the *Diyanet*, the official state body that manages religious issues in Turkey.

Religiously speaking, the movement subscribes to a moderate Turkish Sunni Islam with a significant Sufi dimension, a quality shared by most Turkish Islamic movements. The young Fethullah Gülen was an anti-communist nationalist, who displayed a clear admiration for a strong state, and was an early and authentic admirer of the Ottoman legacy. Different from other Turkish movements, the Gülen *cemaat* is very active in the social sphere, especially in education and the media. Its members manage strong media groups as well as an impressive network of private schools, prep schools, private dormitories, and other educational institutions across the country.

When the AKP (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi) came to power in 2002, things changed in Turkey. The AKP shifted the focus of its foreign policy from securitization to desecuritization of the state. The demands for democratization in the context of Turkish candidacy to the European Union justified the AKP reforms to limit the role of the army in Turkish politics. In the early 2000s, both the AKP and Gülen movement had converging interests. Both share the same social grass roots, i.e. the conservative Anatolian elites that had been excluded and marginalized by the more Westernized Kemalist elites for many years. Their interpretation of Islam shared commonalities, although the AKP was historically and relatively more influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood ideology, and Gülen by the more mystical Sufi Islam of Central Asian origin. Despite minor differences, the political Islam of the AKP and the more social Islam of the *cemaat* shared enough of a common ground to build an alliance. This common ground also shared a common rival in the powerful military and the Kemalist elites who were both very

suspicious of these two religious forces, believing the AKP and Gülen movement to be nurturing a hidden agenda to impair the secular character of the country. The alliance helped to shake the omnipotence and the omnipresence of the military.

Together, Erdoğan and Gülen put an end to the supremacy of the army in both domestic and foreign affairs. But, once the common enemy of the army and Kemalist establishment were drawn aside, personal and ideological discrepancies rose to the surface. Gradually, their alliance and friendship eroded into a more suspicious and competitive relationship. The ultimate break occurred in December 2013. The Gülen movement knew that the AKP was determined to eradicate the *hizmet* in Turkey, especially when, in October 2013, the government announced its decision to close its prep schools, leaving the *cemaat* no choice but to strike back. Thanks to sympathizers working in the police and the judiciary, the *hizmet* revealed via social media several cases of corruption among high-ranking officials, some of whom had close ties to the Erdoğan government, and some who were members of Erdoğan's own family. Vindictive and paranoid, the Turkish prime minister is now waging a war against the *hizmet*. Numerous members, or alleged members, of the Gülen movement were sacked or removed from the police and judiciary sector, and some were arrested. The repression expands outside national borders, as the *hizmet* draws much of its strength from its transnational network. Given Erdoğan's stance against the *hizmet*, what are his chances of eradicating the *hizmet*? And how will his actions impact on Turkish foreign policy?

While they were allies, the Turkish government and the Gülen movement helped to develop a powerful Turkish presence and influence in their immediate regional environment and beyond. Placing Turkey on the worldwide map was beneficial to both sides; but now the break will likely harm both sides, an outcome for which both share responsibility. The *hizmet* could not and would not approve the AKP's authoritarian turn, and the *hizmet*'s politicization away from its initial mystic and apolitical identity challenged and threatened the government. The break leaves no winner, but one loser: Turkish soft power, not only in Western Asia but everywhere that it made a difference and made a promising opening for Turkish influence.

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