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The AKP/Gülen Crisis in Turkey: Consequences for Central Asia and the Caucasus

Bayram Balci

Key points

In Central Asia and South Caucasus the AKP and Gülen have spoken with one voice to establish Turkey's cultural, economic, and political influence.

Both time and energy will be needed for Gülen's representatives to prove to their Central Asian and Azerbaijani partners that their local objectives have nothing in common with the one they pursue in Turkey.

The current crisis could awaken the suspicion and mistrust of public opinion as well as local authorities in Central Asia and Azerbaijan, and stigmatize the students and graduates of Gülen schools.

The AKP government, in power since 2002, has long benefited from the unconditional and valuable support of Fethullah Gülen's sphere of influence, which stretches across many domains. This influence is most notable in domestic policy, where his media network has supported the government's efforts to democratize the state and its institutions, contain the political role of the military, and advance Turkey's EU candidacy. Their *cordial entente* was equally, if not more, effective in foreign policy. This is particularly the case in Central Asia and South Caucasus, where the AKP and Gülen have spoken with one voice to establish the cultural, economic, and political influence of Turkey. This cooperation was all the more harmonious due to the fact that from a sociological point of view, the AKP and Gülen

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share the same social base. However, on December 17, 2013, after having traversed several crises both in foreign and domestic policy, this alliance imploded.¹ The divorce between the two most influential politico-religious leaders in Turkey affects the entire Turkish political system, as well as Ankara's foreign policy, insofar as Gülen's sphere of influence alone incarnates an essential part of Turkish soft power. This crisis concerns Central Asia and the Caucasus, since it occupies an important place in Ankara's policies and the actions of Gülen's network, whose oldest and strongest presence outside of Anatolian borders is located there. The crisis of confidence between Gülen and the AKP raises several questions regarding Turkey's relationship with Central Asia and the Caucasus, where a number of Gülenist schools have developed.

Several questions emerge: In what way does the crisis affect the post-Soviet sphere and change Turkish foreign policy in the region? More fundamentally, how will the societies and regimes of Central Asia and the Caucasus regard the schools of Fethullah Gülen and the intentions, political or otherwise, of the cohorts of graduates who have joined the ranks of local and national elites? Answering these questions will involve a brief summary of Turkish policy in the former Soviet space and the place that Gülen's network occupies in this policy.

Gülen's network at the service of Turkey's soft power

In order to better understand the importance of Gülen's network in Central Asia, one must recall that Turkey was one of the countries most interested in this new geopolitical space inhabited primarily by populations whose language, culture, and religion were close to those of Turkey.² First to recognize their independence, Turkey began an ambitious and unrealistic policy—ultimate goal of which was to form a sort of Turkic bloc capable of weighing in on the international scene.³ However, after a first phase of relative success, realism prevailed; Ankara realized that it did not have the means to achieve such ambitions. In addition, it soon became clear that the post-Soviet republics had little desire to see Turkey become a new big brother that would limit their newly acquired independence. Turk-

ish policy in Central Asia thus rapidly became more the work of private actors who proved themselves to be more effective than the state in their strategies of adapting to the new realities. Among these actors, the most influential and multidimensional was the Gülenist network, which was the de facto spearhead of Turkey's policy in these countries.

Describing Fethullah Gülen's network as a 'movement' hardly suffices to describe an organization that, although visible, has no clear boundaries and whose identity is of variable geometry. At first it might have been described as a power nebula. Strategic secrecy and opacity⁴ were privileged in order to remain elusive, as much in its identity and activities as in its intentions. Its own members define their movement as *hizmet*, which is to say a community organized around 'service' rendered to individuals, the community, and all humanity through education and the dialogue between religions and cultures.⁵ In Central Asia and the Caucasus, Gülen's network has established itself in various sectors, especially in education by developing and running schools and centers of higher learning operated by expatriate Anatolian Turks who find a moral and ethical justification for their economic, and cultural action in the teachings of Gülen.

Turkish businessmen, education professionals, and journalists who shared Gülen's ideas to differing degrees moved into the post-Soviet countries to make connections and rapidly create schools and commercial operations.

The first Gülenist establishments appeared in 1992. In general businessmen, education professionals, and journalists who shared Gülen's ideas to differing degrees moved into these countries to make connections and rapidly create schools and commercial operations. The context of the time was favorable. The collapsing national educational systems lacked the means to meet the demands of openness and globalization. Diplomatic relations with Turkey were excellent due to the prestige and natural sympathy derived from the common heritage of history, language, religion, and Turkic culture. For these reasons, Gülen's network encountered very few obstacles

in its massive implantation. Soon dozens of schools opened to train new elites who were more internationally oriented.⁶ They were partially financed by a network of Turkish small businesses whose mission was to fill out and develop the social and economic landscapes in these new lands.

The zenith of good relations between these schools and the post-Soviet countries occurred in 1999. Kazakhstan boasted thirty schools and a university; Kyrgyzstan, fifteen schools and a university; Uzbekistan, sixteen high schools and an international school, the Ulugbek International School; Tajikistan, six schools; and Turkmenistan, ten schools and a university. In the South Caucasus, there were five schools and one university in Georgia as well as fifteen schools, a university, and nearly twenty preparatory schools in Azerbaijan. These educational establishments were supplemented with the circulation and influence of the Gülenist daily newspaper, *Zaman*, which appeared in the local languages in all of these countries except Georgia and Tajikistan.⁷ Gülenist schools also flourished in the Russian Federation at the beginning of the 1990s.

Two decades have since passed. These schools have trained the first post-Soviet generation and most of them continue to operate. They still have the same status, that of private schools working under the authority of the Minister of Education, in each country. They respect, to the letter, national programs in conformity with local norms, notably in terms of secularism.

However, in two countries, these schools have had to close entirely, or maintain only a symbolic presence. In Uzbekistan, the local authorities decided to close them in 2000, after having closed some of them as early as 1995. The reasons for their prohibition are diverse and must be situated in the general context of the deterioration of relations between Turkey and Uzbekistan. Relations suffered when Turkey offered asylum to several members of the Uzbek political opposition suspected of engaging in subversive activities with Ankara's support.⁸ As for Turkmenistan, the local authorities greatly appreciated the schools, not only under Saparmurat Niyazov, but also during the early years of his suc-

cessor Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedov.⁹ However, in 2010-11, the government decided to absorb most of the Turkish schools into the national system and maintain just two independent establishments, the Turgut Özal School in Ashgabat and the International Turkmen Turkish University. The decision and its application are part of a framework negotiated between the two parties. It is in no way the result of a crisis comparable to the one that accompanied the closing of the Turkish schools in Uzbekistan.

The Gülen schools dispense a secular education in conformity with host country authorities, which watch over them closely. Contrary to a common preconception, these schools are not disguised madrasas dispensing an Islamic education or extolling the ideas of Gülen.

In every country in which they are established, the Gülen schools dispense a secular education in conformity with host country authorities, which watch over them closely. The difference between these schools and their public equivalents resides in the fact that the Turkish schools, rarely identified as Gülenist, offer a modern, multilingual education that responds to the need for openness and the training of new elites. English is a priority, but local languages, Russian, and Turkish, also figure in the coursework. Scientific disciplines are privileged and the ultimate goal is to give students the best chances of entering the universities in Turkey and in the West. The admission selection process is difficult and the schools recruit from the privileged layers of host society, including political elite's children. To reinforce their status, the schools rigorously respect the legal framework of the host countries and participate in the legitimization process of the regimes in power by supporting government policies and inculcating obedience and loyalty in students.

Contrary to a common preconception, these schools are not disguised madrasas dispensing an Islamic education or extolling the ideas of Gülen. They do not offer Islamic classes; however, a certain religious activism was practiced outside of classes during the first years they were in place. The risks this activism posed to

the larger-scale activities of the movement led to the abandonment of any extra-curricular religious education in order to avoid criticism and accusations of Islamic proselytism.

On the other hand, without actively or visibly proselytizing, the Gülen movement transmits a certain Islamic and universalist ethic to its pupils. The value of work, respect and tolerance of the other, cleanliness as well as mental and physical hygiene, politeness, courtesy and good manners or the *edep* of the societies of the Muslim Middle East are applied, lived, and incarnated every day by every Gülenist teacher—and spread to the students through identification and admiration. They follow the model of Christian missionary schools, implanted in Turkey at the end of the Ottoman era, which trained a large number of Turkish republican elites and adopted a more secular model in order to survive in the context of Atatürk's revolution. The Gülen schools are strongly inspired by the European Christian model, not to Islamize but to establish a certain Turkish soft power that benefits, indirectly and over the long term, from the spread of an Islamic ethics without proselytism.

Gülen's approach seduced and earned the support of Turkish diplomatic circles, even at a time, the 1990s, when the relationship between the movement and the Turkish state was difficult. Following the advice of Turgut Özal, who personally supported the opening of Gülen schools in the post-Soviet space, the Turkish diplomatic circles saw in them a means of spreading Turkish cultural influence over the medium and long term. In so doing, they incited their Uzbek, Kazakh, Turkmen, and other counterparts to accept Gülen schools and facilitate their establishment.

However, the tide soon began to change, first in Uzbekistan and then in the other countries of the region. Incidentally this change in attitude coincided with the arrival in power of the AKP in 2002. In Russia, Turkmenistan, and Azerbaijan the authorities began to wonder if the presence of Turkish schools, whose affiliation with a conservative network was becoming increasingly visible, did not risk favoring, in the long term, the development of political Islam—not to mention bringing conservatives preaching a moderate political Islam to power in Bishkek or Baku.¹⁰ It

did not escape them that Gülen's network and the AKP were very close and generally shared the same social base, namely the rising conservative layers of Anatolian society.

Which future for the Gülenist schools?

Since December 17, 2013, the alliance between Gülen and Erdoğan has not only imploded, but the two rivals also have begun a global settlement of scores affecting Gülenist foreign assets. In Central Asia and the Caucasus, the crisis unveiled the amplitude of the concealed political agenda of Gülen schools, one capable of endangering the democratically elected regime of the charismatic Erdoğan, who has been comfortably in power for over ten years. The infiltration of Gülenists into the police and justice systems doubtless led some regimes in Central Asia and the Caucasus to question the right of the schools to operate freely in their countries.

The crisis revealed the movement's political ulterior motives and his implantation in state structures in Turkey. Whatever its real political objective may be, the amplitude of the means deployed to attain this objective—notably the infiltration of the police and justice systems as well as the use of illegal phone taps, practiced widely if one believes the Turkish media¹¹—are enough to show the determination of Gülen's movement. At this point, the Central Asian and South Caucasian regimes are confronted with two major questions: whether Gülen's network has the same power to harm them over the medium or long term, and whether it intends to use this power against the regimes in place. Consequent questions include how these regimes would react and how Turkish diplomacy would respond.

It is difficult to answer the first two questions, as it would necessitate an investigation combining both police and intelligence work. That said, the network does not have the same influence everywhere. In Uzbekistan, for example, almost nothing remains of its influence. In Turkmenistan, the schools managed to train hundreds, even thousands of students over the fifteen years that they existed. In Azerbaijan, Gülen's network is still quite active and influential. In this sense, the movement's weight varies from one context

to another and one can doubt its power to influence local politics, with the notable exception of Azerbaijan. In any case, Gülen's representatives in Central Asia and the Caucasus cannot risk interfering, and do not even have the means to do so.

Now that Erdoğan has compared the movement to the Assassin sect and asked during the annual conference of Turkish ambassadors that the 'misdeeds' of this organization be broadcast and explained around the world, the schools can no longer count on the moral support of the Turkish state.

Each Gülen project should be placed in the context of the movement's broader strategy. In Central Asia and South Caucasus, the objectives are purely educational and cultural. The goal is to train professionals who will create cultural bridges between their home countries and Turkey. They contribute to create a positive image for the movement, increase its international prestige, and reinforce its influence in Turkey. One should not forget that without the alliance and the support of the AKP, Gülen's disciples would have never attained such a level of collusion and infiltration in the Turkish government. In other terms, Erdoğan opened Pandora's box by making Gülen a special ally in his fight against Kemalist forces and quest for regional leadership. In Central Asia and the Caucasus, Gülen's network is not allied with any political actor. It remains restricted to its primary role, that of schoolmaster.

And yet Gülen's network risks suffering in Central Asia and the Caucasus from what is happening in Turkey. Its image and perceptions have been tarnished by the scandals of infiltration and political denunciation. The local regimes, already suspicious of the schools, will no longer regard Gülenists the same way and will increase their vigilance. One country, Azerbaijan, has already started to take concrete measures against Gülenist networks. The authorities have changed the status of the Gülen schools and a member of the presidential apparatus allegedly linked to the movement was fired.¹² Just after the local elections in Turkey Erdoğan paid a visit to Baku, and

his trip was dominated by the Gülen issue in Azerbaijan.¹³ In the other countries, this perverse boomerang effect could awaken the suspicion and mistrust of public opinion as well as local authorities, and stigmatize the students and graduates of Gülen schools.

Despite ten years of AKP power, Turkish diplomacy remains globally secular and Kemalist. Out of pragmatism but not without hesitation, it vouched for and provided moral support to the educational activities of the *hizmet* movement. However, now that Prime Minister Erdoğan has compared the movement to the Assassin sect¹⁴ and asked during the annual conference of Turkish ambassadors that the 'misdeeds' of this organization be broadcast and explained around the world,¹⁵ the schools can no longer count on the moral support of the Turkish state. It is certain that all of the diplomats will not apply to the letter the instructions of the prime minister. Still, seeing the Erdoğan-Gülen split splashed across all global media suffices to complicate the schools' task in the post-Soviet area and beyond.

Conclusion

The confrontation between Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the network of Fethullah Gülen is so far limited to the Turkish political sphere. The political map is being completely redrawn by this battle, one which will not calm down until the municipal and presidential elections in March and August 2014, if ever. This battle, of vital importance for both camps, will certainly continue abroad, with Central Asia and the Caucasus at its epicenter, since it is in this sphere that Gülen's network is best established.

However, the real threat for the network is not being attacked by the Turkish government in Central Asia and the Caucasus, but being considered dangerous by the local governments. Gülen's network has neither the intention (except possibly in Azerbaijan) nor the power to engage in local political struggles. Nonetheless, whether or not it nurses such an ambition, the Central Asian and Caucasian regimes likely believe it to be capable of as much. Whatever its future capacities and intentions might be, Gülen's network has already lost part of its credibility in these countries. Its strength arouses surprise but

also mistrust, because it no longer has the means to hide its political objectives and its infiltration capacity in Turkey. Both time and energy will be needed for Gülen's representatives to prove to their Central Asian and Azerbaijani partners that their local objectives have nothing in common with the one they pursue in Turkey.

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² Thomas Weeler, "Turkey's Role and Interest in Central Asia," *Saferworld Briefing*, October 2013, <http://www.saferworld.org.uk/downloads/pubdocs/turkeys-role-and-interests-in-central-asia.pdf>.

³ Carlo Frappi, "Central Asia's Turkey's Foreign Policy," *ISPI*, No. 225, December 2013, http://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/publicazioni/analysis_225_2013.pdf.

⁴ Joshua Hendrick, *Gülen, The Ambiguous Politics of Market Islam in Turkey and the World* (New York: New York University Press, 2013).

⁵ Fethullah Gülen, "What is the Hizmet Movement?" <http://www.fethullah-gulen.org/op-ed/what-is-gulen-movement.html>.

⁶ Bayram Balci, "Fethullah Gülen's Missionary Schools in Central Asia and their Role in the Spreading of Turkism and Islam," *Religion, State & Society* 31, No. 2 (2003): 151-177, https://wikileaks.org/gifiles/attach/9/9724_Balci%20central%20Asia%20schools.pdf.

⁷ On Gülen school figures in the world, see <http://turkishinvitations.weebly.com/every-continent-but-antarctica-news-articles--links.html>.

⁸ Nadir Devlet, "Turkey and Uzbekistan, A Failing Strategic Partnership," *GMF*, January 5, 2012, http://www.gmfus.org/wpcontent/blogs.dir/1/files/mf/devlit_uzbekistan_jan12.pdf.

⁹ Victoria Clement, "Central Asia's Hizmet Schools," Greg Barton, Paul Weller and Ihsan Yilmaz, eds, *The Muslim World and Politics in Transition* (London, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013), 154-167.

¹⁰ Bayram Balci, "Between Secular Education and Islamic Philosophy: the Approach and Achievements of Fethullah Gülen's Followers in Azerbaijan," *Caucasus Survey* 1, no. 1 (2013), <http://www.caucasus-survey.org/vol1-no1/bayram-balci-approach-and-achievements-of-Fethullah-Gulen-in-Azerbaijan.htm>.

¹¹ Samia Makhloul, Nick Tattersall, "Turkish PM Says Tapes of Talk with Son a Fabrication," *Reuters*, February 24, 2014, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2014/02/25/uk-turkey-erdogan-idUKBREA1N1ZS20140225>.

¹² Shahla Sultanova, "Azerbaijan Backing Turkey's Crackdown on Gülen Movement," *Eurasianet.org*, April 15, 2014, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/68274>.

¹³ Bayram Balci, "Gülen: Top Issue in the Agenda of Erdoğan's Visit to Azerbaijan," *Eurasia Outlook*, April 9, 2014, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2014/04/09/g%C3%BClen-top-issue-in-agenda-of-erdo%C4%9Fan-s-visit-to-azerbaijan/h7kt>.

¹⁴ Ihsan Yilmaz, "Erdoğan, Hizmet, assassins," *Today's Zaman*, 15 January 2014, http://www.todayszaman.com/columnists/ihsan-yilmaz_336711-erdogan-hizmet-assassins.html.

¹⁵ Tülay Karadeniz, "Erdogan Tells Turkish Ambassadors to Spread Word of 'Traacherous' Plot," *The Daily Star Lebanon*, January 15, 2014, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2014/Jan-15/244144-erdogan-declares-war-on-gulens-empire-of-fear.ashx#ixzz2uRWuCi97>.

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