THE FETHULLAH GULEN MOVEMENT: WHAT IS IT?

Abstract

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 organised jointly by the British Prospect magazine and the US 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 ‘organisational 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 organisation 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’. Rubin anticipates millions turning out to greet Gulen on his return to Turkey, his issuing of fatwas 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 US-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’. The movement’s activities abroad sometimes arouse comparable suspicions. 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. In light of all this it is interesting to note that the US authorities chose to reject Gulen’s application for the right of permanent residence in the US on the grounds of his insufficient renown, a decision ruled improper by a federal judge in July 2008.

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 Kalkınma Partisi – AKP), with which it overlaps. 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 during July 2008 as a guest of the Gulen-inspired and UK-based Dialogue Society (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. Although this has evolved towards more universalistic, pluralistic, liberal, and democratic values, 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 sympathise 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 favour 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 sympathised 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 towards this realisation, and for all his proclaimed universalism there is also a pronounced ‘Turkishness’ to his thinking. Turkish society is nationalistic, and some of this flavour has been absorbed by Gulen and the Fethullahci.
For Gulen, the key to Islam’s adaptation to the modern world does not lie through direct political activity and organization. Rather, Gulen propagates a kind of ‘educational Islamism’ as opposed to a ‘political Islamism’. Thus, educational curricula should emphasise science, technology and instruction in the English language. In place of faith teaching Gulen advocates the cultivation of spiritual, moral and behavioural 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. 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, 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. 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. 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 the Prophet’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 no-one’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 flavour 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 Fehtullaheci

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 centres (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 7-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, 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 ‘centre-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 centre. 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.

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-urbanised 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 sympathisers, 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’, 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 sympathisers 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, 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 sympathiser, 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 on 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 (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 organisations.

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 US (www.viu.edu), or of the Dialogue Society that hosted this author in Istanbul, or of Zaman newspaper, or of Fatih University in Istanbul (www.fatih.edu.tr) or of the Confederation of Businessmen and Industrialists in Turkey (TUKSON) (www.tuskon.org), or of charities such as Kimse Yok Mu (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 sympathisers 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 openly declare themselves as such. Indeed, the distinction between members, followers, sympathisers 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 two hundred thousand 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
which 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 sympathisers within the political and bureaucratic elite. Indeed, Gulen sympathisers
can increasingly be found in government service. A Turkish interior minister once
suggested that as many as 70% of the nation’s police force are Gulen sympathisers.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-Islamise 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 behaviour’ 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 behavioural standards they set. This is true too of Gulen schools that serve the west’s Turkish communities. As a consequence, 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 Bashkotorstan, 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. 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 Shia 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 through 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 and towards ‘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 US, 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 Ataturk 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. 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.

**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 US-based Gulen organisations are the Institute of InterFaith Dialog (www.interfaithdialog.org) and the InterFaith Cultural Organization (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 9/11 attacks. In Turkey it has brought together leaders of the three Abrahamic religious communities, and initiated dialogues with Kurds and Alevi. Its activists and offices in Turkey have been subjected to threats and violent attacks in reaction to such endeavours. 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 localised approach to interfaith and intercommunal understanding, not least to address the more local ramifications of global interfaith tension.

Since its formation in 2007 the Intercultural Dialogue Centre (Kurtuler Arasi Diyalog Merkezi - KADIM) (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 DC, 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’ organisation 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 politicised 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. 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.

There is scope here for resentment of the ‘Turkish’ schools. Although Gulen schools represent only around ten percent of Central Asia’s education system, 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. 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. Furthermore, there have been indications of a distasteful Turkish chauvinism and ‘big brother’ attitude towards 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.

Additionally, 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 harbouring of Uzbek opposition leaders. 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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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 US, 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.\textsuperscript{51}
Where Gulen schools host a primarily Muslim intake and its media outlets target primarily Muslim audiences, then 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.\(^\text{52}\) 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 Islamic fundamentalism. Yet it is in precisely those regions most susceptible to fundamentalist Islam that resistance to Gulen is at its strongest. In an apparent paradox, the Gulen movement’s slightest presence is in the neighbouring Arab and Iranian Muslim worlds. This is explained by its occasionally dismissive attitude towards the practice of Islam in these countries,\(^\text{53}\) 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. Shia 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.\(^\text{54}\)

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 intercivilisational 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, 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 definitively assess 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. 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 localised interfaith and intercommunal dialogue and tolerance.
Conclusion

The Gulen movement eludes definition. Deeply Turkish, it is globally engaged. Apolitical, yet it constitutes an existential political threat to Turkey’s officially secularist order, not least through its penetration of the state’s machinery. 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. A ‘cult’ of sorts, yet it is 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.

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 www.prospect-magazine.co.uk.


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20 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.


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
31 Ibid., p.39.
32 Bema Turam, ‘National Loyalties and International Undertakings: The Case of the Gülen Community in
33 Bayram Balci(a), ‘Fethullah Gulen’s Missionary Schools in Central Asia and their Role in the Spreading
35 Balci(a), (2003),p.153; Bema Turam , ‘A Bargain Between the Secular State and Turkish Islam: Politics
36 Bayram Balci (b), ‘Central Asia: Fethullah Gulen’s Missionary Schools’, ISIM Newsletter Vol.9 No.02,
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39 Michel (2003), pp.69-84.
41 For a consideration of the Singaporean example, see ‘Gulen’s Contribution to a Moderate Islam in
42 Balci(a), pp.164-165; Kevin Miller Jr., ‘Islam in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan: the Nurcu Movement’,
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43 Iveta Silova, Mark S. Johnson, and Stephen P. Heyneman, ‘Education and the Crisis of Social Cohesion
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46 Peuch (2004).
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2008.
54 For an account of the Gulen movement’s difficulties elsewhere in the muslim world, see Ozcan Keles,
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55 For more on Hira, see Paul L. Heck, ‘Turkish in the Language of the Qur’an: Hira’, Muslim World in
56 Unal Bilir, ‘Turkey-Islam’: Recipe for Success or Hindrance to the Integration of the Turkish Diaspora
Jill Irvine, ‘The Gulen Movement and Turkish Integration in Germany’ in Hunt and Aslandogan (2006),
pp.55-74.