The eponymous Gülen movement is inspired by the charismatic Turkish preacher, Fetullah Gülen, who currently resides in the United States. Unlike many other organizations in this compilation, the Gülen movement is avowedly pacifist and focuses on providing education to the communities of which it is a part, ostensibly working toward the modernization and democratization of Turkey. Yet the movement operates internally in an undemocratic fashion. Critics accuse its vast network of charter schools of illegally funneling millions of American taxpayer dollars to Turkish businesses. Critics inside Turkey accuse it of infiltrating the Turkish government and military.
HISTORY AND IDEOLOGY

According to Fetullah Gülen’s website (http://www.Gülenmovement.com), he is:

...an authoritative mainstream Turkish Muslim scholar, thinker, author, poet, opinion leader and educational activist who supports interfaith and intercultural dialogue, science, democracy and spirituality and opposes violence and turning religion into a political ideology.

The site notes that he was “the first Muslim scholar to publicly condemn the attacks of 9/11 (in an advertisement in the Washington Post).” It also celebrates his infinite modesty. Yet there is a bit more to the story. Gülen is an immensely powerful figure in Turkey, and—to put it mildly—a controversial one. He is also an increasingly powerful figure globally.

To understand Gülen, it is critical to understand the history of the Nurcu movement. Said Nursî, a Sunni Muslim in the Sufi tradition, was one of the great charismatic religious personalities of the late Ottoman Caliphate and early Turkish Republic; his Qur’anic commentary, the Risale-i Nur, became the basis for the formation of reading circles known as dershanes. These evolved into so-called “textual communities” devoted to reading and internalizing Nursî’s commentaries.

The dershanes gradually spread throughout Anatolia. Hakan Yavuz, a Turkish political scientist at the University of Utah who was formerly quite sympathetic to Gülen, notes that the Nurcu movement:

...differs from other Islamic movements in terms of its understanding of Islam ... As a resistance movement to the ongoing Kemalist modernization process, the Nurcu movement is forward-looking and pro-active. Said Nursî offers a conceptual framework for a people undergoing the transformation from a confessional community (Gemeinschaft) to a secular national society (Gesellschaft)... Folk Islamic concepts and practices are redefined and revived to establish new solidarity networks and everyday-life strategies for coping with new conditions.1

Gülen’s movement, or cemaat, arose from roughly a dozen neo-Nur textual communities, and Gülen is best described as being in Nur’s mold, but more devoted to the Turkish state. Born in 1941, Gülen hails from a village near Erzurum, the eastern frontier of what is now the Turkish Republic. This ter-
ritory was bitterly contested by the Russian, Persian and Ottoman empires and the zone of some of the bloodiest communal conflicts in modern memory. The region gave rise to a strongly nationalist version of Islam. Gülenists do not—contrary to one frequent misconception—view the Russians or the Persians as their friends.

While the contemporary Gülen presents a tolerant Sufi image, his early career was notable for statements, sermons, and publications notable for their intolerance toward those whom he considered enemies of Islam.

In one sermon, allegedly dating from 1979, Gülen energetically chastises his flock for failing to prevent infidels (gâvur) from controlling all of the holy places of Islam: “Muslims should become bombs and explode, tear to pieces the heads of the infidels! Even if it’s America opposing them;” he curses those who indifferent to this cause.2 In another, he says: “Until this day missionaries and the Vatican have been behind all atrocities. The Vatican is the hole of the snake, the hole of the cobra. The Vatican is behind the bloodshed in Bosnia. The Vatican is behind the bloodshed in Kashmir. They have lobby groups in America and Germany.”3

In unrevised editions of books from his early career, such as Fasildan Fasila and Asrin Getirdiği Tereddutler, Gülen calls the Western world the “continuous enemy of Islam.” Of Christians, he writes: “After a while they perverted and obscured their own future.” Jews have a “genetic animosity towards any religion;” and have used “their guile and skills to breed bad blood” to threaten Islam from the beginning of time, “uniting themselves with Sassanids, Romans and crusaders.” He avers that “the Church, the Synagogue and Paganism form the troika that has attacked Islam persistently.” “In any case,” he writes, “the Prophet considers Islam as one nation and the Kuffar as the other nation.”4

At the end of the 1990s, Gülen changed his mind or his tactics, forging warm ties with the Vatican and other tablemates of the Interfaith Dialogue platform. He fled to the United States, ensconcing himself at the heart of what he once considered the Devil’s headquarters. Since then, he has presented himself as the great cultural reconciler. Many Turks, however, still view him as an archconservative imam with extremist views about women, atheists, and apostates. He has neither acknowledged nor apologized for his former views. The earlier books have been wordlessly revised.

Two notable points about Gülen’s theology: First, he differentiates between tebliğ and temsil. The former means open proselytism, and he strongly dissuades his followers from this. He urges them instead to practice temsil—
living an Islamic way of life at all times without uttering the word “Islam” or other “dangerous words.” Temsil missionaries are to set a good example, embodying their ideals in their way of life. It is very visible that in Turkey, at least, the embodiment of these ideals involves a highly segregated role for women.

Second, Gülen holds publicly that Muslims and non-Muslims once lived in peace because the Ottoman Turks established a tolerant environment. To implement this peaceful cohabitation again, Turks should become leaders in the promotion of tolerance among religions. Latif Erdoğan and Davut Aydüz, both authors sympathetic to Gülen and perhaps even “inspired” by him, argue that the cemaat’s key goal is to give Turkey a pivotal role in the international political environment. “Turkey will be the representative of justice in the world... Turkey should show the meaning of civilization to the world once more.”

There are reasons to believe that the Gülen movement need not be seen as a threat to America. For example, the movement is, for pragmatic reasons, more friendly to Israel than is the ruling AKP. Moreover, followers of the movement tend to loathe Iran, and its organs—such as the English-language Today’s Zaman—regularly run scathing denunciations of the Islamic Republic. Toward America, the movement is on the surface relatively warm—as would be expected, since Gülen is in exile in the U.S. and has considerable business interests there.

GLOBAL REACH

There are somewhere between three and six million Gülen followers—or, in the term they prefer, people who are “inspired” by him. An exact figure is impossible to offer, for as one of the inspired, Ihsan Yilmaz, explains, the boundaries of this “collectivity” are “extremely loose and difficult to specify.” Less inspired observers note that Gülen’s followers tend to deny their association with him. In 2006, for example, in a cable released by Wikileaks, U.S. consulate officers in Istanbul remarked that “[w]hile on the surface a benign humanitarian movement, the ubiquitous evasiveness of Gülenist applicants—coupled with what appears to be a deliberate management of applicant profiles over the past several years—leaves Consular officers uneasy, an uneasiness echoed within Turkey by those familiar with the Gülenists...”

The value of the institutions inspired by Gülen—which exist on every populated continent—has been estimated, variously, as ranging from $20 to $50 billion. The movement, according to researchers such as Hakan Yavuz, has three coordinated tiers: businessmen, journalists, and teachers and students.
Financial support for its activities comes largely from the so-called “Anatolian bourgeoisie.” This newly-wealthy class funds the building of hundreds of private high schools, universities, colleges, dormitories, summer camps, and foundations around the world. Followers, moreover, control banks and major financial institutions and have built a vast media empire that owns one of the leading Turkish dailies, Zaman, and its English-language counterpart—which is not its precise translation—Today’s Zaman, as well as the Turkish television station STV, and many magazines and academic journals.

One researcher, Ahmet Insel, describes the cemaat’s regional organizations in developing nations thus:

There is a strong leader, a manager cadre (which knows about the economy and about a people that work much and earn little), and a central inspection mechanism, which centers itself around the person of the leader (Gülen) and manifests the internal coherence of the group.10

Wherever the movement establishes itself, similar patterns emerge. Thus, in Central Asia, French researcher Bayram Balcı notes that “Nurcu group members—whom we can consider as missionaries—are sent by the movement with the aim of making contact with important companies, bureaucrats and personalities in order to appraise local needs. They then invite some of these important personalities to Turkey... Nurcu organizations receive them and show them the private schools and foundations of the cemaat, without ever mentioning this word. Thanks to these contacts it then becomes easy to prepare the work in Central Asia.”11

Gülen himself lives in the Poconos, a rural tourist hub in northeast Pennsylvania. He inspires his followers from America, making him, among other things, the most powerful figure in the world of American charter schools.

There now are Gülen schools in every continent but Antarctica. To date, 95 countries with Gülen schools have been identified, while estimates—and the pronouncements of Gülenists themselves—suggest that the network is broader still, stretching to perhaps as many as 140 countries with an active educational and proselytizing presence.12

RECENT ACTIVITY

To get a better feeling for the significance of the Gülen media empire and the way it has been used, it is instructive to explore some recent Turkish history. In June 2006, police discovered a crate of grenades in an Istanbul slum.
Investigators claimed that they belonged to a shadowy clique of conspirators called Ergenekon. The organization is accused of being an outgrowth of the so-called “Deep State”—a secret coalition of high-level figures in the military, the intelligence services, the judiciary, and organized crime. Allegedly, it planned to stage a series of terrorist attacks throughout Turkey and use the ensuing chaos as the pretext for a military coup.

In the years since, thousands of Turks have been arrested in mostly pre-dawn raids, including hundreds of military officers and academics, NGO spokesmen, theologians, and journalists. In 2009, a new round of mass arrests began, targeting the KCK—the so-called urban wing of the extremist Kurdish Workers Party, or PKK. In total, thousands have been imprisoned.

There is good reason to suggest that key evidence in at least one major trial has been forged. These waves of arrests have been united by obvious evidence of judicial manipulation, all of which has gained support from media outlets associated with Gülen.

It is plausible to suspect that the movement functions like a mafia, has indeed infiltrated the organs of the state in a way that has further corrupted its already corrupt justice system, uses this power to intimidate or imprison those who object to this, and exploits Islamic sensibilities to do this.

This line of argument has been supported by numerous informed assessments. The late University of Ankara history professor Necip Hablemitoğlu, a highly vocal critic of the Gülen movement, in his book Köstebek (“The Mole”), alleged that the Gülen movement had infiltrated the Turkish police. He was assassinated in 2002, shortly after its publication. The case has never been solved. Similarly, Adil Serdar Saçan, former director of the organized crimes unit in the Istanbul Directorate of Security, gave an interview to Kanaltürk TV in 2006 in which he said that Gülen sympathizers had thoroughly penetrated the state’s security apparatus:

During my time at the [police] academy, those in the directorate who did not have ties to the [Gülen] organization were all pensioned off or fired in 2002 when the AKP came to power… Belonging to a certain cemaat has become a prerequisite for advancement in the force. At present, over 80 percent of the officers at supervisory level in the general security organization are members of the cemaat.14

In 2008, Saçan himself was arrested on suspicion of involvement in Ergenekon.
Similarly, the journalist Ahmet Şık was arrested just as he was about to publish *The Imam’s Army*, a book detailing the Gülen movement’s pervasive influence within the Turkish bureaucracy, police force, and judiciary. From prison, he sent a handwritten note to the American journalist Justin Vela, who published part of it in the magazine *Foreign Policy*:

> The Ergenekon investigations are the most important part of allowing the cemaat to take power in the country. I must say that the deep state is still intact. Just the owner has changed. What I mean by this ownership ... is composed of the coalition of AKP and the cemaat.

> .... ‘Something’ has come to power in Turkey, but not sharia. I can’t name that ‘thing’ properly.15

What of the movement’s role in America? In 2007, Gülen sued the U.S. government in District Court, challenging the denial of his petition for classification as an alien of extraordinary ability that would allow him to stay in the United States. District Judge Stewart Dalzell surveyed the evidence, noting that Gülen’s work was “prominent on the syllabi of graduate and undergraduate courses at major American colleges and universities.” Based on Gülen’s “unchallenged statement that the visa he seeks ‘will allow [him] to continue to advocate and promote interfaith dialogue and harmony between members of different faiths and religions’” the court found “no basis for denying his application…”16  The application was thus approved.

In the decade-and-a-half since, Gülen has been able to amass sufficient manpower and influence to beguile several Commanders-in-Chief, woo countless members of Congress, and become the largest operator of charter schools in America, funded with millions of taxpayer dollars, many of these issued in the form of public bonds. These schools have come under scrutiny by the FBI and the Departments of Labor and Education, which have been investigating their hiring practices, particularly the replacement of certified American teachers with uncertified Turkish ones who are paid higher salaries than the Americans, using visas that are supposed to be reserved for highly-skilled workers who fill needs unmet by the U.S. workforce. They have also been hired as PE teachers, accountants, janitors, caterers, painters, construction workers, human resources managers, public relations specialists, and lawyers.

The schools, moreover, have been credibly and frequently charged with channeling school funds to other Gülen-inspired organizations, bribery, using the schools to generate political connections, unfair hiring and termination practices, and academic cheating—the latter charges ranging from grade-changing schemes to the accusation that some science fair projects have been completed by the teachers.
In 2011, the *New York Times* reported that Gülen charter schools in Texas were funneling some $50 million in public funds to a network of Turkish construction companies, among them Atlas, which was identified with Gülen in a 2006 cable from the American Consul General in Istanbul that was subsequently released by WikiLeaks.17

Dozens of Texans, ranging from state lawmakers to congressional staff members to university professors, have taken trips to Turkey financed by Gülen’s foundations. The Raindrop Foundation paid for State Senator Leticia Van de Putte’s recent travel to Istanbul, according to a recent campaign report. 18 Thereafter, in January 2011, she co-sponsored a Senate resolution commending Gülen for “his ongoing and inspirational contributions to promoting global peace and understanding.”19

Federal authorities are investigating several of the movement’s schools for violating immigration laws and forcing employees to send part of their paychecks back to Turkey.20 Nationwide, the charter schools have expanded aggressively with financing through public bond issues. The Texas schools borrowed more than $200 million through these offerings. The Texas Education Agency and the Texas Education Agency are investigating, as is the federal Department of Education. Quite a number of people who have questioned these practices have been threatened with lawsuits for “defamation.”

Importantly, there is no evidence that Islamic proselytizing takes place at these schools, and there is considerable evidence that the schools are viewed positively by both students and parents alike. Graduates perform reasonably well, and some perform outstandingly.

Among other things, the schools are money-makers for members of the *cemaat*: They are loaded with private, state and federal funding. The Ohio charters received more than $27 million in public funds, including stimulus money. They’ve likewise proved an amazingly effective forum for soliciting donations to Gülen’s organizations. The FBI and the Departments of Labor and Education are now investigating whether employees are forced to kick back part of their salaries to the *cemaat*.21 The charter school experiment has resulted in the United States being the only country in the world where the Gülen Movement has been able to establish schools fully funded by the host country’s taxpayers.
ENDNOTES


[4] Gülen’s early writings are out of print and hard to find, but digital copies are archived on various social media sites. See, for example, http://www.flickr.com/photos/eksib612/sets/72157631747801352/.


[10] Bilir, “‘Turkey-Islam.’”


[15] Justin Vela, “Behind Bars in the Deep State,” Foreign Policy, Jan-


[18] Ibid.


[21] Ibid.