

American Foreign Policy Council

FETULLAH GÜLEN MOVEMENT

QUICK FACTS

Geographical Areas of Operation: East Asia, Eurasia, Europe, Latin America, Middle East and North Africa, North America, South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, Australia

Numerical strength (members): There are somewhere between three and six million Gülen followers although exact numbers are impossible to offer because, as Ihsan Yilmaz stated, the boundaries of this “collectivity” are “extremely loose and difficult to specify.”

Leadership: Fetullah Gülen

Religious identification: Mainstream Sufism

Quick Facts courtesy of Ihsan Yilmaz’s, “Inter-Madhhab Surfing, Neo-Ijtihad, and Faith Based Movement Leaders” and Claire Berlinski’s, “Who is Fetullah Gulen?” (Autumn 2012)

OVERVIEW

Fetullah Gülen, a charismatic Turkish preacher, inspired and leads the Gülen movement. Unlike many other organizations in this compilation, the Gülen movement claims to be pacifist and focused on providing quality educations to the communities all over the world of which it is a part, ostensibly working toward the modernization and democratization of Turkey. However, there is compelling evidence to suggest that the Gülen movement is focused more on cultivating its own social power than anything else. Furthermore, 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 and staging a bloody failed coup on July 15, 2016. On December 11, 2015, the Gülen movement was classified as a terrorist organization in Turkey under the name Gülenist Terror Organization (Fetullahçı Terör Örgütü, FETÖ) or Parallel State Organization (Paralel

Devlet Yapılanması, PDY). *Gülen continues to give weekly talks (Bam-teli and Herkul Nağme), which are uploaded to Herkul.org and regularly downloaded by some 20,000–50,000 listeners.*

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 more to the story. Gülen at the height of his power was an immensely powerful figure in Turkey, and—to put it mildly—a controversial one. He is also a 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 territory 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 Gülen presents a tolerant Sufi image today, 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 of 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 further curses those who are 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 Fasıla* and *Asrin Getirdiği Tereddutler*, Gülen called the Western world the “continuous enemy of Islam.” Of Christians, he wrote: “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 averred that: “the Church, the Synagogue and Paganism form the troika that has attacked Islam persistently.” “In any case,” he wrote, “the Prophet considers Islam as one nation and the *Kuffar* as the other nation.”⁴

At the end of the 1990s, Gülen changed either his mind or his tactics, forging warm ties with the Vatican and other tablemates of the Interfaith Dialogue platform. In 1999, he fled to the United States, ostensibly for medical treatment, 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 revised without comment.

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 Aydın, 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.”⁵

Once in power, Gülen’s organization forged an uneasy alliance with the Justice and Development Party of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, although tensions between the two political partners persisted. These broke into the open beginning in June 2007, when police discovered a crate of grenades in an Istanbul slum.⁶ Investigators claimed that they belonged to a shadowy group 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.

According to Turkish journalist Asli Aydintasbas, in 2009 then-prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan began replacing key figures in police intelligence, narcotics, anti-terrorism, and surveillance units headed by known Gülenists. This led to the so-called the Ergenekon investigation. She reports that the eavesdropping capabilities of the military and police were combined under a newly created body, also staffed by Gülenists:

For the purposes of the Ergenekon trials, the investigators, the prosecutor, and later the judges were a clique who have mostly graduated from Gülen schools, participated in Gülen network’s gatherings, were allies of the movement, acted in unison, or were openly known as Gülenists within the police force. Major stories about the case were first published in Gülen-related news outlets, such as Samanyolu, Zaman, Bugün or Taraf. A noticeable number of those arrested in the case and in subsequent probes were nationalists or hardline Kemalists who had criticised or attacked the Gülen network over the years.⁷

In 2009, a new round of mass arrests began, targeting the so-called KCK—the urban wing of the extremist Kurdish Workers Party, or PKK. In 2010, the so-called *Balyoz*, or Sledgehammer, case began when the self-styled liberal *Taraf* newspaper published allegedly leaked reports of the military’s plans to stage a coup, first creating a pretext,

and chaos, by bombing two mosques and accusing Greece of shooting down a Turkish plane. These plans, passed to prosecutors, formed the basis for their case. In total, thousands were imprisoned as a result.⁸

Turkish, U.S., and German forensic experts subsequently concluded that the digital evidence on a number of CDs in the Balyoz case was forged.⁹ As the scholar Dani Rodrik writes,

Today it is widely recognized that the coup plans were in fact forgeries. Forensic experts have determined that the plans published by Taraf and forming the backbone of the prosecution were produced on backdated computers and made to look as if they were prepared in 2003. A quasi-judicial United Nations body has slammed the Turkish government for severe violations of due process during the trial. Erdoğan and his close associates, once fully behind the charges, now talk about fabricated evidence and concede that there was a plot against the military. The 230 defendants held in jail (including Çetin Doğan) were eventually released on June 19th, 2014, following a unanimous ruling by the constitutional court finding the defendants' right to a fair trial had been violated.¹⁰

These waves of arrests were united by obvious evidence of judicial manipulation; despite this, all were supported by media outlets associated with Gülen, which refused to report on claims that the evidence was fraudulent.¹¹

It is plausible to suspect that the movement functions like a mafia, and did indeed infiltrate the organs of the state in a way that further corrupted its already corrupt justice system, used this power to intimidate or imprison those who objected to this, and exploited 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.¹² Similarly, Adil Serdar Saçan, former director of the organized crimes unit in the Istanbul Directorate of Security, gave an interview to Kanal Türk 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.¹³

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.¹⁴

Asli Aydintasbas claims that, in 2010, Erdoğan and President Abdullah Gül removed the Gülen movement from the National Security Political Document. This list of security threats, popularly known in Turkey as the Red Book, is approved by the National Security Council and details Turkey's national security doctrine. Its contents are never published. Journalist Metin Gurcan confirms that in 2010, "religious reactionary trends," often a euphemism for the movement, were removed. (They were reportedly reinstated in 2014, according to Gurcan.¹⁵)

Erdoğan strongly backed the Gülenists' efforts against the so-called deep state. "I am the prosecutor of this case," he said, and his team ridiculed critics who charged the *cemaat* was taking over the country's deep state.¹⁶

There is strong circumstantial evidence to suggest that Gülen's supporters manufactured evidence during the sham trials of senior military figures; Gülenist press organs were keen to promote easily dismissed and contradictory evidence as fact, and did so even as that evidence became more contradictory and absurd. No one knows how or why Gülenists were involved in those trials, so no one yet understands the extent and the nature of Gülen's involvement in Turkish politics and the military.

There are reasons to believe that the Gülen movement need not be seen as a threat to America. For example, the movement has become, for pragmatic reasons, friendlier to Israel than is the ruling AKP. Moreover, followers of the movement tend to loathe Iran, and its publications—such as the English-language *Today's Zaman*—regularly ran scathing denunciations of the Islamic Republic.¹⁷ 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.

However, President Tayyip Erdoğan, Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım, and many politicians from different parties believe Gülen planned and executed the July 15,

2016 coup attempt. The Turkish government calls Gülenists within the Turkish state a “parallel structure organization.”¹⁸ Sources within the military, according to the well-connected Turkish journalist Murat Yetkin, likewise claim that the plotters were known or suspected Gülen sympathizers.

Gülen has strongly denied any involvement. He has denounced the coup attempt, and accused Erdoğan, in turn, of staging the coup himself as a pretext for the brutal crackdown now underway on those suspected of involvement. Turkey has requested Gülen’s extradition from the U.S. to face trial. The United States’ failure to do so expeditiously has placed great strain on the bilateral relationship, with Turkish officials accusing the United States of staging the coup or, at least, of harboring the coup-plotter.

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.”¹⁹ Skeptical 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...”²⁰

The value of the institutions inspired by Gülen—which existed on every populated continent—has been estimated, variously, as ranging from \$20 to \$50 billion. The movement, according to researchers such as Hakan Yavuz, had three coordinated tiers: businessmen, journalists, and teachers and students.²¹ Financial support for its activities came largely from the so-called “Anatolian bourgeoisie.” This newly-wealthy class funded the building of hundreds of private high schools, universities, colleges, dormitories, summer camps, and foundations around the world. Followers, moreover, controlled banks and major financial institutions, and built a vast media empire that owned one of the leading Turkish dailies, *Zaman*, and its English-language counterpart—which was not its precise translation—Today’s *Zaman*, as well as the Turkish television station STV, and many magazines and academic journals. As of this writing, however, virtually all of these organs abroad have been closed down in response to the Turkish government’s lobbying of foreign governments following the July 2016 coup attempt.

One researcher, Ahmet Insel, described 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.*²²

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.”²³

Almost every top commander and general since Kanan Evren has spoken out against Gülen and warned of Gülenist infiltration, even if they did not identify him by name, referring instead to *cemaatler* and *irtica*—reactionaries. The military has always been obsessively careful about its recruits’ loyalty, in part for fear of them. But this does not necessarily mean they succeeded in keeping them out, as the recent coup attempt suggests.

Quite a number of Turkish military sources believe that there are or were large numbers of Gülenists in the nation’s armed forces; top commanders and generals have long spoken against Gülen and warned of attempts at infiltration. That Gülen says he has always been against military interventions doesn’t make it true—he himself is known to have lavishly praised the army following the 1980 coup. The army has long purged Gülenists amid their ranks, however, to the extent they could detect them. But Erdoğan put an end to those the purges during the period after he took power, when he and Gülen closely collaborated.

Gülen himself lives in the Poconos, where he fled to avoid prosecution in Turkey on charges of trying to infiltrate the state. He inspires his followers from a rural tourist hub in northeast Pennsylvania, and has become, among other things, one of the most powerful figure in the world of American charter schools. Before his overt split with then-prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, his supporters, Turkish politicians, and leading businessmen often visited him at his American compound.

The Gülenist 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 at its height that network was broader still, stretching to perhaps as many as 140 countries with an active educational and proselytizing presence.²⁴

In 2001, Gülen was granted an immigrant visa as a “religious worker,” and soon after received his green card.²⁵ In the decade-and-a-half since, he has been able to amass sufficient manpower and influence to effectively lobby 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, exploiting loopholes in H1-B visa laws.²⁶ 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.²⁷

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.²⁸ Thereafter, in January 2011, she co-sponsored a Senate resolution commending Gülen for “his ongoing and inspirational contributions to promoting global peace and understanding.”²⁹

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.³⁰ 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 State Legislature 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 students and parents alike. Graduates perform reasonably well, and some perform outstandingly.

Among other things, the schools are moneymakers 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 have investigated whether employees are forced to kick back part of their salaries to the *cemaat*.³¹ The federal investigation was closed without any criminal charges.³² 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.

Despite continuing questions and concerns and the uncertainty in the Gülen movement's future given the recent political tension with Turkey, charter schools still exist all over the world. The *Wall Street Journal* reported in 2016 that around 150 U.S. charter schools were tied to the Gülen movement.³³

RECENT ACTIVITY

As Turkish journalist Asli Aydintaşbaş details,

Hundreds of think-tankers, congressional staffers, and several members of the US Congress [have] visited Turkey on tours organized by such Gülen outfits as Rumi Forum. The group's pro-Western views and moderate form of Islam were particularly attractive in the post-9/11 atmosphere. A congressman who came to Istanbul in 2012 on such a tour did not know much about the movement (or the Gülenist-led trials where dozens of journalists were behind bars) but described the group to me in glowing terms as "the anti-mullahs".

Gülen-related entities and individuals were also able to do fundraising at the local level, since many had become naturalized residents of the US, and could make contributions to election campaigns in Texas, New Jersey and, New York at a national level.³⁴

But while the Gülen movement developed its contacts in the United States, its connections to Turkey's political elite grew shakier. As previously discussed, the AKP had

relied upon the Gülen movement to eliminate secularist establishment in the state and the military, once the military was sidelined, the inevitable happened: The AKP and the Gülen movement descended into a struggle for the control over the state.

Long-rumored tensions between Gülen and Erdoğan broke into the open in the immediate aftermath of the Gezi uprising of May 2013, when the Gülen movement issued an 11-article communiqué to dispute “accusations and charges” that it claimed came from AKP quarters.³⁵

Shortly afterward, Turkish police carried out dawn raids against leading businessmen and allies of the prime minister.³⁶ They alleged that the targets of the raids had helped Iran bypass international financial sanctions by sending gold to the regime in Tehran in exchange for oil and natural gas. Gülenists were assumed to be behind the raids. On December 17, 2013, corruption several bureaucrats, ministers, mayors, and family members of the ruling Justice and Development Party, leading to widespread protests and calls for the resignation of the government.³⁷ Erdoğan immediately attributed the raids to a Gülenist set-up.³⁸ The whistleblowers who had tipped off the police leaked rumors that Erdoğan’s sons were next to be arrested. They released, on social media, recordings that purported to be Erdoğan telling his son, Bilal, to rid their home of a billion dollars.³⁹

This sparked an outright civil war among Turkey’s Islamists. On December 14, 2014, Turkish police arrested more than two dozen senior journalists and media executives connected with the Gülen movement on various charges. The government raided and closed all Gülen-linked media, and began seizing companies that belonged, or were widely believed to belong, to Gülen supporters. It began purging the bureaucracy, particularly the police and judiciary. The preparation of a list of military officers, to be purged in August 2016, is widely speculated to have precipitated the July 15th coup.

The failed military coup in Turkey that began on the evening of July 15th left more than 150 dead and over 1,100 injured.⁴⁰ It was the fifth coup attempt in Turkey since 1960, but the first in which the military turned its fire against its own citizens. The AKP was very nearly decapitated; Erdoğan escaped assassination by minutes. Unthinkably, and inexplicably, the aspiring *junta* also bombed the Turkish parliament, the symbol of the democracy it claimed to be acting to rescue. It was the most serious coup plot in Turkey since the military takeover in 1980. Hundreds of officers and up to 10,000 soldiers from the army, air force, navy, and gendarmerie were mobilized.

Immediately after the failed coup, General Hulusi Akar’s aide, Infantry Lt. Col. Levent Türkkkan, confessed his allegiance to Gülen. His testimony reinforced longstanding rumors that Gülenists are sufficiently well represented in the military to furnish their protégés with the answers to the military academy’s examination questions. “Yes, I am a member of the parallel establishment,” he said. “I am from the Fethullah Gülen community.... After I was brought to the aide-de-camp position at the Gen-

eral Staff, I started to execute the orders given on behalf of the community.”⁴¹ Sources within the military, according to the well-connected Turkish journalist Murat Yetkin, likewise claim that the plotters were known or suspected Gülen sympathizers.

While in all likelihood there was Gülenist involvement in the coup plot, it is not known whether they were its only authors. The putschists’ manifesto appealed to classically Kemalist tropes and dramaturgy. They called themselves “Yurtta Sulh Komitesi,” or the “Peace at Home Committee,” in an appeal to Atatürk’s famous slogan, “Peace at home. Peace in the world.” This doesn’t necessarily indicate Kemalist involvement, and may have been a dog whistle calculated to lure Kemalists into the streets in support of the coup.⁴² Gülen himself has strongly denied any involvement. He has denounced the coup attempt, and accused Erdoğan, in turn, of staging the coup as a pretext for the brutal crackdown now underway on those suspected of involvement.⁴³

It will be many years, if ever, before we fully understand the coup plot. But some of the conclusions drawn in the immediate aftermath in the Western media make no sense. Many commentators were quick, for example, to accept Gülen’s intimation that the scale of the purge indicated that the coup attempt was staged by Erdoğan himself, in some kind of Turkish “Reichstag Fire.” It is true that the lists of people to purge were prepared in advance, but that doesn’t mean that Erdoğan staged the coup. Beginning in 2012, the AKP had visibly, explosively, and publicly fallen out with Gülen’s flock, so of course these lists were ready. The president took advantage of the coup plot to accelerate a purge, but it does not necessarily mean that he staged it. Nor is the longstanding tension between Erdoğan and Gülen proof that Gülen led the plot, though it would be credulous to dismiss the idea of his involvement out of hand.

According to Ahmet Şık,⁴⁴ a journalist who was arrested after writing a book that charged the Gülenists with extensive infiltration of the Turkish state, the coup was headed by Gülenist officers who had been planning to stage it before a promotions meeting in August, when they were due to be dismissed. Their plans were discovered, he writes, and they knew they were to be arrested at 4am on Saturday morning.⁴⁵ He believes the officers, aware they had been betrayed, decided to attempt the coup early on Friday night. This would explain why the coup was so poorly planned. Consistent with this, Erdoğan has acknowledged he knew of “military activity” at least seven to ten hours before the coup.

The number of arrested and purged since the coup attempt has been breathtaking. At least 40,000 have been detained,⁴⁶ including at least 10,000 soldiers and, for reasons that remain unclear, 2,745 judges.⁴⁷ Thousands of teachers have been suspended and their licenses revoked on allegations of loyalty to Gülen. More than 100,000 people have been “arrested and fired from their jobs.”⁴⁸

It is widely believed both by the Turkish public and the government that the United States sponsored the coup attempt—a belief fueled, particularly, by Gülen’s residency in the United States. In response, on July 16, 2016, then- U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry encouraged the Turkish government “to present us with any legitimate evidence that withstands scrutiny” for an extradition request.⁴⁹ On August 2, 2016, due to escalating tensions over Gülen, Erdoğan questioned Turkey’s relationship with the United States and criticized the West for supporting terrorism and backing the coup-plotters.⁵⁰ Washington has insisted it needs more evidence of Gülen’s guilt before extradition, to which Erdoğan said: “When you asked for the return of a terrorist, we did not ask for documentation... Let us put him on trial.”⁵¹ Although he didn’t specify the threat, the *Wall Street Journal* concluded from his tone that he had “raised the prospect of a prolonged closure of the Incirlik air base in southern Turkey if he didn’t get his way.” Suleyman Soylu, Turkey’s labor minister, has overtly stated the U.S. was behind the coup.⁵²

Gülen is prepared to fight an extradition request in U.S. courts, so this is apt to be a contentious issue between the U.S. and Turkey for a long time to come. Both Gülen and the Turkish government have well-paid lawyers and PR firms to ensure their side of the feud is ably represented. For its part, the Trump administration has not made its priorities and thoughts regarding Gülen’s extradition clear, although Lt. General Michael Flynn, now the U.S. National Security Advisor, has stated that he believes the U.S. should extradite Gülen back to Turkey.⁵³

ENDNOTES

[1] MH Yavuz, “Towards An Islamic Liberalism?: The Nurcu Movement and Fethullah Gülen,” *Middle East Journal* 53, no. 4, Autumn 1999.

[2] “Fethullah Gülen’s exemplary preaching,” *Haber 5*, June 13, 2010, <http://haber5.com/video/fethullah-Gulenden-ibretlik-vaaz> .

[3] “Fetullah Gülen’in İç Yüzü/ 3. Bölüm” YouTube video, April 2, 2007, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SRAYGkE1q50#t=4m51s>.

[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/>.

[5] Unal Bilir, “‘Turkey-Islam’: Recipe for Success or Hindrance to the Integration of the Turkish Diaspora Community in Germany?” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 24, no. 2, October 2004.

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