

### 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 Fethullah Gulen?” (Autumn 2012)*

### INTRODUCTION

*Fethullah Gülen, a charismatic Turkish preacher, inspires and leads an eponymous Islamic revivalist movement. Unlike many other organizations in this compilation, the Gülen movement claims to be pacifist and focused on providing quality education to 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 any other objective. Furthermore, the movement operates internally in an undemocratic and opaque fashion. Critics maintain that its vast network of charter schools illegally funnels millions of American taxpayer dollars to Turkish businesses. Detractors inside Turkey, meanwhile, have accused it of infiltrating the Turkish judiciary and security apparatuses, and blame the organization for staging a bloody failed coup against the government of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on July 15, 2016. On May 26, 2016, the Gülen movement was officially classified as a terrorist organization by the Turkish government under the name Fethullahist Terror Organization (Fethullahçı Terör Örgütü, FETÖ) or Parallel State Organization (Paralel Devlet Yapılanması, PDY). Gülen continues to give weekly talks (Bamteli and Herkul Nağme), which are uploaded to Herkul.org and regularly*

*downloaded by some 20,000–50,000 listeners.*

## HISTORY & IDEOLOGY

According to an article quoted on Fethullah Gülen’s website, 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.<sup>1</sup>

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*).”<sup>2</sup> Yet, there is more to the story. Gülen at the height of his power was an immensely powerful figure in Turkey, and a controversial one. He has also cultivated global influence through the networks established by his followers.

Gülen is a follower of Said Nursî (1876-1960), who was one of the great charismatic religious personalities of the late Ottoman Caliphate and early Turkish Republic, and whose followers became known as the Nurcu Movement. As a young man, Nursî was greatly influenced by the Sufi brotherhoods, known as tariqah from the Arabic for “road” or “path,” although he was never formally initiated into any of them. Nursî was a prolific writer, producing numerous pamphlets, letters, brochures, and Qur’anic commentaries, which were collected in what became known as the *Risale-i Nur* or “Epistles of Light.”<sup>3</sup> As Nursî’s following grew in size, 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. Nursî argued strongly for the compatibility of modern science with the Qur’an and the collections of sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muhammed, known as the Hadith. He contended that any apparent contradictions between modern science and Islamic scripture were the product of a superficial or erroneous understanding of the sacred texts. He encouraged his followers to study mathematics and the sciences as they sought to shape their lives according to Islamic

precepts. He maintained that they should follow a three-phase process: seeking first to Islamize individuals and then society, before moving onto the final stage of Islamizing the state and regulating it according to Sharia Islamic Law.

The dershanes gradually spread throughout Anatolia. Hakan Yavuz, a Turkish political scientist at the University of Utah who was formerly sympathetic to Gülen, claims 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.<sup>4</sup>

Gülen's movement, which is frequently known as the cemaat (community), arose from roughly a dozen Nurcu textual communities. Unlike Nursî, who was Kurdish by origin, Gülen is an ethnic Turk, and his teachings have always contained strong elements of Ottoman nostalgia and Turkish nationalism, with a particular emphasis on the Turkish language. As a result, although Kurds make up some of his followers, even at its height, the Gülen Movement struggled to establish a strong presence in the predominantly Kurdish Turkish southeast. Gülen's worldview has also been shaped by Sunni sectarianism, especially towards the Shia of Iran, whose historical predecessor, the Persian Empire, was one of the Ottomans' greatest rivals.

Born in 1941 in the village of Korucuk in the province of Erzurum in eastern Anatolia, Gülen was taught Arabic and the basic tenets of Islam by his father.<sup>5</sup> In 1958, he passed the entrance examination for the state-controlled Presidency of Religious Affairs, commonly known as the Diyanet, and was appointed the resident preacher on

a civil servant's salary at a mosque in Edirne in northwest Turkey.<sup>6</sup> It was around this time that he became acquainted with Nursî's writings, although the two men never met. In 1966, Gülen was transferred to the Aegean port of Izmir. In 1971, he began to attract a growing following as a result of the religious instruction he provided at summer youth camps. During the leftist-rightist factional fighting of the 1970s, Gülen was also involved in the anti-Communism movement.

Nursî's reputation was built on his notoriously complex writings, which are often criticized by outsiders for their obliqueness. However, his followers maintain that their difficulty is evidence of their complexity and profundity, and that discussions about their meaning draw readers deeper into the text. In contrast, the appeal of Gülen's writings and public utterances has been primarily emotional rather than intellectual. During his sermons, Gülen frequently breaks down in tears while describing the sufferings of the Prophet Muhammed. Although his followers developed a rapidly expanding network of reading circles to study his writings in different towns and cities across much of Anatolia, Gülen was never regarded as a leading Islamic theologian by those outside his own cemaat. For Sufi brotherhoods such as the Naqshbandi—whose members undergo a rigorous training and initiation process before they are deemed worthy of being admitted into an esoteric tradition which is believed to stretch back to the Prophet Muhammed himself—Gülen was regarded as something of a theological parvenu, lacking the spiritual authority and pedigree of the tariqah.

Since he relocated to the U.S. in 1999, Gülen has presented himself as an advocate of tolerance, reconciliation and interfaith dialogue. However, his early career was notable for statements, sermons, and publications expressing intolerance toward those whom he considered enemies of Islam. In one sermon, allegedly dating from 1979, Gülen energetically chides his flock for allowing infidels (*gâvur*) to take control of all the holy places of Islam. He declared, "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.<sup>7</sup> 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.»<sup>8</sup>

In the first editions of books from his early career, such as *Fasıldan Fasıla* (From Chapter to Chapter) and *Asrın Getirdiği Tereddütler* (The Puzzles of the Age), 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.”<sup>9</sup>

Such references have been removed from the later editions of Gülen’s books and from the copies of his writings available on the Gülen Movement’s websites. He has never provided an explanation for the change, or disowned his previous statements. Many Turks, however, still view him as an archconservative imam with extremist views about women, atheists, and apostates.

In his writings, Gülen’s theology differentiates between *tebliğ* (communication) and *temsil* (representation). He calls on his followers to avoid open proselytism, or *tebliğ*. 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, within the *cemaat*, the embodiment of these ideals appears to involve a subordinate role for women.

Gülen maintains that Muslims and non-Muslims lived in harmony under the Ottoman Turks—even though, for nearly all of the Ottoman Empire’s existence, non-Muslims were legally subordinated to Muslims in what amounted to a religious caste system. Gülen argues that, in order to ensure peaceful cohabitation between different faiths, Turks should become leaders in the promotion of religious

tolerance. The authors Latif Erdoğan and Davut Aydın, who are both sympathetic to Gülen, argue that the cemaat's key goal is to provide Turkey with 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."<sup>10</sup>

Starting in the 1970s, Gülen sought to create a "Golden Generation" of committed male followers who, in addition to embodying Islamic values in their everyday lives, would form the leadership cadre of the cemaat.<sup>11</sup> Most were the children of pious low income families of first or second generation migrants from the countryside to the cities. Selected at an early age, they would have their education paid for them by wealthy members of the cemaat, which would also arrange shared accommodation and a small stipend for those who were forced to relocate to attend university. The shared apartments—known as ışık evleri (lighthouses)—were single sex. Students would receive regular visits from older members of the cemaat, known as abiler (elder brothers) or ablalar (elder sisters), who would check on their welfare and lead discussions and readings of Gülen's works.

As the cemaat grew in size, it began to expand its educational and recruitment activities, particularly through the specialized schools that were established by Gülen followers to prepare students for the nationwide high school and university entrance examinations. The cemaat would identify bright students from low income backgrounds and provide them with scholarships to enable them to attend private schools and universities. Gradually, the cemaat also began to establish dormitories and schools of its own.

Gülen frequently encouraged his followers to seek employment in the Turkish civil service on the grounds that it would enable them to serve the nation, although skeptics accused him of trying to take over the state by stealth. Those of his followers who went into the private sector created a rapidly growing network of companies, media organizations, and NGOs. In addition to creating employment for Gülen's followers, these commercial activities also provided a steady revenue stream for the cemaat. Additionally, individual members who could afford to do so were vigorously encouraged to donate a portion of their salaries as Zakat, the religiously required

giving of alms, in order to support the cemaat's activities.

The internal organization of the cemaat has always been extremely opaque and secretive. A small number of prominent members of the organization meet with Gülen frequently, usually once or twice a month, to assess the cemaat's activities and determine strategic goals. Although some members of this inner circle have geographical responsibilities, such as being responsible for overseeing activities in a particular country or region, there is no detailed hierarchical structure. The implementation of decisions made at the meetings with Gülen is usually the result of ad-hoc cooperation between individual members under the supervision of one or more senior figures.

During his later years, Said Nursî was an outspoken supporter of the Democrat Party (DP) of Prime Minister Adnan Menderes (1899-1961), who was overthrown by a military coup in 1960 and hanged the following year. Over the next decade, Nursî's followers tended to vote for the Justice Party (AP), which was formed to replace the DP, which had been banned after the 1960 coup. However, in 1970, the Nurcus joined with the tariqah to support the foundation of an explicitly Islamist political party, the National Order Party (MNP), under the leadership of Necmettin Erbakan (1926-2011), who had close connections with the Istanbul-based İskenderpaşa lodge of the Naqshbandi tariqah. The MNP was closed down after the 1971 coup and replaced by the National Salvation Party (MSP), which was also led by Erbakan and supported by the Nurcus. However, the Nurcus broke away from the MSP in 1974 after it entered a coalition government and supported amnesty for leftists convicted of political offences. The Nurcus, including the Gülen Movement, subsequently returned to supporting the AP and its successor, the True Path Party (DYP), which was formed after the AP was outlawed following the 1980 coup. However, the majority of Turkish Islamists—including most of the tariqah—continued to back the MSP until it was banned; they would later support the MSP's successor, the Welfare Party (RP).

The situation changed in 1997, when a campaign was launched by the Turkish military to force an RP-led coalition government from office, and to purge what were seen as reactionary forces



from the public and political spheres. On June 19, 1999, the *ATV* national television channel broadcast two video cassettes of Gülen apparently instructing his followers to infiltrate critical parts of the apparatus of state, biding their time by presenting a moderate image until they were strong enough to implement their agenda.<sup>12</sup> As state prosecutors began a judicial investigation into Gülen, he fled to the U.S., ostensibly for medical treatment.

After the RP was also outlawed, and Erbakan banned from politics for five years, in August 2001, a younger generation of former RP members formed the Justice and Development Party (AKP), under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the former mayor of Istanbul. Like Erbakan, Erdoğan had close connections to the İskenderpaşa lodge of the Naqshbandi tariqah. Despite their differences, Erdoğan and the Gülen Movement formed an alliance of convenience against what they regarded as a shared enemy, namely the secular Turkish Establishment especially the country's military. Each was confident that, once their common enemy had been marginalized, they would be strong enough to dominate or discard the other.

When the AKP came to power in November 2002, Erdoğan enabled the cemaat to rapidly expand its presence in the apparatus of state, especially in the Turkish National Police, the judiciary and the Education Ministry—both by employing large numbers of Gülen's followers and by fast-tracking them for promotion. In return, the cemaat mobilized its networks in support of Erdoğan and the AKP, both domestically and abroad. At the time, the AKP had no organized presence outside Turkey, and very few speakers of foreign languages. The cemaat filled the gap, particularly in Washington, where its members lobbied vigorously on Erdoğan's behalf, including forming close relations with interest groups with ties to the administration.

Inside Turkey, Erdoğan and the cemaat were initially very cautious for fear of triggering a military intervention. The situation changed when the AKP reacted to a clumsy attempt by the military to prevent it from appointing then-Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül to the presidency by calling an early general election for July 2007, which it won in a landslide. Unwilling to defy such a clear



manifestation of public sentiment, the military remained silent as Gül was sworn in as president in August 2007.

Confident that he no longer needed to fear the military, Erdoğan began to pursue an increasingly overt pro-religion agenda. The cemaat used its presence in the police and judiciary to go on the offensive against its opponents and perceived rivals by various means, including initiating a series of highly politicized mass trials and leaking embarrassing wire-tapped private telephone conversations involving its more outspoken critics to the public. The most notorious of the trials involved hundreds of people who were arrested and charged with belonging to a vast covert organization known as Ergenekon, which prosecutors claimed had been responsible for almost every act of political violence in modern Turkish history. The investigation and the subsequent trials, which together lasted from late 2007 until August 2013, were extensively covered by the cemaat's media organs, which published lurid allegations against the accused and conducted defamation campaigns against critics of the cases. Turkish journalist Asli Aydintasbas wrote,

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 criticized or attacked the Gülen network over the years.<sup>13</sup>

Supporters of the Ergenekon investigation claimed that it was an attempt to unravel what Turks call the “Deep State”—a covert network with its roots in the military which was believed to have manipulated political processes and to have been responsible for numerous acts of politically motivated violence, including overseeing death squads targeting leftists and Kurdish nationalists. Although its influence had begun to weaken from the late 1990s onwards, the Deep State was a reality. However, the Ergenekon investigation made no attempt to investigate the real Deep State, opting instead to target opponents, rivals and critics of the cemaat.<sup>14</sup> As the latter were almost invariably hostile to Erdoğan, he actively

supported the investigation. “I am the prosecutor of this case,” he said, and his supporters ridiculed critics who claimed the cemaat had taken over the state.<sup>15</sup>

In 2009, a new round of mass arrests began, targeting Kurdish nationalists who were accused of being members of the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK), an umbrella organization for all of the groups which follow the ideology of Abdullah Öcalan, the founder of the militant Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK). The police and prosecutors overseeing the KCK investigation were all suspected members of the cemaat, and in many instances the same officials who were responsible for Ergenekon. Some of the thousands who were arrested and imprisoned in the KCK investigation were known to be sympathetic to the PKK. Many others were not. The latter included staff at NGOs active in the predominantly Kurdish southeastern region of Turkey, where the cemaat was belatedly attempting to establish a presence for its own schools and NGOs.

In January 2010, pro-Gülen journalists at *Taraf* newspaper published details of what were alleged to be plans drawn up by a cabal of high-ranking military officers in December 2002 to stage a military coup in 2003. According to *Taraf*, the coup, which was codenamed called Balyoz or “Sledgehammer,” was to have started after the conspirators had engineered the bombing of two mosques in Istanbul and the downing of a Turkish F-16 warplane over the Aegean, which would have been blamed on Greece. The cabal, it was alleged, would have used the resultant chaos to seize power, establish an interim government and imprison its domestic enemies. *Taraf* handed the documents to pro-Gülen prosecutors, who launched an investigation that led to the arrest, trial and imprisonment of hundreds of active-duty and retired members of the military.

However, it soon became clear that the Balyoz coup plan was flawed. Prosecutors claimed that some of the defendants had held a seminar at First Army Headquarters in Istanbul on March 5-7, 2003, to discuss bombing mosques in the city on February 28, 2003. A detailed analysis of the alleged coup plan by Harvard scholars Dani Rodrik and Pınar Doğan, the daughter of one of the defendants, revealed hundreds more anachronisms and contradictions. Forensic analysis by Turkish, U.S., and German experts of the CD on which the

Balyoz plan was stored concluded that it had been forged and copied onto computers associated with the defendants.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, in September 2012, 325 serving and retired officers were sentenced to lengthy prison terms for their alleged role in the plot. As Dani Rodrik wrote,

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.<sup>17</sup>

As the number of cases brought by pro-Gülen prosecutors grew, they increasingly targeted those who had specifically criticized the cemaat itself, not opponents and critics that the cemaat shared with Erdogan. In 2006, Adil Serdar Saçan, former director of the Organized Crimes Unit of the Istanbul police, gave an interview to Kanaltürk TV in which he claimed 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.<sup>18</sup>

In 2010, another former police chief, Hanefi Avcı, who was once believed to be sympathetic to the cemaat, published a devastating account of the manner in which Gülen's followers had established networks within the police and judiciary that were controlling cases against the cemaat's perceived critics.<sup>19</sup> In 2011, it became known

that the left-wing journalist Ahmet Şık was completing a book on the cemaat's penetration of the Turkish state apparatus, to be entitled *İmamin Ordusu* (The Imam's Army). All three men were arrested and imprisoned on charges of belonging to Ergenekon. Şık was arrested before his book had even been published.<sup>20</sup>

From prison, Şık sent a handwritten note to the journalist Justin Vela, who published part of it in *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.<sup>21</sup>

Privately, members of the cemaat had long made little effort to conceal their personal disdain for Erdoğan, and were preparing for an eventual power struggle. However, Erdoğan was convinced that the cemaat would not dare to challenge his authority. In November 2011, a listening device of the same type as those used by the now cemaat-dominated police was found in Erdoğan's office. Three months later, when Erdoğan was recuperating at home following an operation for intestinal cancer, pro-Gülen prosecutors issued a summons for Hakan Fidan, the head of Turkey's main spy agency, the National Intelligence Organization (MİT), on charges that he had knowingly allowed MİT agents in the PKK to engage in terrorism. At the time, Fidan was regarded as one of Erdoğan's closest confidantes – and the summons was seen as an attempt to weaken Erdoğan's grip on power while he was incapacitated. However, Erdoğan immediately ordered the Justice Minister to block the summons and suspend the prosecutors concerned.

Over the months that followed, pro-Gülen companies and NGOs found themselves increasingly excluded from state contracts, disbursements, and access to cheap funding from Turkey's state-run banks. In November 2013, Erdoğan announced plans to abolish

the crammer school system, thus effectively threatening to remove what had become the cemaat's main means of recruitment and one of its primary sources of income. In December, 2013, pro-Gülen prosecutors hit back by issuing arrest warrants for nearly 100 associates of the AKP leadership, including Erdoğan's son Bilal. The allegations included claims that members of Erdoğan's inner circle had participated in a scheme operated by Turkish-Iranian businessman Reza Zarrab to circumvent U.S. sanctions on Iran by channeling funds through Turkey, sending gold to Tehran in exchange for oil.<sup>22</sup> Erdoğan eventually succeeded in quashing the investigation and having the prosecutors concerned suspended, but not before four ministers who had been implicated in the scandal had been forced to resign.<sup>23</sup>

Erdoğan responded by initiating a massive purge of suspected Gülenists from the police, including suspending the staff of entire departments. Over the next three months, the cemaat reacted by daily postings on the internet—mostly from U.S.-based accounts—of a barrage of wiretapped recordings of leading members of the AKP apparently fixing state contracts and manipulating judicial processes. Many of the recordings dated to before the growing tensions between the cemaat and Erdoğan had descended into open warfare. The primary motivation for the release of the material appears to have been to damage Erdoğan in the run-up to local elections on March 30, 2014. Erdoğan was hoping that a convincing victory in the local polls would provide him with the momentum to stand as a candidate in the presidential elections that were scheduled for August, 2014. On April 6, 2014, a week after Erdoğan and the AKP had comfortably won the local elections, the postings came to an abrupt halt. In August 2014, Erdoğan was duly elected president.

Over the next two years, Erdoğan intensified his purges of suspected Gülenists from the police. He also moved against Bank Asya, the cemaat's bank, which operated according to Islamic financing rules. In February 2015, the state seized a majority stake in Bank Asya. In July 2015, it took over the entire bank. In March 2016, the state seized control of *Zaman*, the cemaat's flagship daily newspaper, and its English language affiliate *Today's Zaman*. One by one, politicized cases such as Ergenekon and Balyoz were all

overturned on appeal. By late 2015, all of those who had been convicted had been released from custody.

In February 2014, the minutes of the Turkey's National Security Council (MGK) meetings began referring to the cemaat as an "organization that threatens national security." The phrase was repeated in the minutes of all subsequent MGK meetings until May 26, 2016, when the cemaat was officially included in the list of proscribed terrorist organizations as the Fethullahçı Terör Örgütü (Fethullahist Terror Organization, or FETO).

The cemaat had first started to infiltrate its members into the Turkish military in the late 1980s. These efforts had intensified during the 1990s, when hundreds of suspected Gülen sympathizers were expelled from the officer corps. Those who confessed described how they had been recruited into the cemaat while teenagers, told to take the entrance examinations for officer training school and then pursue a military career while taking care to avoid showing any signs of piety—such as by praying regularly or refraining from drinking alcohol. The Gülenists who succeeded in infiltrating the military did not network amongst themselves and were normally unaware of the identity of other members of the cemaat in the officer corps. Most remained in intermittent contact with Gülenist mentors outside the military through covert meetings. Others went for years without any contact at all, until they were approached and given tasks such as stealing documents or, particularly during the Ergenekon and Balyoz investigations, planting fabricated evidence in military installations.

Through early 2016, there were repeated rumors that there would be a purge of suspected Gülenist officers at the annual Supreme Military Council (YAŞ) at the beginning of August 2016. Some of the retired officers targeted by the Balyoz case circulated lists of officers they believed to be Gülenists.

On the evening of July 15, 2016, Turkey was rocked by an attempted coup, as military units tried to seize a handful of locations in Istanbul and Ankara. Erdoğan called his supporters out onto the streets to confront the putschists. Around 250 civilians and an unknown number of military personnel were killed in the ensuing clashes. By 10 am on July 16, 2016, the coup attempt had been crushed and virtually all of the 8,000 military personnel who had

taken to the streets – most of them cadets and conscripts who had been told by their officers that they were participating in an exercise – were in custody.

Within minutes of the news of the attempted coup breaking, and long before the identity of any of the officers involved was known, AKP officials were already blaming the cemaat. These accusations intensified after it emerged that the names of some of those known to have played an active role in the putsch were on the lists drawn up by the retired officers. A handful of the putschists even confessed to being Gülenists, although the vast majority vigorously denied any connection to the cemaat. Those who were aware that they were participating in a coup maintained that they believed it was being staged by the military high command rather than the cemaat.

Many aspects of the coup attempt remain unclear, not least how the putschists expected to seize control of the country with such limited resources and what they would have done next if the coup had been successful. Erdoğan has refused to allow a transparent and comprehensive investigation into the events of July 15-16, 2016, which his opponents, including the cemaat, have used to claim that Erdoğan instigated the coup himself—something he has resolutely denied. It has also meant that the U.S. has repeatedly rebuffed Turkish requests for Gülen's extradition, citing a lack of evidence demonstrating that he was directly involved in the attempted putsch.<sup>24</sup> The refusal to extradite Gülen has added new tensions to the increasingly strained relationship between Washington and Ankara and fueled the widespread belief, both in government circles and amongst the Turkish public, that the U.S. was complicit in the putsch.<sup>25</sup>

Under normal circumstances, Turkish law makes it extremely difficult to dismiss state employees. However, on July 21, 2016, Erdoğan announced a State of Emergency, enabling him to suspend civil rights and rule by presidential decree. Over the next year, the State of Emergency was used to imprison more than 50,000 people on charges of Gülenist sympathies and dismiss 110,000 civil servants, mostly from the judiciary, police, military and Education Ministry. In addition, more than 2,000 NGOs, media outlets and educational institutions were closed down and nearly 1,000 private companies



with total assets of \$11 billion were seized by the state.<sup>26</sup>

## GLOBAL REACH

There are believed to be somewhere between three and six million Gülen followers worldwide, although the exact figure is difficult to determine. As the Gülen follower Ihsan Yilmaz explains, the boundaries of the cemaat's "collectivity" are "extremely loose and difficult to specify."<sup>27</sup> Skeptical observers note that Gülen's followers have long tended 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..."<sup>28</sup>

The value of the institutions inspired by Gülen worldwide has been variously estimated as ranging from \$20 to \$50 billion. According to researcher Hakan Yavuz, the movement had three coordinated tiers: businessmen, journalists, and teachers and students.<sup>29</sup> Financial support for its activities came largely from the so-called "Anatolian bourgeoisie," which funded the building of hundreds of private high schools, universities, colleges, dormitories, summer camps, and foundations around the world. Although some of Gülen's followers had established some revenue-generating activities outside the country, most of its foreign operations were at least partly dependent on funding from Turkey. As a result, in addition to having a devastating impact on its activities inside Turkey, Erdoğan's crackdown on the cemaat is likely to force the group to severely reduce its global activities as well. Before the crackdown, in many countries, the cemaat had established close relations with the ruling elites, who often sent their children to be educated in its schools. Until 2013, Turkish diplomats also were under instruction from Ankara to support the activities of the cemaat's schools and NGOs in the countries to which they were posted, as they were regarded as instruments of Turkish "soft power." In some countries, particularly in Africa, the cemaat's local networks exerted more

influence than the Turkish state.<sup>30</sup> But since 2013, and even more so since the failed coup of July 2016, the Turkish government has vigorously encouraged governments to close down the cemaat's schools and NGOs—and, in several cases, threatened to withhold foreign aid unless they do so.

Gülen himself lives in the Pocono Mountains of northeast Pennsylvania, rarely leaving the sprawling rural complex he has inhabited since 1999. Before the split with Erdoğan, Gülen's supporters, Turkish politicians, and leading businessmen often visited him at his compound. Subsequently, his only visitors have been his committed followers and occasional journalists.

### *The Gülenist Schools*

There are Gülen schools on every continent but Antarctica. To date, 95 countries with Gülen schools have been identified, although at its height the network is believed to have been broader still, stretching to perhaps as many as 140 countries.<sup>31</sup>

In 2001, Gülen was granted an immigrant visa as a “religious worker,” and soon after received his green card.<sup>32</sup> During the years that followed, the cemaat was able to amass sufficient manpower and influence to woo countless U.S. lawmakers, and become the largest operator of charter schools in America. Gülenist schools were 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.<sup>33</sup> They have also been hired as PE teachers, accountants, janitors, caterers, painters, construction workers, human resources managers, public relations specialists, and lawyers.

The cemaat has also been credibly and frequently charged with channeling school funds to other Gülen-inspired organizations using the schools to generate political connections. Unfair hiring and termination practices, and academic cheating run rampant—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.<sup>34</sup>

Nevertheless, there have been no prosecutions and the network of cemaat-controlled charter schools has continued to operate.<sup>35</sup> The U.S. is the only country in the world where the Gülen Movement has been able to establish schools fully funded by the host country's taxpayers. The *Wall Street Journal* reported in 2016 that around 150 U.S. charter schools were tied to the Gülen movement.<sup>36</sup> Despite pressure from Ankara, the cemaat has also maintained an effective lobbying presence in Washington.

Unlike in Turkey, where religion dominates both curricular and extra-curricular activities, there is no evidence that Islamic proselytizing takes place at the cemaat's schools in other countries, which are generally viewed positively by students and parents alike. Graduates perform reasonably well, and some perform outstandingly. Despite continuing questions and concerns and the uncertainty about the Gülen movement's future, its schools and NGOs are currently still active in many countries all over the world.

## RECENT ACTIVITY

The Gülen Movement is largely in retreat. It has been crushed and discredited in Turkey, where the overwhelming majority of the public believe that it was responsible for the July 2016 coup attempt. Its once vast networks have been dismantled and virtually all of its leading members have either been imprisoned or fled abroad. There currently appears little prospect of Gülen restoring his public image or the cemaat ever recovering its former strength.

Even if many still cite a lack of concrete evidence for the Turkish government's narrative that the cemaat was responsible for the July 2016 coup attempt, the collapse of its alliance with Erdoğan has allowed enough evidence of its misdeeds—particularly in relation to the Ergenekon and Balyoz cases—to enter the public domain that its foreign reputation has also suffered considerable damage. Apart

from its activities in the U.S., all of the cemaat's foreign activities relied on financial support from businesses and NGOs inside Turkey. With this source of funding now severed, its global activities are expected to enter a long, but inexorable decline.

Most critically, Gülen himself has been in poor health and has no successor. Erdoğan's July 2016 crackdown led to widespread hardship. There are numerous credible reports that many of those arrested have suffered torture and physical abuse. In addition to being dismissed from their jobs, a large proportion of those targeted by Erdoğan's purges have also been stripped of their homes, cars, bank accounts, pensions, and social security rights, in nearly every case, without ever being convicted of any crime. Gülen has counselled his followers to be patient, comparing their sufferings to those of the Prophet Muhammed in the early years of Islam. However, such statements have merely exacerbated unprecedented signs of discontent inside the cemaat, with dissidents arguing that, as an elderly lifelong bachelor enjoying a comfortable secluded existence in the Poconos, Gülen does not face the same risks and hardships as his followers and their families. Although this discontent has yet to lead to any major public schisms, the number of new recruits is falling far short of the number of existing members who are drifting away from the organization.

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