



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-Madhab 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 more 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 Erdoğan 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, or FETÖ) or Parallel State Organization (Paralel Devlet Yapılanması, or 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. However, the movement's membership and influence continue to decline as the Turkish government targets their financial resources, both within Turkey and abroad.

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.¹

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*).”² Yet, there is more to the story. At the height of his power, Gülen was an immensely powerful, controversial figure in Turkey, and has cultivated global influence through the networks established by his followers.

Although the two never met, Gülen is a follower of Said Nursî (1876-1960), 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.”³ 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 shaped 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.⁴

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, Turkish nationalism, and an 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 predominantly Kurdish southeastern Turkey. Gülen’s worldview has also been shaped by Sunni sectarianism, especially toward the Shi’a of Iran, whose historical predecessor, the Persian Empire, was one of the Ottomans’ greatest rivals.

Born in 1941 in eastern Anatolia, Gülen was taught Arabic and the basic tenets of Islam by his father.⁵ In 1958, he passed the entrance examination for the state-controlled Presidency of Religious Affairs, commonly known as the Diyanet, and was appointed as the resident preacher at a mosque in Edirne in northwest Turkey.⁶ It was around this time that he became acquainted with Nursî’s writings. In 1966, Gülen was transferred to the Aegean port of Izmir. He began to attract a growing following in 1971 while providing religious instruction at youth summer camps. During the 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; 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 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 believed to stretch back to the Prophet Muhammed himself—Gülen is 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 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.⁷ 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.”⁸

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 West the “continuous enemy of Islam.” Of Christians, he wrote: “After a while they perverted and obscured their own future.” Gülen also wrote that Jews have a “genetic animosity towards any religion;” and have used “their guile and skills to breed bad blood... 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.”⁹

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.

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, both of whom were sympathetic to Gülen at the time,¹⁰ argued that the *cemaat*'s key goal was to help Turkey play 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.”¹¹

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*.¹² 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 by wealthy members of the *cemaat*. The benefactors 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 specialized schools 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 attend private schools and universities. Gradually, the *cemaat* established dormitories and schools of its own.

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 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*. Members who could afford to donate were vigorously encouraged to do so with 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 organization members meet with Gülen 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 overseeing activities in a particular country or region, there is no detailed hierarchical structure. Any decisions made resulting from 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. The DP was banned after the coup.

Over the next decade, Nursî's followers tended to vote for the Justice Party (AP) until the AP was outlawed following the 1980 coup, at which point those supporters tended to cast their votes for the True Path Party (DYP), the AP's natural successor.

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 an amnesty for leftists convicted of political offences. The majority of Turkish Islamists, including most of the *tariqah*, however, 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 the Turkish military launched a campaign 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 videos of Gülen apparently instructing his followers to infiltrate critical parts of the government, biding their time by presenting a moderate image until they were strong enough to implement their agenda.¹³ As state prosecutors began a judicial investigation into Gülen, he fled to the U.S., ostensibly for medical treatment.

In August 2001, after the RP was also outlawed and Erbakan banned from politics for five years, 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: the secular Turkish establishment and the country's military. 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 foreign language speakers. The *cemaat* filled the gap, particularly in Washington, where its members lobbied vigorously on Erdoğan's behalf and formed 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 the party 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 pursuing 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 Ergenekon, a vast covert organization which prosecutors claimed had been responsible for almost every act of political violence in modern Turkish history. The investigation and the subsequent trials, spanning 2007 until August 2013, were extensively covered by the *cemaat*'s media organs. Lurid allegations against the accused were published and defamation campaigns targeted critics of the cases. "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," wrote Turkish journalist Asli Aydintaşbaş.¹⁴

Supporters of the Ergenekon investigation claimed it was an attempt to unravel what Turks call the "Deep State"—a covert network with roots in the military that had manipulated political processes and was responsible for numerous acts of politically motivated violence, including death squads targeting leftists and Kurdish nationalists. Although its influence weakened from the late 1990s onwards, the Deep State was a reality. However, the Ergenekon investigation made no attempt to investigate the real Deep State; it instead opted to target opponents, rivals and critics of the *cemaat*.¹⁵ As the latter were almost invariably hostile to Erdoğan, he actively supported the investigation. "I am the prosecutor of this case," he said; his supporters, meanwhile, ridiculed critics who claimed the *cemaat* had taken over the state.¹⁶

In 2009, a new round of mass arrests began, targeting Kurdish nationalists accused of being members of the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK), an umbrella organization for all of the groups following 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*; in many instances the same officials were responsible for Ergenekon. Some of the thousands who were arrested and imprisoned in the KCK investigation were 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 attempting to establish a presence for its own schools and NGOs.

In January 2010, pro-Gülen journalists published details of alleged plans to stage a military coup in 2003. The plans were supposedly drawn up by a cabal of high-ranking military officers in December 2002. According to *Taraf*, the newspaper where the journalists worked, the coup, codenamed Balyoz (or "Sledgehammer"), would start after the conspirators 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, to establish an interim government, and to 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 Pinar 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.¹⁷ 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.¹⁸

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*.¹⁹

In 2010, another former police chief, Hanefi Avcı, once thought 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.²⁰ 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. All three men were arrested and imprisoned on charges of belonging to Ergenekon. Şık was arrested before his book was published.²¹

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.²²

Privately, members of the *cemaat* 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 was found in Erdoğan's office. When Erdoğan was recuperating at home following an operation for intestinal cancer three months later, pro-Gülen prosecutors issued a summons for Hakan Fidan, the head of Turkey's main spy agency, the National Intelligence Organization (MİT). Fidan was charged with knowingly allowing MİT agents in the PKK to engage in terrorism. At the time, Fidan was regarded as one of Erdoğan's closest confidantes; 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 to suspend the associated prosecutors.

During the following months, 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 a primary source 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 claimed 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 channelling funds through Turkey, sending gold to Tehran in exchange for oil.²³ Erdoğan eventually succeeded in quashing the investigation and having the prosecutors suspended, but not before four ministers implicated in the scandal were forced to resign.²⁴

Erdoğan initiated a massive purge of suspected Gülenists from the police, sometimes suspending entire departments. Over the next three months, the *cemaat* reacted with daily internet postings (mostly from U.S.-based accounts). The posts were voice recordings of leading AKP members fixing state contracts and manipulating judicial procedures. The growing tensions between the *cemaat* and Erdoğan had descended into open warfare. The *cemaat* sought, with the release of the recordings, to damage Erdoğan in the run-up to local elections on March 30, 2014. Erdoğan hoped that a convincing victory would provide him with the momentum to stand as a candidate in the presidential elections 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. On August 10, 2014, Erdoğan was duly elected president.

Over the next two years, Erdoğan intensified efforts to purge suspected Gülenists from police departments. 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, and 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).

Cemaat members first infiltrated 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 were recruited into the *cemaat* as teenagers, told to take the entrance examinations for officer training school and then to pursue a military career while taking care to avoid showing any signs of piety, such as praying regularly or refraining from drinking alcohol. Gülenists who succeeded in infiltrating the military did not network amongst themselves and were normally unaware 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 (YAS) 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 on his supporters to confront the putschists. Around 250 civilians and an unknown number of military personnel were killed in the ensuing clashes. By 10am 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 identities of officers involved were known, AKP officials were blaming the *cemaat*. These accusations intensified after it emerged that the names of some who had played an active role in the putsch were on lists drawn up by 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 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.²⁵ The refusal to extradite Gülen has added new tensions to the increasingly strained relationship between Washington and Ankara; it has fueled the widespread belief, both in government circles and amongst the Turkish public, that the U.S. was complicit in the putsch.²⁶

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 to 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 to 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.²⁷ By December 2018, the *cemaat*’s networks in Turkey had been shattered and around 33,000 alleged members and sympathizers had been imprisoned in Turkey for terrorism-related crimes.²⁸

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 Gülen follower İhsan Yılmaz explains, the boundaries of the *cemaat*’s “collectivity” are “extremely loose and difficult to specify.”²⁹ 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...”³⁰

At its peak, the value of the institutions inspired by Gülen worldwide varied between \$20 to \$50 billion. According to researcher Hakan Yavuz, the movement had three coordinated tiers: businessmen, journalists, and teachers and students.³¹ Financial support for its activities came largely from the so-called “Anatolian bourgeoisie,” which funded hundreds of private high schools, universities, colleges, dormitories, summer camps, and foundations around the world. Although some of Gülen’s followers established 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* has forced the group to severely reduce its global activities. Before the crackdown, the *cemaat* had established close relations with the ruling elites in many countries, who often sent their children to be educated in its schools. Until 2013, Turkish diplomats were under instruction from Ankara to support the activities of the *cemaat*’s schools and NGOs which were regarded as instruments of Turkish “soft power.” In some countries, particularly ones in Africa, the *cemaat*’s local networks exerted more influence than the Turkish state.³² 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 some speculate that there were as many as 140 host countries at the height of the movement.³³

In 2001, Gülen was granted an immigrant visa as a “religious worker,” and soon after received his green card.³⁴ During the years that followed, the *cemaat* was able to amass sufficient manpower and influence to woo countless U.S. lawmakers, becoming 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, including H1-B visa process exploitation. Some schools would replace American teachers with uncertified Turkish ones hired at a higher salary.³⁵

Academic cheating runs rampant; charges range from grade-changing schemes to accusations that some science fair projects have been completed by the teachers. 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. 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.³⁶

Nevertheless, there have been no prosecutions and the network of *cemaat*-controlled charter schools has continued to operate.³⁷ 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 *Washington Post* reported in 2018 that 167 U.S. charter schools were tied to the Gülen movement.³⁸ 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 so. 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 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. The possibility of Gülen restoring his public image or the *cemaat* ever recovering its former strength is low.

Even if many still cite a lack of concrete evidence for the Turkish government's narrative about 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 damaging its foreign reputation. 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 these sources now severed, its global activities appear to have entered a long, inexorable decline. Most critically, Gülen himself has been in poor health and has no successor.

There are numerous credible reports that many of those arrested during Erdoğan's July 2016 crackdown 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*. Dissidents argue 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 drifting away from the organization.

Turkey's crackdown on Gulenist elements worldwide, meanwhile, is ongoing.³⁹ In May of 2021, Selahaddin Gulen, the nephew of Fethullah Gulen, was detained by Turkish security services overseas and brought back to Turkey. Selahaddin was captured in Kenya, where he was living and fighting a legal battle with the Kenyan government to avoid deportation.⁴⁰ His fate remains unclear as of this writing.

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