

Gulen Movement

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Question/Answer

Bulent Aliriza: Notwithstanding your disclaimer of not speaking for the movement I think you gave a very good expose. But, it leads me to the question that has exercised me for some time. I run the Turkey Project at CSIS and we focus on domestic politics, the economy, foreign policy. Particularly US-Turkish relations, and we have not focused on the work of the Gulen Movement. Except recently I have become very interested in the political impact of the movement. Now you talked about the non-partisan nature of the movement and how it's not affiliated with any political party. You talked about the goals being definitely non-political but nonetheless when you talk about a newspaper that has a circulation of almost a million, almost double that of the next newspaper, when you talk about TV stations, they don't just focus on educational matters they have a political impact. And as the recent flap caused by the discovery of a document allegedly setting out plans to destroy this movement as well the ruling party, clearly what I talked about the beginning of the meeting, which is the perceived influence of the movement, has led people to believe that you exercise influence in the political arena even though you do not run a political party. When this question is raised with you, although you are not an expert on political matters, what is your answer? The Gulen Movement is outside the political arena but undoubtedly has influence in the political arena. When Ekrem Dumanli writes an article in Zaman, that influences the political process. What is your view of this?

Aslandogan: I think it can be fairly said that the movement in general can be regarded as involved in politics as every Turkish citizen will be involved. The matters of government policy impact the lives of everybody so everybody has a responsibility, in a sense, to get involved. So what is the nature of involvement, I think that is the key differentiation, point, what is the nature of involvement. A person or a group of people can get involved by committing or by aligning themselves with a particular party, that is definitely not the case in the case of the movement. The engagement or the involvement is on issues, on values, on attitudes, and issues. So, for political parties who are seeking support from movement participants to the degree that their agenda or their policies agree or overlap with the general views or ideas of the movement participants, they will get their support, either individually by voting or in terms of the media institutions or other institutions in terms of the people who are there. So today it may be a particular political party who seems to get the most political support of the movement and tomorrow it may be a totally different party. And for those people who know Turkish politics they know what I'm talking about. There is a choice that you can align with a particular political party and they know you as their guys and you know them as your guys. Whereas in the case of the movement these are the issues that we feel dear about, these are the values that are dear to our hearts, and whatever political party champions them, values such as democratic society, not non-democratic interventions in democracy, values such as non-corruption, not being corrupt, values such as not abusing the political power at the

expense of the large segment of the population. Values such as these, any party that champions and promotes these values, can get and will get the support of the movement.

BA: I'm going to follow up and then I'll open it up to others. I don't think you answered my question. You undoubtedly have political influence beyond the confines of the movement, beyond the mission of the movement as you described it, and you're getting a reaction because of that. Now, to focus my question just on what's been happening recently, how do you react to the reaction against your movement which seems to be in such vehement terms when you yourself say that you are keeping yourself outside the political process?

A: Again, in the sense that individually as citizens all participants are involved to some degree in the process without commitment to a particular political view or party. But if you are talking about the latest developments, first of all I would like to say that it would be an oxymoron to talk about the destruction of the movement, it is the Turkish people. It is possible to the degree that you can destroy the Turkish people. We are talking about millions of participants that come from every segment of society. How is it possible to destroy anything like that unless you actually get rid of the people themselves. So I don't think it's possible, even imaginable, to destroy the movement. But to discredit the movement, to reduce its impact and the growth rate that might be possible. And that might be due to the perception on the part of some individuals of a political threat or a political alliance that is not their favorite type of alliance. And such individuals existed throughout the four decades, there are columnists who have been writing against the movement for more than 30 years now in their papers, so such individuals in the media and other institutions will exist, have existed and they did devise some mechanisms to discredit the movement. But so far they all failed because the movement is so deeply rooted in the Turkish population.

BA: With that I open the floor for questions.

Albert Nekimken: I wonder if you could tell us a little about Fethullah Gulen as a person, his background, does he have training as an imam and why did he leave Turkey and resettle in Pennsylvania?

A: Gulen has been serving as a state licensed preacher, which is a little higher than an imam. The imam leads the prayer in a particular mosque but a preacher can preach in a mosque or maybe other mosques, and he was a traveling preacher. That is he preaches in a mosque primarily but he can travel and go to other towns and preach there. So he was working under the Diyanet Isleri, the directorate of religious affairs, as a state licensed preacher for many years, probably over 2 decades, maybe about 3 decades. In his education background, he completed elementary school education in part in school, actually attending school, and later in personal studies and he passed an exam to get the school diploma. He studied under some legalistic scholars as well as spiritual masters in eastern Anatolia for a number of years in his youth. And then he continued his education through his own efforts and he passed an exam that is administered by the directorate of religious affairs in Turkey to become an imam and preacher. He is very literate in western literature especially western philosophy and literature, he can cite many important thinkers in many of his sermons, Kant, Sartre, Pascal, you will find them if you

do a search in his literature in many places. He is very conversant in western literature. He knows a lot about science, on many scientific topics he spoke, he wrote. So that is his educational background. Ali Bulac, a very famous author and writer in Turkey, called him a “two winged scholar and intellectual,” that is he is well trained in religious sciences as well as the positive sciences. Now his coming to the US has multiple factors. One of them was the health reason and the other one was political. The health reason was he suffers from cardiovascular disease. Some years ago he had a stent put in one of his vessels. He suffers from diabetes. Because of these diseases his doctors recommended him to stay away from tension and from stress. Now in the ‘90’s there was this phenomenon in Turkey of what is called a ‘soft coup’ or ‘post-modern coup’ in 1997. When there was a lot of tension between the military and the Virtue party which secured the highest votes in the general election and became the coalition partner. There were many people in Turkey who were not happy with their policies and that actually included Gulen himself as well.

BA: It was the Welfare Party.

A: I’m sorry The Welfare Party. So during that period there was a lot of tension, a lot stress, a lot of you might say psychological warfare going on among political or non-political entities. As a part of this process, Gulen was charged by a particular prosecutor for organizing a group to take over the government and try to turn it into an Islamic state. Gulen left Turkey and came to the United States initially to the Mayo Clinic, I believe, for health reasons. But upon seeing this development, he decided upon the recommendation of his doctors to stay away from the stress and to remain in the States. If interested, we can talk more about that case. There is some documentation and books on that case that I can refer you to.

Albert Nekimken: Can he return?

A: He can return, there is no legal obstacle to his return. But, again for the same reason his return to Turkey may be taken advantage of by some political parties to make an issue and rally support for themselves. He fears that his going back to Turkey may be abused. That is the only reason he doesn’t want to go now, not to increase his own health stakes.

Sonar Kamber: I am a Fulbright Scholar from Turkey. You just said it’s not possible to destroy the movement. However, as you also mentioned, Mr. Gulen is in ill health. My question is, are there concerns within the movement about the future leadership about the future composition of the movement? And my second question, is compared to other Nurcu movements in Turkey the membership concept is very loose in your movement. People sometimes don’t think they really are a member of the organization or they are just perceived so by the others although they might not be. Yet when it comes to working together, when it comes to organizing an event for instance people will work all together with just a phone call. Can you explain this just through the hizmet concept or is there something else there?

A: I’m glad that you asked these questions actually. I had the first hand experience of getting the opinions and impressions of people from the movement in a study by a sociologist last year. So we visited with her three, four towns and a total of 106 individuals were interviewed, sometimes

individually sometimes in a group setting and one of her questions was this first question: What do you think will happen to the movement after Mr. Gulen passes away? The answer that was given almost unanimously was that this is not a movement about an individual. This is not a personality cult or a person-based movement. What happened to Rumi's impact after he passed away? His teachings and his mission thrived after he passed away. People expect, at least the sample that we talked to, expect the movement to continue to thrive after Gulen passes away. Secondly, in terms of the association and organization mechanisms I talked about some of the mechanisms through which people get in contact with the movement participants but it doesn't, of course, stop there. So people spend time, they work on projects so we can talk about a conglomerate of multiple social networks in the country. In townships, for instance in a small town, it would be very easy to go from one person to a person that you don't who also shares the same values and ideals of the movement. So there is a social networking phenomenon that involves a high degree of trust due to the factors that I mentioned, there is no suspicion of foreign intervention or foreign aid. There is no suspicion of pursuing your personal interest. So this gives a lot of power to this level of trust that is present among the participants. Because participation is totally open to everybody, anyone can go to an institution that is known as a movement institution and say: Hi I share some of the values here, I would like to be part of this in some degree and the next day you can begin working on a project.

Elcin Poyrazlar (Cumhuriyet newspaper): Alp Bey, you said that you are receiving fund raising money, about 5, 10, 15 percent from donations. I'd like to know if you can give us a specific total amount for the financial wealth of the Gulen Movement and who manages it?

A: This is an interesting question. It is in a sense it is a question you cannot really talk about, the financial wealth of the movement. You are talking about millions of people and hundreds of thousands of institutions. What is the collective total? Or financial wealth here? You can only go from institution to institution and ask them and get numbers and sum them up. Besides that, you cannot find a single number. There are estimates. Estimates based on how many schools there are, how much does it cost to run a school, build a school. How much does it cost to run a media institution or relief agency. Some of these numbers are available publicly. For instance, the relief agencies publishes their information and project costs, some of the education foundations they publish and make available for free. So you can come up with estimates, but that's the best you can do. When you do that and when you come up with a single number, I don't think it makes any sense, it's a meaningless number. We are talking about millions of people and thousands of institutions. Why do you put them into a single number in the first place?

BA: You did also say that you do not have a centralized organization, so therefore, it is impossible to answer this question.

A: To again give you an idea. In this past year's study with the sociologists, with some institutions, we were able to get their documentation, what kind of donations that they received and what does it

amount to. It is possible to do a scientific study and to come up with a really accurate number, at least for some institutions. But overall, it is an impossible task.

Elcin Poyrazlar (Cumhuriyet newspaper): What is your estimate though?

A: I don't have an estimate and I don't see it as a valuable piece of information.

BA: You know how this leaves you vulnerable to those who will exaggerate your wealth, along with your influence. So when you are unable to answer this question, for reasons which are understandable, then that leaves you open to the charges that I mentioned at the very beginning.

A: Exactly. You're very right and I agree with you. The only way to actually resolve that situation or help this person or entity get rid of those suspicions or fears or concerns, is to actually get them involved in how these projects are managed or how these projects start. Projects usually start with a need. There is not a bank account or one hundred bank accounts and money is collected there and then there is a project and let's spend the money there. There is no such phenomenon. There is a need, there is a project. And then people go out and fundraise. It always starts as a fundraising campaign. Hundreds and thousands of such campaigns goes on at anytime. As we speak now, there are probably tens of thousands of campaigns going on in Turkey, in every city.

Cynthia Butler: Hi thanks so much for coming. I'm Cynthia Butler, I'm an attorney from town, and I also work with a conflict resolution organization. A lot of what you described is very either analogous to or cooperative with, or at least consistent with, the standard Christian virtues of education. You know, reconciliation, and promoting these humanitarian altruistic sorts of values. I was wondering, does the Christian community in Turkey or elsewhere team up with you or support you openly or finance you or do any sort of reconciliation efforts in conjugation with the Gulen movement.

A: I know a few pieces of information that might help you understand what's going on, but I also think that will deserve a specific study. The first kind of official or formal context with the Christian communities in Turkey happened when Gulen started the interfaith initiative in the 90's. He met with the religious leaders of religious minorities in Turkey. The Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, the Jewish community, the Assyrian Orthodox. And they attended events together and they co-organized events together. And looking from the US at this, it's not a big deal, handshake and then the president at the event together. But it was a big deal in Turkey because Turkey had just got out of this war that they fought with Greeks, Orthodox Christians, Russians, Orthodox Christians, the French, again Christians. You name all the people that Turks fought, they're all Christians. So there was this doubt amongst the Turkish population that what is the commitment or the allegiance of the Christian citizens here is it to their faith or their foreign power or is it to their country? So this suspicion lingered for decades into the '90s. So Gulen's initiative was saying: Folks Turkey is now a strong country, let's close that page and open a new page. Now we're talking about a global clash of civilizations, talking about making the country more prestigious. Let's work together, we're all in the same boat, let's work around the message of peace together. So, those meetings were very symbolically significant. That was an initiative, I think, that paved the way to warmer relations. In terms of the Christian citizens, being part

of the movement or supporting the movement, I know that in the cities where there is such a population, such as in Istanbul, such as in south-east where there are Assyrian Christians, some of them do send their children to movement schools and they do support financially. I know for sure that such citizens exist, I don't know their numbers. And I know that some members of the Jewish communities also support the movement projects. Namely, Uzeyir Garih and Isak Alaton. Isak Alaton actually gave an interview to Zaman newspaper describing why he believed this was a positive movement and why he's supportive of the movement. So there is some relationship, some support of the movement in some non-Muslim communities in Turkey. But the degree, I cannot talk about that, I cannot say anything.

Mandana Afshar (National Endowment for Democracy): Thank you. I was curious if it has ever occurred in the past that a part of the movement wanted to start an institution or a policy or a direction that the bigger movement would not be supportive of or the bigger movement would try to stop. What would happen in such a case? Usually, when you have leaderless organizations, it can start its own dynamic, it can go in a different direction. Are there concerns? Has it happened in the past?

A: I haven't heard of any groups of people who wanted to do something like that, that would not be approved of by the larger movement. I did hear about some individuals running for political positions. You know, there is nothing wrong per se for a citizen to run for a political position. But, if a person is kind of identified with the movement, if they are at the head of an institution, that is identified with the movement for instance, there is a danger there. So, I heard that there were some individuals who wanted to run political positions and they were highly discouraged. In a couple of cases, it was made public that, you know, this individual was acting on his own behalf and not on the part of the movement institutions.

Ahu Ozyurt (Milliyet/CNNTurk): Thank you. Dr. Aslandogan thank you for coming. I have a couple of issues actually, if you could clarify. Recently, there has been some concern about the movement, sort of not leaving space for other NGOs to work in the same area. There is this concept of you not wanting any competition. Especially, in the education field and the relief organization field. Unfortunately, some of the publications have known to discredit some of the very good NGO workers. Could you clarify your position? There is this concept of Gulen or not Gulen. You're with us or you're not with us, you know, with the movement.

BA: Do you have a second question as well?

Ahu Ozyurt: I do

A: Can I answer this first. Ok, in terms of there not being room for competition. That is definitely not the case. The social problems of the country are endless, they will not be resolved any time. Talk about drug abuse, talk about children on the streets. Talk about human trafficking, talk about terrorism and its repercussions. You can list a number of social problems that need attention, and God knows there is room for everybody to do something about it. So I don't think that any participant, relief, or agency has thought that either we do it or nobody. I don't think that's the case, I don't think that's accurate. That

is not based on any real data. But in terms of media institutions, discrediting others, I think that should be investigated on a case by case basis. You know, I will speculate that on a case by case basis, it might be that this media institution or this individual or this other institution might have their suspicions on the true goals or agenda on that particular institution. That's why maybe they discredit it or publicize something negative about it. So I think that we can only understand that on a case by case basis and not on a general attitude of not leaving space. I think that is totally inaccurate.

BA: Before you go onto your second question, did you have one particular institution in mind or one particular case in mind? And do you want to talk about it?

Ahu Ozyurt: I don't know if you would want to comment specifically on the Cagdas Dernegi and the Cagdas Egitim Vakfi? Contemporary education foundations?

A: That would be an example, where some individuals in the movement or representative or administrators of institutions had their doubts of the motivations of some of the people behind those organizations. I think that's the case. That they had their doubts and their suspicion of their real agenda.

Ahu Ozyurt: You mean Gulen's publications might have doubt over these organizations?

A: Yes.

Ahu Ozyurt: Ok.

A: I think that is objective. I think it is very easy to assess this, by looking at the publications.

BA: And your second question please?

Ahu Ozyurt: The second one is about this big discourse about the Gulen students being favored by the AKP for certain appointments. Favoritism in terms of ministry of education, ministry of security, police force, judiciary. Could you respond to that? Why is your movement, to be sort of the backyard of a political movement, and appointments go straight to that, although there are secular people who share the same values with you.

A: If you look at the relationship of the political parties and especially the political parties, with either a political Islamist background or conservative leanings. When we look at the relationship with the movement participants and institutions with these parties, it is very complex. In individual cases, you can actually see political parties discriminating against the movement participants in hiring practices. In individual cases I think you can also find cases where they are favored. I don't think there is any pattern to it. I know for sure, in the late '90s, movement participants were either specifically either eliminated or discriminated against by a party who claimed to be representing Muslims in the country. I am sure of that episode. But it is possible that AKP or any other party who is in political power, they might be following such practices. But there is no pattern to it. It would be an individual basis, it would be localized incident. And again, for those among you who know Turkish politics that there is nothing new. I don't think anyone can accuse anyone else in Turkey for favoring a particular political group when they

are in political power. No political leader has any right to charge or criticize any other political party for doing that. Just ask any Turkish expert here.

BA: We got about ten minutes to go, so are there any other people with questions on their minds? Go ahead.

Kasim Cindemir (Hurriyet): Why aren't you on good terms with the military in Turkey? Why don't they like you? Do you know the reason?

A: Short and concise, important question.

BA: Especially after the most recent events.

A: To satisfactorily answer this question, first of all, I don't think that I share the premise. To say that the military doesn't like the movement is not an accurate statement. You might talk about individuals within the military who might have negative views of the movement and there might be some in the military who have positive views. Some of the retired officers, generals, have come out and expressed positive views of the movement after their retirement. They didn't do it when they were in office, for various reasons. And to understand those reasons you have to go all the way back to the late Ottoman Empire, early Turkish Republic. And in terms of the movement's look of the military, I think a very good practical reference is the statement that Gulen, Mr. Gulen, made very recently about this late incident. He said that, on the virtue of this particular document that surfaced, it is wrong to discredit the military because the military is a very important institution in the society, in the country, and the respect for the military is something that, everybody, every Turkish citizen should maintain, and should try to preserve. And the society and the military itself should do their duty to pursue any individuals who do any action, who commit any action to the contrary. So if there are any people who committed actions that are unlawful against the movement or against a political party that ends up discrediting the military, then I think he said that it's a duty, for people to identify them and let the legal course go ahead. And to preserve the respect for the military at the end. So, Gulen has been criticized in the past actually for taking a pro-state and a pro-military stance on a number of sayings in books and sermons because he sees the state and the military as the people's state and people's military. As an institution he's for those institutions, but he is against the abuse of individuals who end up discrediting the state or the military.

Radwan Masmoudi (Center of the Study of Islam and Democracy): Good afternoon. Three very simply questions.

A: Three of them?

Radwan Masmoudi: Very short. Because I'm not Turkish myself, I'm just curious. The first one: What is the status of the Gulen movement? Is it a legal organization in Turkey, does it have a legal status? The second one: Does it have any connection with the Nursi movement? Are there any connections or links with the Nursi movement? And the third one: You mentioned that you prevent your members from

running for office. I mean, is there anything wrong with members of your movement running for political office?

A: In terms of legal status, again, this is a social phenomenon. So it's inappropriate to talk about the legal status of the movement. We can talk about the legal status of institutions, a foundation, a company, an association. So all of those institutions, hundreds and thousands, they are all legal, and they have never been illegal. Throughout the existence of these institutions they have always been legal. And that is a key principle, to always reject any illegal activity. The second question?

Radwan Masmoudi: Nursi?

A: Gulen has a number of, if you might say, sources of inspiration, you might say teachers. And as a matter of fact, he lists these individuals who are most important in his upbringing, in his formation of his intellectual worldview. And Gulen, lists people like Rumi, people like...

Radwan Masmoudi: Said-i Nursi?

A: Said-i Nursi, Gazali. So he lists people like Nursi among them as an important person who helped form his understanding of Islam and worldview. But he does not limit to him. So he's one of them, he's not the only one. And the third question?

Radwan Masmoudi: Office?

A: Running for office. So maybe I can clarify what I have said. It is discouraged for a person who is identified with the movement as an administrator in an institution or as a leader in any sense, as a social leader in any sense who is identified too tightly with the movement. When you talk about this person, everybody knows that, yes he's a long time participant and committed person to the movement. For such individuals it is discouraged that they run for political office. Because that will give the impression that the movement now allies itself with this political party. But for ordinary citizens, for ordinary participants, of course there is no such thing, and they do run for office.

BA: Let me follow that up. What if people get elected to political office and then begin to draw closer to the movement. Do you push them away?

A: The general principle is to remain at the same distance to all political parties. Sometimes people say, the same distance, or the same closeness to political parties. So as long as this principle is preserved, the political officers, or people who hold political positions, if they cherish the values of the movement, if they promote them, they will obviously be seen as close to movement's general world view.

BA: You know, for those of us who are trying to understand it, and your presentation was very useful at least from my point of view in trying to understand, one of the problems is that you do not have membership per se, so you talk about closeness. You know, one does not know who is in and who is outside the movement. Is that deliberate?

A: That's exactly the point. Because potentially everybody is in. Potentially every Turkish citizen is in there. I mentioned it. It started with a handful of people and now it's in the millions. And if it goes like this, you can imagine that in a few decades everybody in Turkey will have something to do with it. From the start it has been Gulen's perspective, that we share something with anybody. If you're a Muslim believer, then we share a lot. If you're a Christian believer, we share some. If you're an atheist, then we still share something with you. So this perspective leaves nobody out, and it doesn't leave out the non-Turkish citizens of other countries. Because there are values that we share with them. That explains the popularity of the movement's schools in very remote places where there are no Turkish or Muslim persons but the schools are still cherished there. In Thailand, I don't know if there is a school there, but you know, if there is one, it will be cherished by the local community because of the values.

BA: We're coming to the end, and I think I'm going to push the chairman's prerogative to its limit and ask the final question myself. You have grown in a very impressive manner, and you have described how big you have grown, and my question is what is the ultimate goal? The reason I'm asking that is because all human activity has a goal in one form or another, so do communities, societies, nations. Now this movement was born in Turkey, Fethullah Gulen is a Turkish citizen and he cares about Turkey and he's trying to improve the Turkish educational system. He's done a great deal within the country, but ultimately the fate of that country is determined by those who run for office and who form the government, and who determine its future as I have said. Now, is there an end goal? If there is not, will you just continue growing like this and let others say what influence you have in the political process without you ever defining precisely what influence you want to make things happen in a direction that you would want it to go to?

A: To answer that I'll begin with something that I learned in my eighteen years of staying in the United States. In a painting, under a painting I guess it said, "Success is not a destination, it's a journey." I think this explains the mentality of many of the participants. At the individual level and at the social level we can talk about goals. At the individual level, for most of the participants I can say the goal is to seek God's pleasure through activity, through personal worship and devotion, but also through social activity, serving fellow human citizens, the community around you, or the nation. To seek God's pleasure through social activity in addition to personal devotion. At the institutional level they have their own specific goals which are actually public. I think at the social level, if you're going to talk about goals we can talk about an open society, a democratic society, where no segment of the population is discriminated against or prevented from taking their part in their society.

BA: But, no political goals?

A: To the degree that this is political, you can call it political goal. And I'd also like to say that I disagree with the premise that ultimately it is the politicians that run the country, no, ultimately it's the people who determine the general course of the country.

BA: No. They choose people who then run the country on their behalf, that's the political process. Now, I can't let this go without challenging you. Because what happened is the national vision, milli-gorus, developed in a certain way, set up political parties, four of them were closed—and the current party has

its roots in the Islamist movement. They say they are not Islamist but they share some of the goals like an open society, redefinition of secularism that allows more openness, with you. Except they have run for political office, they now form the government. You have chosen not to run for office. But there is a degree of congruence, not least because the enemies of AKP are also the enemies of the Gulen Movement. It's that line between what you are doing and the political process that interests me just as much now as it did at the beginning of this meeting. Do you want to say a final word on this?

A: I think to understand this attitude towards politics we need to consider the overarching principle of reaching to everybody. A particular political commitment, by definition, excludes some people. But the goal of the movement participants is to reach out to everybody. How can you do that once you engage either with a political party or a strict political view? So I can say that it will never happen, I can confidently say that will never happen. The movement, the participants, the institutions, will have an impact on Turkish politics. It is there now, it has been there in the past decades at a lower degree and it will probably be higher as there are more people who participate in the projects. But it will never take the form of taking over a government or forming a party and finally shaping the course of the country. It will never come to that nature.

BA: With that we come to the end of our session. I would like to thank you for a very impressive presentation. Although all the questions including the ones raised by me were not answered, I think this was a very useful exercise and I would like to thank you for coming.