

An Overview of the Gulen Movement

I would like to begin by thanking the Center for Strategic and International Studies for hosting this presentation and in particular Dr. Aliriza for his invitation and organizing this gathering.

I also have a couple of disclaimers: First, I will not be speaking on behalf of any institution. The views presented here belong solely to me personally and do not represent in any way the official position of any institution or the movement in general.

Secondly, I do not come here as an expert on but as a keen student of Turkish history, politics and society, and also as a person whose cultural understanding has been influenced by the service ethics of the Gulen movement.

Overview

1. An attempt at **description** and a short **historical** overview of the movement's development.
2. The **values and ideals** of the movement participants.
3. **Fields of activity, institutions** and organizations that are considered within the movement.
4. **Participation and fund-raising** mechanisms.
5. **Cultural and social dynamics** that underlie the growth of the movement.
6. The **views** of Gulen or movement participants **on key issues** such as democracy, secularism, Turkey's EU membership, women's roles, the Kurdish issue, the Alevi issue, religious minorities and interfaith dialogue, nonviolence, science and arts.

Let me start with an attempt at description of the movement.

Description and Historical Background

The so-called Gulen Movement is a civil society movement. It started out as a local service group of students, teachers, parents, and small business owners around the Turkish scholar and preacher Fethullah Gulen in the city of Izmir. For ease of reference, it is now mostly referred to as the Gulen Movement, especially by western scholars because of its main source of inspiration. By its participants, however, it is often called *hizmet*, or volunteer services (movement). As far as Gulen is concerned, he prefers to refer to it as "the movement of humans united around high human values." The Movement originated in late 1960s Turkey as a faith-based (or Islam-inspired) initiative around creating educational opportunities in the form of scholarships, dormitories,

schools and tutoring centers. Over the four decades since then, it has grown into a transnational educational, intercultural and interfaith movement, with participants numbering in the millions, comprising of hundreds of foundations, companies, professional associations, formal and informal, but legal, associations of various kinds.

The first group of people who associated with Gulen were college students, local mosque-goers, audiences who attend open-to-all question and answer sessions, seminars, and café meetings.

The students at the **Kestane Pazari** dormitory/tutoring center in Izmir where Gulen served as the director were also very important at the early stages of the development of the movement.

In this stage, in addition to public speeches, Gulen attended **conversation circles** around tea. There people, discussed the values and ideals such as promoting and investing in sound education.

The next stage is when **institutions** were established by educators and business owners inspired by Gulen's constant encouragement for investing in education. Example institutions include dormitories, K-12 schools, and tutoring centers.

In the next stage, **media** organizations were encouraged and established. At this stage we start to see the media as a continuation of the educational initiative for the masses.

In the next stage **professional associations** and intellectual/cultural organizations were formed in different locations by like-minded individuals.

After the collapse of the iron curtain in the **late 1980s**, with the educational institutions established and run there, the movement became **transnational**, expanding particularly into the Central Asian states with Turkic cultural background.

In parallel to the institutionalization and transnationalization, the movement heavily engaged in **Interfaith Dialog**, in anticipation and prevention of the so-called clash theories that would be promoted by others after a while.

Today, as there is no central head quarters of registry, yet based on the media coverage, it is estimated that hundreds of schools exist in Turkey in addition to a similar number of such institutions in five continents. They all are inspired by Gulen's peaceful life and works.

In every city and town of Turkey, it is possible to encounter some educational facility or other cultural activity that can be associated with or inspired by the movement.

The Movement grew from a handful of individuals around Gulen in the late 1960s to millions in the 2000s, most of whom is impossible for Gulen to meet or know. How did this happen? What was so attractive to the Turkish people who came in contact with the movement?

Message and Attraction

In the late 1960s, or early 1970s, Gulen's message of deep and practiced faith, altruism and action was being delivered against a **backdrop** of poverty, corruption and moral decay. Non-democratic interventions on democracy, restriction of religious expression in public life, political and ideological clashes were prevalent. Tensions among the Sunni and Alevi, Turkish and Kurdish, and practicing Muslim versus secular life style citizens were high. But most importantly, political and ideological armed clashes among "communists", "fascists" and radical religious resulted in the deaths of thousands of youth on the streets. In addition, assumed tensions between modernity and tradition and a multitude of other problems besieged the educational system.

What appealed to the first audiences was Gulen's comprehensive approach to the individual, society, the nation and humanity in general. Gulen identified poverty, rivalries (schisms in Turkey), and lack of sound education as the main problems plaguing the nation. In particular, Gulen represented and taught the following:

1. Reforming oneself and thus becoming a **better believer and practitioner of faith**. When examined, it can easily be determined that Gulen's rhetoric focused this aspect the most.
2. **Serving something greater than yourself**. Do not simply care for your own interest, but strive toward a greater vision. Why not a more prestigious Turkey? Why not a humanity in peace? According to Aydin Bolak, the late chairman of Turkish Petroleum Foundation and Turkish Education Foundation, Gulen gave a new vision to the Turkish youth who were getting trained in fulfilling their personal interests/objectives.
3. **Education is the key** to the solution of our main problems: Ignorance, division, poverty. And the key to making education work for the better is to have teachers and administrators who "represent" (*temsil* in Turkish) the values cherished by the people. Invest in education. If you are young, able and willing, choose teaching as your profession. If you are a business person, support a school financially. If you are a parent, encourage sound education and for that help build a school in your locality. In short, everybody could do something about any

education project. Later other projects, such as media, hospitals, disaster relief and poverty assistance were initiated, and appealed to every segment of the population.

4. **Not expecting everything from government.** As a participant in a civil initiative, do something yourself, and do not delegate your responsibilities totally to the government, in similar tone to Kennedy's famous saying "ask not what your country can do for you, but as what you can do for your country." If you are a business person, do business, form partnerships and holdings, become rich and give charitably, with no expectation in return, back to your community.
5. As opposed to isolation from or being reactionary to public life, **being present at every institution of our society** with the intention to serve, including the judiciary, bureaucracy, military, media, art and business. The observant citizens of the country have shunned these institutions out of assumed pietistic concerns. They tended to send their children mostly to Qur'an schools and Imam/Preacher schools. As a consequence, their expectations or worldview have been seldom valued or represented in the state or public institutions.
6. **A successful synthesis or integration** of religion, modernity, patriotism, democracy, science, arts, secularism and positive action. According to Bolak, Gulen's combination of faith, spirituality and sciences offered the best expression of Turkish understanding of Islam.
7. **Outreach, inclusiveness, outward looking, integrationist.** From community to movement, from the transnational movement to whole humanity. Accepting everybody as they are, in their respective position.

As for the success of the movement, certain factors play a key role:

1. **Mainstream nature:** The movement participants are not different from the mainstream population of Turkey in terms of ethnicity, culture, religion, social class, and attitudes toward violence. Entry and exit is free and possible for all. It is an open project to anyone who wants to become part of it. Association and disassociation are completely voluntary.
2. Certain principles of the movement participants were very attractive to the average citizen. These include:
 - **Altruism** and the absence of any self interest. Gulen set an example by not owning any wealth or property and even discouraging his relatives from pursuing wealth (see Faruk Mercan).
 - **Trust and independence:** There has never been a credible suspicion of financial self interest or foreign aid or intervention.

- **Abiding by the law** has always been a key principle. Respect for the **state** (as opposed to cause ‘failing state’, and democracy as opposed to attacking the state categorically) was also noted by his audience who saw their state as essentially legitimate despite concerns around corruption and oppressive policies.
- Another important principle was **non-partisanship**. There was no allowance for division for any political reason. The movement always had a comprehensive perspective in which every fellow citizen is seen as a potential future participant. Gulen refused proposals to support a particular political party or a candidate on every such occasion.

Values and Ideals

The values Gulen discussed and promoted can be gleaned from the titles of the series of articles he wrote for popular magazines or from the titles of the transcribed sermons and talks he gave. Some of these values include deep-conscious faith, altruism, equity, tolerance, love, hope, modesty, chivalry, the complementary nature of science, rationality and spirituality, interfaith dialog, and freedom of thought.

A look at the list of sermon series by Gulen is also instructive:

- Social Justice – Ictimai Adalet,
- Ethics and Morality: values and virtues (Ahlak),
- Family and Child Education,
- Ritual Prayer,
- Afterlife,
- Metaphysical world in the light of the Qur’an,
- Virtues that elevate humanity,
- the Life of prophet Muhammad,
- Pilgrimage,
- Destiny and Free Will,
- Fasting,
- Messengers of God,
- Zakah charitable giving,
- Belief in the oneness of God,
- The World of the heart,
- Qur’an and Science
- Reflections on business and economics, and frugality

The book entitled “The Statue of Our Souls” is a good representative of some these values that have been promoted by Gulen.

Fields of activity, institutions and organizations encouraged/inspired/established by Movement participants

Movement Participants inspired by Gulen’s understanding, by his discourse, writing and action have set up charitable foundations and companies that are active in the fields of education, media, health care, disaster relief and business. They are all ‘decentralized’

- **Educational Institutions:** By some estimates, over a thousand educational institutions such as K-12 schools, tutoring centers and reading rooms have been established around the world inspired by Gülen’s ideas and life. These are non-religious, non-denominational, secular schools sponsored by local entrepreneurs, altruistic educators and dedicated parents. Regardless of their location, these schools are symbols of harmonious interfaith and intercultural relationships; successful unification of faith and reason; and dedication to the service of humanity.
- **Media Institutions:** Newspaper, magazines, national and local TVs, Internet sites, radios.
- **Disaster Relief and Humanitarian Assistance:** A relief organization ‘Kimse Yok mu?’, which was established upon Gülen’s encouragement, has been instrumental in bringing aid to disaster victims around the world such as the victims of the Tsunami in South-east Asia; the floods in Bangladesh; the earthquakes in Pakistan and Peru and the ethno-political violence in Darfur. The organization assumed the sponsorship of a village in Darfur for rebuilding their schools and a new medical clinic.
- **Health care:** Hospitals and medical services.
- **Professional Associations:** White collar, blue collar, other.
- **Business Associations** in small towns and big cities.

Participation and Fund Raising Mechanisms

New participants in the movement get to know about the movement through multiple paths. These include the following:

1. Personal or interpersonal relationships, **social networking**. By meeting business owners, women or people of various professions who are participants in the movement. Some of these encounters involve an invitation to a once-a-week tea party in which spiritual topics are discussed.
2. **At college, at college prep centers, while staying with fellow students** in houses and dormitories.

3. By meeting with the members of **professional organizations** established by movement participants.
4. **Through publications, audio cassettes and videos, and media institutions**, such as STV national TV channel, or local TV channels, or Zaman newspaper or radio stations.
5. By participating in a **social service campaign** such as a disaster relief or health screening or scholarship activity organized by Kimse Yok Mu relief organization.

Fund-raising: Himmet

The movement has been very careful to reject any governmental help or financial contribution from foreign foundations to maintain independence and civic nature of the projects. The main fund-raising mechanism of the movement is a meeting called “himmet” which could be translated as “donation pledge.” This is very similar to the notion of a fund raising dinner in the western sense. It is usually held during the month of Ramadan in which it is believed that virtuous charitable acts are more valuable. In such a meeting, participants make a financial or in-kind contribution pledge to an institution such as a foundation. (For a sociological study of the process of giving, please see upcoming book by Dr. Helen R. Ebaugh by Springer, available for preorder on Amazon.com.)

Other fund raising mechanisms include separate pledge drives for students scholarships, sacrificial animal pledges, Kermes or bake-sale type events organized by ladies.

Everybody Gives: It is a principle within the movement that everybody contributes something of their time and financial resources. For a businessman, a typical contribution rate of **10% may mean a million dollar a year**. In addition to the financial pledge, the business people are encouraged to do outreach visits to other business people and introduce the movement projects. For a **blue-collar worker, a 5% pledge** may mean fifty dollars a month. No one is obliged or coerced to give. All donations or contributions are free and kept a god record of that institution it was donated, but not a central board of committee of the whole movement

Participation in the movement activities are totally voluntary and there is no membership. Volunteers participate by

1. Financial contributions
2. Volunteering their time or performing their profession pro bono for some time but not all
3. Kermes organizations by ladies,
4. Doing outreach visits,
5. Hosting guests or meetings in their homes.

Cultural and social dynamics that underlie the growth of the movement

The movement's fast growth from a few individuals to millions within four decades can be attributed to what I call the "**crystallization effect.**" If you remember the high school days and the over saturation experiment, then you will understand what I mean. If a cup of water is heated continuously, it can absorb increasing quantities of sugar. If this cup is then cooled down, and a sugar piece is held in the center, a crystal formation begins around this seed. It then grows until all the sugar that is in the water but in excess of its capacity crystallizes around the seed. Gulen's effect on the Turkish people can be likened to this process. The values championed by Gulen are not new to his audiences. Values such as faith, altruism, taking Prophet's life as an example, valuing science, dialogue, tolerance, brotherhood-sisterhood, striving together for a better society are values that are dear to the Turkish heart. Even mechanisms of association and participation such as *sohbet* and *himmət* are not new. Their roots can be traced to such religious values as *adān mislik*, *zakah*, *sadaqah*, *karz-I hasen*, *sohbet* (motivational or inspirational gatherings around tea or coffee).

Organizational Nature

The movement can be described as **a collection of millions of individuals with multiple voluntary associations** in hundreds and thousands of foundations, companies, professional associations, intellectual and cultural organizations. The unifying theme among these institutions, in other words what makes them a 'movement organization' is their shared values and ideals.

Some of these institutions collaborate to improve efficiency. For instance, foundations in a particular city may meet to designate specific areas of activity to avoid duplication of effort or inefficiency.

Noteworthy Stances of Gulen

1. Public condemnation of **9/11**, media interviews, book, and BinLaden.
2. Promotion of education even at the expense of **headscarf** for girls.
3. **EU** membership of Turkey. Cooperation of civilizations.
4. No return from **democracy**.
5. **Women** can have any role in the society, including judge and president.
6. **Non-violence** since the inception of the movement, that is since 1970s.
7. **Interfaith dialogue** initiative.
8. **Spiritual depth** in faith. Called a modern day Rumi by Sefik Can.
9. **Science and faith in harmony**.

Views of movement participants on key issues such as

State

Movement participants see the state as the guarantor of order in the society, individual rights, human rights, justice and equity.

Democracy

Fethullah Gulen on a number of occasions repeated his belief that there will be no return from democracy. Quote: “An atheist should be able to live as such without worry, and a believer should be able to live his religious life fully.” (See Mehmet Gundem interview 2005, available in English online at fethullahgulen.org.) He suggests that democracy is the best form of government devised by humankind. Democracy will continue to improve itself and for countries such as Turkey where democracy is not well established, the strengthening of democracy will provide the ultimate opportunity for development, freedom and improving the human condition.

Secularism

It would be fair to say that the movement participants would be very happy to have a secularism policy like that of the United States. Those who live in Europe and the United States are happy to be contributing residents/citizens to their respective societies.

Turkey’s EU membership

Movement participants are predominantly pro-EU due to their expectations of the strengthening of democracy at the expense of non-democratic manipulation of politics, increased transparency and decreased corruption, better economic competition and improved standards of living.

Women’s roles

Gulen has stated on a number of occasions that in the Turkish religious interpretation of Islam which is informed essentially by the Hanefi school, women can be anything in the society including judges, ministers, prime ministers and presidents. There is no profession that is beyond limits for women. However, it is easy to sense that some professions are not seen as ideal for women such as military combat.

Women participate in every institution associated with the movement, such as teacher or administrators in schools, columnists, producers or directors in media institutions, doctors in hospitals.

The Kurdish issue

On the Kurdish issue, Gulen's views can be summarized as a combination of four factors:

1. Addressing of the grievances of the population
2. Emphasis on common cultural elements
3. Education and economic development.
4. Opinion leaders
5. Balancing of diplomacy and the use of force

The Alevi issue

Gulen promotes the building of *cemevis* along mosques where there is an Alevi community. Gulen also promotes the documentation of the oral Alevi tradition for preventing abuses for political reasons.

Religious minorities and interfaith dialogue

Gulen has been a pioneer of interfaith dialog in Turkey and abroad. Just remember the fact that Turkey got its independence after the WW1, after a troubled period of state formation, and after a war against occupation in which all of the enemies were Christians. In the 1990s, several years before 9/11 Gulen promoted interfaith dialog saying that as leaders of faith communities, they needed to show solidarity to demonstrate that religion is not and should not be a reason for conflict. He met and co-organized events with the leaders of Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, Jewish and other faith communities in Turkey. To this day, he remains close friends with them. Gulen's efforts served as opening a new page for interfaith relations in Turkey from suspicion into collaboration. The government's Directorate for Religious Affairs established an office for interfaith dialog. Prime minister's office, universities and city governments participated in interfaith activities after these initiatives. Due to the significance of his initiatives, he received a personal audience with the late pope John Paul II. These brave moves were not without a cost. Gulen was criticized by radical circles as a hidden Christian, or a hidden cardinal of Rome.

Nonviolence

Gulen's stance against violence has been consistent since the 1970s. During the political anarchy years, Gulen consistently denounced terror, anarchy and violence and instructed his audiences to never respond to violence in kind. During the first gulf war, he protested Saddam's rockets targeting Israeli civilians in mosque sermons in the presence of thousands of Muslims. After 9/11 he condemned the attack with an advertisement on the Washington Post. He called Bin Laden a monster along with people around him. He condemned Bin Ladin's actions on humanitarian as well as religious grounds.

Science and arts

Gulen has promoted science and arts in multiple works. In his work entitled "The Statue of Our Souls" he describes new horizons for arts and science as ideals for the new generations.

Nationalism

Patriotism, not racism. Inclusive, positive, affinity-based national pride, not antagonist. There are Kurdish participants. Generally positive role of Turkish nation, inclusive of all ethnicities of Anatolia.

Thanks for your time and attention.