

The context of the Gülen Movement:
The exceptional story of Turkish Islam

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ABSTRACT

The Gülen Movement, to be sure, is notable for its achievements towards the cultivation of an Islamic perception that is in harmony with modern science, democracy and pluralism. Although it is certain that this success owes a lot to Mr. Fethullah Gülen's vision and the dedication of his followers who put it into practice, the context from which they arose from is undeniably crucial. The Gülen Movement, first and foremost, is a Turkish movement, and both its worldview and practice are heavily influenced by Turkey's exceptional experience of modernity as a predominantly Muslim nation.

The modernization efforts of the Ottoman Empire date back to the 18th century, and were accelerated with the founding of the Turkish Republic by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Moreover, Turkey has had a functioning democracy since 1950, or, arguably, even since 1876, the year of the proclamation of the Ottoman Constitution and founding of the Ottoman Parliament. Consequently, while a total lack of democracy bred authoritarian Islamist movements in some other Muslim nations, Turkey's devout Muslims have focused on the broadening of democracy, which, over time, led to the appreciation of secular (but not necessarily *secularist*) state, liberal values, and, more lately, the political criteria of the European Union. The ongoing integration of Turkey with the global economy, a process which has accelerated since the

1980's, has also deeply influenced Turkish society, including its religiously conservative segments.

This paper will analyze how such dynamics helped the rise of a democratic Muslim middle class in Turkey, and how this social structure has led to the emergence of the Gülen Movement as a globally significant religious phenomenon. It will also include some constructive critiques of the Movement.

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Most scholars who study radical Islam agree it is something peculiar to the twentieth century. They also note that radical Islam is more of a political movement rather than a religion. It is, in other words, a movement motivated by politics, but framed within an Islamic language. Antoine Sfeir, a French scholar studying Islamic radicalism in Europe, characterizes it as “a kind of combat against the rich, powerful, by the poor men of the planet.” Oliver Roy, another French expert on Islamic movements, notes, “To convert to Islam today is a way for a European rebel to find a cause; it has little to do with theology.”

This political nature of radical Islam makes it attractive even to those who would not be good Muslims in the traditional sense. Lionel Dumont, an Algerian-born French national suspected of links to al-Qaeda, said that he joined Islam because “the Muslims are the only ones to fight the system.” Another example is the recent “conversion” to Islam of Carlos the Jackal, the notorious Marxist terrorist now imprisoned in France. From his prison cell he has penned a book titled *Revolutionary Islam*. This brand of Islam, he argues, “attacks the ruling classes in order to achieve a more equitable redistribution of wealth” and is the only “transnational force capable of standing up to the enslavement of nations.”

In other words, Islamic radicalism is first and foremost political movement, not a religious one. It is about fighting against the “system” and hoping to create a better one. And not too surprisingly this ideology finds ground in political contexts that are fertile for radicalization: Undemocratic, suppressive regimes of the Middle

East, whose nations see the West only through the eyes of their colonial experience or intimidation by Israel. Or ghettoized and alienated immigrant communities of Europe.

But what if the content of Islam is different? What happens if Islamic movements flourish in a country that has not been colonized by the West, and rather has developed its own sovereign democratic system that gives Muslims the chance to participate in the political process? What happens when Muslims face modernity not as a ghettoized and alienated community in the suburbs of London or Paris, but as natives of a predominantly Muslim country?

To answer such questions, one has to look at a case study and there is no better alternative than Turkey.

THE OTTOMAN EXPERIENCE

Actually it is a very oft-repeated dictum to say that Turkey is unique. For many Westerners, the country is the shining star of the Muslim world. It is a secular democracy, a NATO member, and a US ally. Turks themselves note and appreciate the fact that they are different from other Muslims nations, and especially their neighbours in the Middle East. But why Turkey is exceptional?

To see that, one should first examine the Turks' experience with Islam. Compared with the Arabs, the Turks were latecomers to the Muslim faith. The former were politically and intellectually more advanced until the 13th century, when the Arabs' flourishing civilization was nearly destroyed by one of the most devastating conquests ever, the Mongol catastrophe. The chance of world trade routes, from the Middle East and the Levant to the oceans, was an additional misfortune that would steadily impoverish the Arab world, which owed much of its wealth to trade. The long-term result was the stagnation of the Arab peoples.

Meanwhile, the leadership of Islam was passing to the Turks, who created powerful states under the Seljuk, and especially the subsequent Ottoman dynasty. The Ottoman state extended its bor-

ders both towards the West and the East, and in the 16th and much of the 17th centuries, acted as the world's foremost superpower.

The political power of the Turks, and their continual interaction with the West, gave them an important insight: They faced the rise of modernity. The Ottoman elite had to rule an empire, make practical decisions, adopt new technologies, and reform existing structures — all of which allowed them to understand and cope with secular realities. Sociologist Şerif Mardin calls this experience “Turkish-Islamic exceptionalism,” which is overlooked by most contemporary Western scholars on Islam because of their “concentration on Arab or Salafi Islam.”¹ Mardin adds that the exceptionalism is not solely produced by the Turkish Republic, as it is often thought, but was built in a long historical evolution thanks to milestones such as “the earlier rise of a Turkish bureaucratic class (circa 1780)... the type of institution building policy that goes back to the reign of Sultan Abdulhamid II (r. 1876–1909) and the type of synthesis between Islam and modernity that was promoted by an intellectual elite between 1908 and 1923.”²

MYTHS AND FACTS

There is a popular myth about Ottoman modernization and those who believe in them are often secularist Turks. It is the idea that the Empire's modernization efforts were continuously resisted and crippled by religion. “According to received wisdom,” Rossella Bottoni, research fellow at the Catholic University of Milan, notes:

“In the Ottoman Empire there was a Manichaean struggle between, on one side, the reformers who were Westernizers, liberals, secularizers and modern, and, on the other side, the opponents, especially the ulema (Islamic scholars), who were obscurantist, backward-looking and hooked on the most obsolete customs dictated by religion.”³

“However,” Dr. Bottoni adds, “some studies prove that the religious class... was divided over the reform issue and that many

ulema did collaborate on the modernization and secularization program.” In fact “some ulema were reformers themselves,” while “the protest against secularizing reforms was mainly expressed by the lower echelons of the religious class, such as preachers of small mosques and softa (medrese students and aspiring ulema).”

Bottoni also points to the impressive achievements of the Ottoman Empire during the 19th century, in terms of modernization of the legal system and political culture:

Mahmud II strengthened his power to traditional powers' disadvantage, making all his subjects, civilians and military, Muslims and non-Muslims, equal before him. In the Tanzimat era (1839-1876), the Ottoman reform age par excellence, this idea developed in the concept of Ottomanism (Osmanlılık), a secular notion of citizenship according to which all Ottomans, regardless of their religion, had exactly the same rights and the same duties...

Several domains of law were also reformed. New modern codes were promulgated: the Criminal Code in 1840 (then substituted by another one in 1857), the Commercial Code in 1850 (then amended in 1861), and the Commercial Maritime Code in 1863. All of them had been borrowed from the French legal system, but had been amended with the inclusion of some provisions derived from the *şariat* (Islamic law). The only exception was the Civil Code, known as Mecelle, which was not borrowed from a foreign legal system, but was elaborated by a committee chaired by the aforementioned Ahmed Cevdet Paşa, an enlightened member of the ulema. The Mecelle, rather than a code in the modern sense, was a compilation of Islamic religious rules and principles, based on the Hanafi legal doctrine. However, such a codification represented an unmistakable sign of secularisation, an effort planned by men in order to formulate the *şariat* as positive law, selecting the religious provisions regarded as better suited or more fitting and advisable, and, in some cases, combining them with rules borrowed from a foreign legal system.

One of the most important consequences of the promulgation of the new secular codes was the creation of a system of courts, called

nizamiye (regulamentary) and separated from the şer'iye courts, that is, the religious courts where the şer'iat was applied. In contrast, the new nizamiye courts applied the new secular law.⁴

One should not overlook the fact that all these reforms took place within a state defined by Islam and ruled by the Sultan/Caliph. The Ottoman ulema and newly rising Muslim intelligentsia often sided with the reforms and, instead of opposing them, rather tried to find justifications from an Islamic perspective. The group of thinkers called "Young Ottomans" such as Namik Kemal and Ali Suavi "attempted to reconcile Islamic concepts of government with ideas of Montesquieu, Danton, Rousseau and contemporary European scholars and statesmen."⁵

The most important of all Ottoman reforms would be the "meşrutiyet," i.e., constitutional monarchy. With the Ottoman Constitution of 1876, the first Ottoman Parliament convened, only to be closed down by Sultan Abdülhamid II nine months later, but to be reopened in 1908. The next decade in Ottoman history is named "The Era of Second Meşrutiyet," and was a time when a proto-democracy, with a diverse parliament and multi-party system, emerged.

All this means that the modern Turkish Republic was not created *ex nihilo*, as its official ideology asserts. As Bottoni notes:

Atatürk certainly created a new Turkey, founding it on the pillar principle of laiklik, but the old regime he wiped out was not an ancient, theocratic regime, but a system that, despite its confessionalist character, had started to secularize its institutions and to undertake a reform program, without which it would have been difficult for Mustafa Kemal to devise his revolutionary laws.⁶

Another inference that should be taken from Ottoman modernization is that the Islamic side of Turkish society was introduced to modern ideas — such as constitutionalism, democracy, and equality before law — as early as the 19th century. That's why the Islamic movements that would unfold in Republican Turkey would be

much more democratic in nature when compared to some of their Middle Eastern counterparts.

SAID NURSI: A TURKISH JOHN WESLEY?

The secularizing reforms of the early Turkish Republic, carried out by the “Single Party regime” (1925-46) of Atatürk’s People’s Republican Party (CHP), came as a shock to Turkey’s conservative Muslims. Unlike the Ottoman reforms, which were focused on secularizing the state structure, Kemalist reforms were focused on secularizing the society. No wonder they faced strong reaction, and were implemented only under the Kemalist motto, “for the people, in spite of the people.”

This undemocratic character of the founding of the Turkish Republic left behind two deep bones of contention: The Kurdish question, and the clash between Islam and Turkey’s staunch secularism. But unlike the former problem, which has created more than a dozen armed rebellions against Ankara, the conflict between the state’s authoritarian secularism and the religious circles only led to the latter’s peaceful demand for democratization.

In other words, instead of fighting against “the Republic”, practicing Muslims have preferred to vote for conservative parties that would soften its autocratic nature. Some of them hoped to bring an “Islamic rule” via elections, while others only demanded a democratic rule which would respect their religious freedom. A very prominent name in the latter camp would be Said Nursi (1878-1960).

Nursi was a product of not just traditional Islam but also Ottoman modernization. After studying completing a traditional madrasah education at the early age of fourteen, he studied physical sciences, mathematics and philosophy. Soon he would become convinced that the Turkish madrasah education was inadequate and his own interest in natural sciences led him to construct a new curriculum for the Islamic educational system. This took him to

Istanbul, where soon he joined the Young Turk movement which aimed at reestablishing constitutional monarchy. When Nursi was arrested for the rebellion of 1909, which he actually no link with, he delivered a speech at his trial “defending the virtues of constitutionalism and freedom.”⁷ These would be the principles that he would also defend in the Republican period, when his treatises on the Koran (“Risalei Nur”) would become the basis of Turkey’s largest religious movement.

In his article, “An Islamic Reformation In Turkey,” Arthur Bonner argues that in many ways Nursi was similar to Britain’s John Wesley (1703-91), the founder of Protestant Methodism. According to him, both leaders:

- Opposed the closed and isolated traditional orders.
- Both defined their faiths as “essentially a social religion.”
- Both leaders created “learning communities... where the devout... prayed and recognized the transcendental source of their well-being while sharing insights and practical wisdom.”
- While Nursi “taught the unity of science and religion,” Wesley “refused to accept a dichotomized thought pattern with science and reason on one side and religion and irrationality on the other.”
- Both “introduced new methods of religious interpretation.”
- And both were proponents of religious tolerance. “Nursi initiated what would be a major attempt to slip the bounds of hatred by sending copies of his writings to Pope Pius XII in the Vatican.” And Wesley “similarly reached out to Irish Roman Catholics when the wounds of a century and a half of religious wars still festered.”

According to Bonner, Wesley’s Methodism “was the all-embracing Christianity that so impressed Alexis de Tocqueville, who reasoned that voluntary groups, whether in churches or businesses, were vital to the formation of American democracy.”⁸ The same would be true for Said Nursi’s “Nur” movement, which

emerged as a social network whose focus was faith and morality, and whose interest in politics was limited to voting for center-right, pro-Western political parties.

Nursi actually regarded the Christian West as an ally against his main threats for Islam: aggressive atheism and communism. Hence he supported Turkey's participation to the Korean War and entry to the NATO.

The difference between Nursi and some of his contemporaries such as Abul Ala Maududi and Sayyid Qutb are striking. Nursi was much more friendly to modern West than the other two. And while both Maududi and Qutb focused on creating Islamic polities via revolutionary means, Nursi's focus was on saving souls by civil preaching.

ENTER THE GÜLEN MOVEMENT

After the death of Nursi in 1960, his followers ("nurcu"s) divided into several camps with differing views on how to interpret his legacy and, also, how to engage with politics. In the 70's a cleric in Izmir who had been influenced by some of Nursi's ideas but also who had new approaches of his own, started to attract attention and following. He was Fethullah Gülen, whose popularity and influence would soon exceed those of all other Islamic movements in Turkey.

Gülen had a vision that would take him and his followers to a point where no other Muslim community in Turkey even dreamed of. Instead of simply trying to create a limited living space for itself in public life, like many other Islamic groups do, Gülen movement decided to engage with society and create publications and institutions that would appeal to people from all walks of life. Their newspapers and TV channels, such as *Zaman* or *STV*, are not in-house community outlets but they speak to the whole society. Their schools, which are famed for their high education quality and moral integrity, have students with diverse backgrounds. The movement also emerged as the champion of interfaith friendship and dialogue.

Counted among Gülen's good friends are such exceptional figures as the Chief Rabbi of Turkey and the Ecumenical Patriarch of Istanbul.

THE CASE FOR A SECULAR STATE

In June 1998, a very significant meeting took place at a hotel near Abant, which is a beautiful lake in the east of Istanbul. The participants included some of the most respected theologians and Islamic intellectuals in Turkey. For three days, the group of nearly 50 scholars discussed the concept of a secular state and its compatibility with Islam. At the end, they all agreed to sign a common declaration that drew some important conclusions

The first of these was the rejection of theocracy. The participants emphasized the importance of individual reasoning in Islam and declared, "No one can claim a divine authority in the interpretation of religion." This was a clear rejection of the theocratic political doctrines — such as the one established in the neighboring Iran — which granted a divinely ordained right to a specific group of people for guiding society.

The second important conclusion of the Abant participants was the harmony of the principles of divine sovereignty and popular sovereignty. (Some contemporary Islamists reject democracy by assuming a contradiction between the two.) "Of course God is sovereign over the whole universe," the participants said, "but this is a metaphysical concept that does not contradict with the idea of popular sovereignty which allows societies to rule their own affairs."

The third argument in the declaration was the acceptance of a secular state that would "stand at the same distance from all beliefs and philosophies." The state, the participants noted, "is an institution that does not have any metaphysical or political sacredness," and Islam has no problem with such political entities as far as they value rights and freedoms.

In sum, the “Abant Platform,” as it became known, declared the compatibility of Islam with a secular state based on liberal democracy. This was a milestone not only because the participants included top Islamic thinkers, but also because the organizers were no one other than the members of the Fethullah Gülen movement.

Indeed the Gülen movement was the first Islamic community ever in Turkey to openly accept the legitimacy of the secular state — while, of course, asking for religious freedom under it. This idea would echo in other Islamic circles, including the reformist wing of the Islamist Virtue Party. Soon this reformist wing would break up with that old school in order to found the Justice and Development Party (AKP). And, as well known, AKP came to power in 2002 and transformed not just itself but also Turkey. This post-Islamist Muslim democrat party, as it is often described, has emerged as the country’s most dedicated proponent of the EU accession process and liberal reforms.

One little noticed fact was that AKP’s transformation from an Islamism that was suspicious toward the West to a “Muslim democrat” and EU-aspiring position was encouraged and exemplified by the Gülen movement. If the tradition started by Nursi and advanced by Gülen weren’t out there, the AKP would have a hard time in becoming what it came to be.

A REASONABLE ATTITUDE TOWARD THE WEST

The apolitical tradition established by Nursi, which focuses on faith and morality rather than politics, is one of the main tenets of the Gülen movement, too. In a recent interview to *Foreign Policy* magazine, Gülen noted the following:

Islam as a religion focuses primarily on the immutable aspects of life and existence, whereas a political system concerns only social aspects of our worldly life. Islam’s basic principles of belief, worship, morality, and behavior are not affected by changing times. Islam does not propose a certain unchangeable form of government or attempt to shape it. Islam has never offered nor estab-

lished a theocracy in its name. Instead, Islam establishes fundamental principles that orient a government's general character. So, politics can be a factor neither in shaping Islam nor directing Muslims' acts and attitudes in Islam's name.⁹

This is striking different from the theories of "Islamic state," popular in the Middle East, Pakistan, and even the suburbs of Europe. For Gülen, there is no "Islamic state." There are rather states that respect the Islamic values of justice, human rights, equality, etc.

In the same interview, Gülen also noted the following:

It is a fact that Muslims have lagged behind in science and technology for the last few centuries. The Muslim world suffers from internal divisions, antidemocratic practices, and the violation of fundamental human rights and freedoms.¹⁰

This is, again, very different from the popular Islamist rhetoric that accuses the West — or "Zionism" — to explain the misfortunes of the contemporary Islamic world. The West might have indeed contributed to some of those misfortunes — in the form of colonialism, orientalism, or double standard. But the Nursi-Gülen approach points out to the mistakes of Muslims as well and suggests constructive solutions.

This approach might be related to two facts:

1) Turkey has never been colonized. Thus the anti-colonial, anti-Western rhetoric and mindset has never been as dominant as in the Middle East.

2) In Turkey the anti-Western ideology has traditionally been associated with the radical left, which was seen by conservative Muslims as the representative of the biggest threat, "godless communism."

In short, the fact that the Gülen community is a modern, moderate and tolerant Islamic movement is very much related with the fact that it is, first and foremost, a Turkish movement. It simply did not come out of a vacuum. To be sure, there are other Islamic communities in Turkey which don't share the movement's ecumenism and

rather follow a more nationalist or radical agenda. Yet it is not an accident that such movements take their interpretation from not the Ottoman tradition that Nursi and Gülen has followed, but other sources such as modern nationalism or modern Islamic radicalism.

The experience of Turkish Islam also hints us how the much-sought renaissance of the Islamic world will come about: through the flourishing of democracy, open society and economic development. Only these social dynamics create a social context from which a modern and politically moderate Islam can emerge. On the other hand, if Muslim societies are forced to accept modernity—through, say, secularist tyrannies or Western military interventions—they simply react to it, and the backlash fuels radicalism.

CRITIQUES

One criticism that can be brought to the movement, though, that the change Gülen himself has been speaking about has been mostly on a *de facto* level, but not a *de jure* basis. In other words, the movement has not theorized the legitimacy of its modernization by introducing a reinterpretation of the classical Islamic sources that it values. Or, at the very least, it has not yet made such a reinterpretation public. This might be one of the reasons that Turkish secularists fear from a “hidden agenda,” besides their own paranoid attitude toward anything religious. Perhaps this problem is understandable because the movement is basically a movement of activists, not intellectuals. But its solution is still a needed step.

Another criticism can be that the movement is still too much of a Turkish one, and that might not fit well with its self-declared global role. Turkish Islam indeed gives the Gülen movement the very tradition which makes it unique, but the challenge ahead is how to make this tradition accessible to non-Turkish Muslims and even the rest of the world. Therefore, while the content of the movement’s message can include elements derived from the Turkish experience, it will be a disadvantage to keep message in a language

that has heavy doses of “Turkishness.” I believe the movement needs to “de-Turkify” itself, if it is dedicated to becoming a source of global influence.

NOTES

- 1 Şerif Mardin, “Turkish Islamic Exceptionalism Yesterday and Today: Continuity, Rupture and Reconstruction in Operational Codes,” *Turkish Studies* 6, (2), Summer 2005, pp. 149-150
- 2 Ibid, p. 145
- 3 Rossella Bottoni “The Origins of Secularism in Turkey,” paper delivered to the 28th Conference of the International Society of Sociology of Religion on the subject ‘Religion and Society: challenging boundaries’, held in Zagreb, 18–22 July 2005
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 M. Şükrü Hanioglu, “A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire,” Princeton University Press, 2008, p. 104
- 6 Bottoni.
- 7 M. Hakan Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey*, p. 153
- 8 Arthur Bonner, “An Islamic Reformation In Turkey,” *Middle East Policy*, Spring 2004
- 9 “Meet Fethullah Gülen, the World’s Top Public Intellectual,” *Foreign Policy*, August 2008
- 10 Ibid.