



26.10.07
FRIDAY

Religion as a Source of Social Capital? The Gülen Movement in the Public Sphere

by *Etga Ugur*

Panel:
Gülen and Islam as Social
Capital

Venue:
Lecture Theatre,
Brunei Gallery, SOAS

26.10.07 Panels	Parallel Session 1	Parallel Session 2
9:30-11:30		
13:00-15:00		
15:10-17:00	Presentation 09	

This paper asks: when and under what conditions does religion become a source of cooperation rather than conflict? The Gülen movement is an Islamic social movement that bases its philosophy on increasing religious consciousness at the individual level and making Islam an important social force in the public sphere. It is this intellectual and social activism that has made the movement a global phenomenon and the focus of socio-political analysis.

The Gülen community brings different sectors of society together to facilitate ‘collective intellectual effort’ and offer ‘civil responses’ to social issues, seeing this as a more subtle and legitimate way of influencing public debate and policy. To this end, the movement initiated a series of symposiums, known as Abant Workshops in Turkey. The scope of these meetings was later expanded to include a wider audience in Europe, the U.S., and the Middle East.

This paper looks specifically at the Abant Workshops and the movement’s strategy of bridge building and problem-solving. It uses the press releases, transcripts and audio-visual records of the past 14 meetings to discuss their objectives and outcomes. This material is supplemented by interviews with key organisers from the Journalists and Writer Foundation and other participants. The discussion aims to understand how far religiously inspired social groups can contribute to the empowerment of civil society vis-à-vis the state and its officially secular ideology. Beyond that, it aims to explain the role of civil society organisations in democratic governance, and the possibility of creating social capital in societies lacking a clear ‘overlapping consensus’ on issues of citizenship, morality and national identity.

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Etga Ugur: studying for PhD in political science at the University of Utah, where as adjunct instructor he has taught classes on comparative politics, international relations, Middle East politics, and religion and politics in comparative perspective. Research interests: religion and politics, Islamic movements and comparative government; currently researching public activism among religious groups in the US and Turkey. He has published essays on religion, especially Islamic movements, in the journals *Muslim Minority Affairs* and *New Perspectives on Turkey* and *The Fountain* magazine.