

TURKMENISTAN'S NEW CHALLENGES: CAN STABILITY CO-EXIST WITH REFORM? A STUDY OF GULEN SCHOOLS IN CENTRAL ASIA, 1997-2007

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Abstract

In the 1990s, Turkmenistan's government dismantled Soviet educational provision, replacing it with lower quality schooling. The Başkent Foundation schools represent the concerted efforts of teachers and sponsors to offer socially conscious education grounded in science and math with an international focus.

This case study of the Başkent Foundation schools in Turkmenistan establishes the vitality of Gülen schools outside of the Turkish Republic and their key role in offering Central Asian families an important choice in secular, general education. The paper discusses the appeal of the schools' curriculum to parents and students, and records a decade-long success both in educating students and in laying the foundations of civil society: in Turkmenistan the Gülen movement offers the only general education outside of state provision and control. This is particularly significant as most scholars deny that there is any semblance of civil society in Turkmenistan.

Notes: The author has been conducting interviews and recording the influence of Başkent schools in Turkmenistan since working as Instructor at the International Turkmen-Turk University in 1997. In May 2007 she visited the schools in the capital Ashgabat, and the northern province of Daşoguz, to explore further the contribution Gülen schools are making. The recent death of Turkmenistan's president will most likely result in major reforms in education. Documentation of how a shift at the centre of state power affects provincial Gülen schools will enrich this conference's broader discussion of the movement's social impact.

The history of Gülen-inspired schools in Central Asia reveals as much about the Gülen movement as it does about transition in the Muslim world. While acknowledging that transition in the 21st century includes new political and global considerations, it must be viewed in a historical context that illustrates how change, renewal and questioning are longstanding inherent to Islamic tradition.

In the former Soviet Union, the Gülen movement contributed to the Muslim people's transition out of the communist experience. Since USSR fell in 1991, participants in Fethullah Gülen's spiritual movement have contributed to its mission by successfully building schools, offering English language courses for adults, and consciously supporting nascent civil society throughout Eurasia. Not only in Turkic speaking regions, but also as far as Mongolia and Southeast Asia, the so-called "Turkish schools" have succeeded in creating sustainable systems of private schools that offer quality education to ethnically and religiously diverse populations. The model is applicable on the whole; Gülen's movement has played a vital role in offering Eurasia's youth an alternative to state-sponsored schooling.¹

Recognition of the broad accomplishments of Gülen schools in Eurasia raises questions about how these schools function on a daily basis and how they have remained successful. What kind of world are they preparing students for? How do the schools differ from traditional Muslim schools (*maktabs or madrasas*)? Do they offer an alternative to Arab methods of learning?

Success in Turkmenistan is especially notable due to the dramatic politicization of education under nationalistic socio-cultural programmes in that Central Asian country. Since the establishment of the first boarding school, named after Turkish Prime Minister Turgut Ozal, in 1991 the Gülen schools have prospered despite Turkmenistan's extreme political conditions and severely weakened social systems. How did this network of foreign schools, connected to a faith-based movement, manage to flourish under Turkmenistan's capricious dictatorship? In essence, Gülen-inspired schools have been consistently successful in Turkmenistan because a secular curriculum partnered with a strong moral framework appeals to parents and students without threatening the state.²

This hypothesis encourages further consideration of the *cemaat's* ethos and Gülen's philosophies such as the imperative of activism (*aksiyon*), the compatibility of Islam and modernity, and the high value Islamic traditions assign to education.³ Focusing on this particular set of "Turkish schools" in Turkmenistan provides details and data from which we can consider broader complexities of the movement as a whole. In particular, the study illustrates that current transitions in the Muslim world have long, complex histories that extend beyond today's immediate questions about Islam, modernity, or extremism.⁴

1 One scholar calls the schools in Kyrgyzstan "to be among the most dynamic and worthwhile educational enterprises I have encountered in the world." See Thomas Michel, "Fethullah Gülen as Educator," in *Turkish Islam and the Secular State: The Gülen Movement*, M. Hakan Yavuz and John L. Esposito eds. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2003), p. 70.

2 I have been conducting interviews and recording influences of Başkent schools in Turkmenistan since I was an Instructor at the International Turkmen-Turk University in 1997. My most recent visit was in May 2007 and included one school in Dashoguz.

3 The importance of activism is underscored by the movement's Turkish magazine of that name *Aksiyon* (Action). Ahmet T. Kuru, "Search for a Middle Way," Yavuz and Esposito, 2003, p. 126; Bayram Balçi, "Central Asia: Fethullah Gülen's Missionary Schools," *ISIM Newsletter*, September 2002.

4 Ihsan Yılmaz, "İjtihad and Tâjdid by Conduct," in Yavuz and Esposito, 2003, pp. 208-237; John Völl, "Renewal and Reformation in the Mid-Twentieth Century: Bediüzzaman Said Nursi and Religion in the 1950s," *The Muslim*

Post-Soviet Turkmenistan

When Turkmenistan gained independence in 1991, adult literacy was near 99%. However, the educational system, left over from the Soviet-era, was utterly inadequate. School textbooks still featured the Bolshevik leader Lenin and university level institutes continued to rely on Russian vocabulary for technical, scientific, and medical studies. Curriculum content was neither current to the post-Soviet order nor free from Moscow's influence. Nevertheless, the institutions were in place and they functioned. Moreover, teachers and administrators were eager to continue their work. Despite all this, the new government's policies ruined the educational system as part of an anti-Soviet backlash that left stark voids in social and cultural spheres. Gülen schools played a major role in filling the instructional and institutional vacuums President Niyazow's programmes created.

From October 1991, when Turkmenistan gained independence and came under sole rule of Saparmurat Niyazow, until 11 February 2007, when Gurbanguly Berdimukhammedow assumed the presidency, Niyazow's personal whims governed the educational system.⁵ Instead of linking Turkmenistan to the larger world by building upon systems and personnel in place, President Niyazow reduced the educational system to a shell of what it had been during Soviet times. As part of his *Milli Galkynyş Hereketi* the state cultivated policies to support the "Turkmenification" of social spheres that had been Russified during the Soviet era.⁶ The government dismantled Soviet education systems, replacing them with lower quality schools and curricula. Learning became tightly linked to nation building and Niyazow's ideology became codified with the introduction of his *Ruhnama* into the schools in 2002.⁷ Rather than move away from political ideology, which had saturated education during the Soviet Union, classroom content further weakened under the weight of Niyazow's cult of personality and state-controlled anti-Russian cultural programs. Moreover, classrooms became sites for ethnic discrimination. Turkmen displaced Russian as a language of instruction in schools; ethnic divisions permeated school lessons as state-employees who did not speak Turkmen—including teachers—were fired; and applications to institutes for higher education required students to identify their ancestry in a veiled attempt to keep non-Turkmen out of universities. Under Niyazow's leadership, the state-sponsored education system suffered from such acute deterioration that it threatened a generation of human capital in that country.⁸

Turkmenistan's citizens felt as if they were moving backward and feared their children might become a "lost generation" rather than the "golden generation" or *Altin Nesil* as Niyazow

World, Vol. 89, No. 3-4, 1999, pp. 245-59; Filiz Başkan, "The Fethullah Gülen Community: Contribution or Barrier to the Consolidation of Democracy in Turkey," *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 6, November 2005, pp. 849-861.

5 Saparmurat Niyazow was appointed head of the Turkmen Communist Party in 1985, elected president in 1990, and named "President for life" in 1999. Although he employed the title "president" and the state had the trappings of a parliamentary system it was no secret that all power emanated from Niyazow. His self-chosen title "Türkmenbaşy" meant "leader of the Turkmen."

6 Adrienne Edgar, *Tribal Nation: the Making of Soviet Turkmenistan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); Victoria Clement, "Türkmenistanyň Milli Galkynyş Hereketi [Turkmenistan's National Revival Movement]," *Central Asia: Perspectives from the Field*, Central Asia Research Network (CARN) SOAS, University of London, November 7-8, 2003.

7 *Ruhnama* or "Book of the Soul" was a pseudo-philosophical-historical text that came to dominate public discourse throughout 21st century Turkmenistan and supported Niyazow's cult of personality.

8 Victoria Clement, "Bilimli Nesil—the Learned Generation in Niyazow's Turkmenistan, 1999-2005" Paper delivered at Advancement for the Association of Slavic Studies, Boston, December 4-7, 2004.

labeled the post-Soviet youth.⁹ In interviews I conducted with parents between 2001-4, one of the most frequent unsolicited comments was that families wished to see Turkmenistan's educational system restored to Soviet levels—at a minimum.¹⁰ In later interviews, in 2006 and 2007, families continued to express this dissatisfaction despite the risk of speaking critically about the state with a foreigner.

It is both because of the extreme local conditions and the continuous success of the Turkish schools that Turkmenistan provides an edifying case study of the Gülen movement's contributions to Central Asian societies. The odds were against success, yet during the past decade, members of the Gülen community have offered Turkmenistan's youth the only means of attaining a quality education within that country. The details of the day-to-day administration and the consistently cooperative approach to dealing with the local government (typical of Gülen-schools everywhere) illustrate aspects of this school system that work well and make the system applicable outside of the Turkic speaking world.

Gülen Schools in Turkmenistan

In 1990 *perestroika* made it possible for Turkmenistan's Ministry of Education to begin formal discussions with Turkey's Başkent Educational Firm over the possibilities of cooperation in the educational sphere. This dialogue led to agreement to develop a network of Turkmen-Turkish schools in Turkmenistan.¹¹ At the beginning of the 1991/92 academic year the Turkmen-Turkish Boarding School named after Turgut Özal opened in Aşgabat. Two years later, in 1993/94 the network of joint Turkmen-Turkish boarding schools opened institutions in seven cities: Mary, Baýramali, Çarjew, Daşoguz, Nebitdag, Türkmenbaşy and Könyaürgenç. Later that same year the network expanded to include an economic-technical school (*lise*) in Ashgabat, boarding schools in Tejen, Büzmeýn, and Kerki, and the International Turkmen-Turkish University in Aşgabat. In the 1997/98 school-year in Aşgabat a new Turkish Center began offering courses in languages and computers, while a school for girls opened.¹² The schools experienced near continuous expansion and unwavering political support from the Turkmen leadership, even after the death of the Turkish president Turgut Özal who had played such an imperative role in bringing Turkish culture to post-Soviet central Asia.¹³

The schools' curricula emphasized the natural sciences and mathematics. Languages played a major role in instruction as well as communication within the schools. Study of English, Turkish, Turkmen, and Russian languages was obligatory. Special attention was given to English for which preparatory classes were organized. Designed to reach talented and gifted

9 The origin of this moniker is unknown. Niyazow may have borrowed it from Fethullah Gülen, who also speaks of the "golden generation". Beýik Saparmyrat Türkmenbaşyň Altyn Bilim Syýasaty [Saparmyrat Turkmenbashi the Great's Golden Education Policy] (Aşgabat: Turkmenistan's Ministry of Education, 2003). Victoria Clement, "Education in post-Niyazov Turkmenistan," paper delivered at School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, January 25, 2007.

10 Victoria Clement, "Rewriting the Turkmen 'Nation': Literacy, Education, and Power in Central Asia, 1904-2004" Ph. D. dissertation, The Ohio State University, Columbus, 2005, chapter 5.

11 Zeki Pektaş, *Sovmestnye turkmeno-turtskie shkoly-internaty v Turkmenistane: etapy stanovleniia i razvitiia* (Aşgabat: Ýlym, 1999), p. 10.

12 Türkmen-Türk Mekdeplerinde Buýsançly 10 Ýyl (Aşgabat, n.d.)

13 Türk Cumhuriyet Bakanlıklığı ve Turkmenistan arasında Eğitim İş Protokolü, 1992; "Birleşik Devletlet Topluluğu'nda Türkçe," TÖMER Dil Dergisi, sayı 4, Ocak 1992. See also TİKA (Turkish International Cooperation Agency) journal in general.

children, the Gülen schools offered an education fairly typical to the locality, but with standards higher than in most public schools.¹⁴ The pedagogy is based on the program for private schools in Turkey in correspondence with the requirements of schools in Turkmenistan.¹⁵ In the earliest years, most teachers and staff traveled from Turkey out of their personal interest in the Gülen movement and a sense of *dawah* or mission.¹⁶ Some Turkish citizens worked in Central Asia because schools there afforded religious freedom they could not access in Turkey, such as wearing headscarves. Still others found good jobs with salaries that allowed for a comfortable life, especially considering the low-cost of living in the former Soviet Union in the 1990s. Local teachers, conducting courses in such subjects as Turkmen language, Russian language, and the history of Turkmenistan, sought out work in the Turkish schools for the high-level of pay as well as for better working conditions. These instructors received salaries at least three times that of teachers in Turkmenistan's public education system and many have maintained their positions over the past decade.¹⁷

Finances

The schools cover expenses with monies received from Turkey, primarily Ankara, or from Turkish businesses in Turkmenistan.¹⁸ The school administration had initially intended to take care of costs down to the clothing of the students; each pupil receives a uniform, shoes, and sports clothes.¹⁹ In fact, some students receive full scholarships, some pay nominal fees, and others pay tuition in the range of \$1000 per year.²⁰ According to Lester Kurtz,

The movement has mobilized and involved prominent intellectuals and even set up a non-interest bearing bank—with \$125 million capital—Asya Finans, to promote economic development in the Turkish-speaking Central Asian republics of the former Soviet Union.²¹

The Baskent Educational Firm (*Başkent Eğitim Şirketi*) is the Gülen community's financial and administrative umbrella organization in Turkmenistan. The *Baskent Bilim Merkezi* (*Başkent Educational Center*) is the Gülen community's administrative and pedagogical center. The Center also houses space for youth interaction that is typically filled with young people spending free time with friends, playing table tennis, or using computers—an important offering in the days before the internet cafes of 2007. Locals refer to the Center as “Başkent” or the “Turkish Center” by association with language and identity of the teachers. Nevertheless, Başkent operates as an independent administrative and legal entity certified in Turkmenistan by that state.

Funded and staffed by members of the *cemaat*, Başkent opened a university in 1993/4 and began to build primary and secondary schools around the country.²² Başkent has maintained

14 Pektas, p. 11.

15 Pektas, p. 12.

16 Interviews with teachers 1997-2007.

17 On human resources at Gülen schools see Thomas Michel, “Fethullah Gülen as Educator,” Yavuz and Esposito, 2003, p. 70.

18 “Fethullah Gülen's Missionaries,” Turkish Daily News, September 14, 2001. Monies to schools in Kazakhstan tend to come from Turks in Izmir.

19 Pektas, p. 13. See also

20 Silova, forthcoming, p. 6.

21 Lester B. Kurtz, “Gülen's Paradox: Combining Commitment and Tolerance,” The Muslim World, Special Issue: Islam in Contemporary Turkey: the Contributions of Fethullah Gülen, Zeki Sarıtoprak, ed., vol. 95, No. 3, July 2005, p. 381.

22 Clement, 2005, pp. 142-162.

the schools, 11 departments within 3 colleges (*fakultet*) at the university, and the Center itself, which offers 5 courses in foreign languages and computers. Since the earliest days of Turkmenistan's independence, the Center has offered English language classes for a nominal fee. At that time, the office and classroom occupied a small rented space, which though located near the center of the city, was hidden behind the old Soviet Circus. It was a challenge to find. Today, Baskent offices occupy a large building to house all of the classes, administrative offices, and social spaces. Located on a main street in Turkmenistan's capital city Aşgabat, its accessibility and its good reputation doubtlessly encourage the young people who drop in and the adults attending night courses in English.

Başkent's schools and students in have grown in number consistently. In 1997/98 there were 13 schools in Turkmenistan with 3,294 students. In 2006/07 those numbers had grown respectively to 16 schools and 5,250 students.²³ Moreover, the local population recognizes these schools as the best alternative form of education in Turkmenistan. Every year 9-10,000 students compete for 750 places. At the university 4,000 applications were submitted for 200 places. In the first ten years the elementary schools graduated 2,803 pupils, the language and computer program awarded 10,710 certificates, and more than 500 students have graduated from the International Turkmen-Turkish University.²⁴ This consistent growth is due both to the administration of the institutions, as well as to Turkmenistan's citizens' ever-increasing interest in enrolling their children in superior schools.

Publicity and Growth

How was the *cemaat* able to advertise their new schools in a country without a free press? They began by sending representatives to visit schools to announce the entrance exams. Soon word of mouth among families was enough to build the reputation of the schools among the populace.²⁵ A few years later, the newspaper *Zaman* began publishing a Turkish-Turkmen language version in Aşgabat. Today it has that country's highest subscription rate for a periodical.²⁶ *Zaman* originated in Istanbul and is today printed separately in a handful of countries with a *cemaat* presence. For those who cannot obtain print copies, an electronic version of the Istanbul issue is accessible via the Internet. It announces local and international news, local school events and happenings within the Turkish school system, such as the scheduling of university entrance exams. A method for combining news and promoting the schools is to publish articles about such prestigious student events as a competition of language sponsored by Başkent and the Turkish and Afghanistan embassies' cultural attaches.²⁷

The reputation of the Turkish schools is their most powerful form of advertisement and recruitment. In conversations with graduates of the Turkmen-Turkish University I asked how Turkmen people generally perceive a graduate of a Turkish school. They explained that they encounter some envy because they have had opportunities that are available to only a handful of the young population. Knowledge of English and Turkish, as well as Russian

23 Iveta Silova, "Reclaiming the empire in post-Soviet Asia: Turkish education initiatives towards Central Asia and Azerbaijan," in L. Chisolm & G. Steiner-Khamsi (eds.), *South-south transfer: Cooperation and unequal development in education* (forthcoming), p. 5.

24 Türkmen-Türk Mekdeplerinde Buýsançly 10 ýyl, 2005, p. 12.

25 Interview with Ahmet Çopursan June 7, 2007 in London, England.

26 This fact is a cause for concern within Turkmenistan's Democratic Party. Interview with member of Democratic Party, May 30, 2007.

27 Ibrahim Asahoglu, "ÖSS'deki sayısal sorular bu sene daha kolay olacak," ZAMAN, 14 Haziran 2007, p. 1; "Aşgabat dil sergisi," ZAMAN International Newspaper, May 8, 2004, pp. 1-2.

and Turkmen, make them competitive on the job market. Graduates from state schools may have studied one or two of these languages, or may know a smattering of each, but that cannot compare with the level of acquisition the Turkish schools' programs provide. Moreover, graduates reported that they are viewed as trustworthy and dependable because of the strict discipline of the Gülen schools. Any parent should be instilling a sense of *terbiyâ* (upbringing) in their children, but it is never guaranteed that they do. A degree from a Turkish school certifies that the individual has been introduced to the traditional concepts of *adab* (enlightenment, culture, etiquette) and *terbiyâ*, in addition to having received an internationally recognized education.²⁸

If there is one aspect of the Başkent schools that is foreign to Turkmen students it is the gender separation in middle schools and the university. While Turkmen do practice separation of the sexes during religious events and some family gatherings, it is not typical of their modern educational spaces. Despite this, no one named it as a reason to avoid Başkent schools.²⁹

There are families that will not send their children to the Turkish schools, or have even removed them from the schools, due to a perceived influence of Islam on the students. Some parents have complained that their children suddenly developed an interest in visiting the mosque or "developed a more religious attitude."³⁰ Even though there are no explicit lessons about Islam, "implicit cues about their Islamic orientation" can be detected in the behavior of teachers and in cultural programs on campuses.³¹ This handful of dissatisfied families saw in the model living of teachers or in *terbiye* degree of spirituality that they could not reconcile with their expectations of secular education. Despite this minority attitude, a far greater number of families wish to enroll their children in the Turkish schools, even families who are not Muslim.³²

Measuring Spiritual Influence

The Gülen schools have been successful in terms of education, but the extent of their spiritual influence is difficult to measure. Parents respect the Turkish schools for providing a broad curriculum with high standards, and they appreciate the technical advantages of these well-funded institutions and the level of discipline extolled by committed teachers. However, Turkmen families choose to send students to these schools not in search of Islamic enlightenment but as a means of gaining qualifications for employment.³³

While independence in 1991 allowed for a surge in religious practice, Turkmenistan did not re-establish an Islamic-based system of public education like that which existed prior to their

28 Interview with ethnic Turkmen, male graduates of International Turkmen-Turk University, May 30, 2007. The fact that the Turkish schools meet international standards is most significant in Turkmenistan where the state had reduced the number of years of education available so that high-school graduates could not meet the requirements for international universities.

29 Victoria Clement, "Secular and Religious Trends in Turkmen Education," unpublished study for Eurasia Policy Studies Program, National Bureau of Asian Research, August 2004.

30 Interviews with Turkish graduates of ITTU, in Istanbul, Turkey, June 2007.

31 Engin Demir, Ayşe Balcı, and Fusun Akkok, "The Role of Turkish Schools in the Educational System and Social Transformation of Central Asian Countries: The case of Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan," Papers from the Central Asia Regional Literacy Forum, accessed at http://www.literacyonline.org/products/ili/webdocs/carlf_dem.html on 5/15/ 2007.

32 Ethnic Russian families report that they would rather have their children influenced by Turkish schools that teach international languages and business than Turkmenistan's schools which focus on the Ruhnama.

33 Private discussions with parents from varied economic backgrounds between 1997-2004. Clement, 2004.

incorporation into the Russian empire.³⁴ Rather, the government took steps to ensure that an official Islam, one overseen and limited by the state, was the public Islam. Firstly, academics and government officials replaced the Cyrillic script with a Latin-based alphabet rather than an Arabic-based writing system, thus separating them symbolically as modern or westward looking. Secondly, around the country citizens raised their own funds to build mosques in cities and villages, but prayer remained primarily a private pursuit in the home. Thirdly, a few *madrasas* (Islamic colleges) reopened in the earliest years of independence, but secular schooling remained the primary source for general education. Lastly, Islamic rituals were revived or practiced once again in public, but at no point did anyone suggest the state adopt more Islamic approaches. The thirst for spiritual growth and general education did not overlap explicitly.³⁵ Appreciative of secular, Soviet education, both citizens and the state eagerly maintained the separation between public education and Islam. Thus, in Turkmenistan, lessons with religious content are found only in a limited number of places such as the Ylahyýet fakultet at Magtumguly State University or in private classes that meet in mosques or the homes of Islamic scholars (*mollas, ahuns*). With an obvious interest in maintaining a separation between secular education and religion, how do Turkmen reconcile that view with the fact that the *cemaat*'s mission is rooted in Islam?

Turkmen parents view general education not as a means for spiritual development, but as path to getting a job. They expect schools to impart knowledge that will allow citizens to function in globalized or international society. Any contradiction between this conceptualization of education and the Gülen movement's faith-based goals is superseded by the fact that the Turkish educational institutions provide the best educational opportunity in Turkmenistan. Ultimately, Turkmen families do make allowances for an overlap between secular enlightenment and Gülen's faith-based initiative in acknowledging that education guided by a moral framework (*terbiýä*) would provide their children with better material opportunities. In that respect their expectations fit well with Gülen's belief that a good Muslim is one who is committed to the world. He clarifies this intersection of education and material advancement in today's world.

I encouraged people to serve the country in particular, and humanity in general, through education. I called them to help the state educate and raise people by opening schools. Ignorance is defeated through education; poverty through work and the possession of capital; and internal schism and separatism through unity, dialogue, and tolerance.³⁶

One of the Turkmen assistant principals asserted the practical aspect of the schools' curricula saying,

We need 'know how' for the development of our country. Those schools provide hope for us in achieving our purposes, because they train qualified people who are familiar with universal standards."³⁷

34 See Adeb Khalid, *Islam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007). Non-Muslim groups also struggled with questions about social development and new expressions of local epistemology in the post-Soviet era. Alexia Bloch, *Red Ties and Residential Schools: Indigenous Siberians in a Post-Soviet State* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

35 Olivier Roy, *Globalized Islam: The search for a New Ummah* (NY: Columbia, 2004), pp. 80, 190, 227-228.

36 M. Fethullah Gülen, 2005, p. 85.

37 Demir, Balci and Akkok, Literacy Online, p. 6 of 10.

Making the Global Local: Gülen School's Adaptability to Local Contexts

In each country, the *cemaat* creates a “network” of schools.³⁸ This term does not imply that a singular overarching association or administration governs the members and schools around the world. Gülen inspires his followers. He is the teacher (*Hocaefendi*) and the author of influential writings, but there is no single formal entity to which the schools are responsible. Each school must consider local political and social conditions when creating a curriculum, admitting students, even in choosing the languages of instruction. For example, in Turkmenistan the Russian language was a part of all Gülen schools' curriculum until 2003, when Turkmenistan's president decreed that Russian should no longer be a language of instruction in schools. According to a former teacher, President Niyazow made an official announcement and the schools complied.³⁹ While the Turkish schools pride themselves on teaching foreign languages—indeed it is a fundamental aspect of Gülen's philosophy—they adhered to the policy immediately. Yet in Kazakhstan, where the tone is far less nationalistic, Russian remains in the Turkish schools. While a driving principle of the schools and related media is to encourage the spread of English (the international language of technology) and Turkish (language of the founder and most adherents) local languages demonstrate the movement's “state-oriented” inclination to work within systems.⁴⁰ The adaptability the Gülen system allows it to flourish beyond the Turkic language world. Moreover, the schools can be, and are, located in countries without a Muslim majority. There are as yet no schools in Arab speaking countries, but the flexible nature of the model makes it at least theoretically possible to use the Gülen educational system in any country.

Hakan Yavuz describes the “movement” as a “loose network system” consisting primarily of shared values as well as methods of teaching and organizing schools, for example, drawing teachers and administrators from within the core community, relying on similar texts and curricula, and the concept of a teacher living as a model. Each set of schools is organized separately within a particular country, in cooperation with that country's government, and is funded through a locally established company or foundation. The sources of funding are critical clues to demonstrating the independence of each school system. Businessmen living in Kazakhstan provide financial support to the *Kazakh-Türk Eğitim Vakfı* which then oversees the institutions in that country. Monies from schools in the Balkans are not shared with those in Kyrgyzstan. In Turkmenistan it is the *Başkent Bilim Şirketi* (Bashkent Educational Firm) that organizes funding, while successful businessmen (*işadamı* and *esnaf*) fund the movement and its schools.⁴¹ Donations to such foundations allow the middle class to contribute to the shaping of society, fulfill an act of piety (*zakat*), and aid in building an active community. Turks living abroad, in Central Asia for example, also assist in the creation of schools at which their children can receive a quality education.

The firms or foundations represent the concerted efforts of teachers and sponsors to offer

38 Jean-François Mayer, “Gülen Movement: Modern Expression of Turkish Islam. Interview with Hakan Yavuz,” *Religioscope*, 21 July 2004. http://religion.info/english/interviews/article_74.html.

39 Interview with Ahmet Çopursan June 7, 2007 in London, England. Ahmet Bey was a teacher and head of the Department of History at the boy's kolej in Konya Urgeç—2 years, Abadan (former Buzmeyin)-2 years, Ata Murat (formerly Kerki)—2 years, as well as the Başkent Education Center in Aşgabat—3 years. He lived with his wife and children, one of whom was born in Ashgabat (at the Turkish hospital).

40 Bayram Balci uses the term “state oriented” to describe the *cemaat*'s tendency to cooperate with local governments.

41 M. Hakan Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 189.

socially conscious education grounded in teaching modern sciences (*talim*) with an international focus. Yet course offerings do not include religious instruction. “Gülen’s group differentiates itself from other Islamic movements by stressing the importance of ethics in education and the business world.”⁴²

These schools don’t give religious education or encompass educational activities with a religious environment... Activities take place within the framework of each country’s current laws and educational philosophy. For example, in Uzbekistan, after students learn Turkish and English in the preparatory class, they study science in English from Turkish teachers and social subjects in Uzbek from Uzbek teachers. Giving religious knowledge or religious education is not the goal.⁴³

The aim of the schools is not to teach religion per se, but to stress such values as community service (*hizmet*) and ethics (*ahlak*), which are seen as “unifying factors between different religious, ethnic, and political orientations.”⁴⁴ *Terbiyâ* (character building) is critical to raising good Muslims and is the principal concept by which the schools are organized. Using the phrase “bilim we terbiyâ” no less than eight times in a single presentation, Seyit Embel, the Chair of the Başkent Educational Center in Aşgabat wrote that “enlightenment and character building are the main aims” of the combined Turkmen and Turkish efforts.⁴⁵

The underlying methodology of conveying *terbiyâ* has been for the teachers to embody spiritual ideals and impart them through model living (*temsil*).⁴⁶ Gülen has addressed this methodology writing,

Those who lead the way must set a good example for their followers. Just as they are imitated in their virtues and good morals, so do their bad and improper actions and attitudes leave indelible marks upon those who follow them.⁴⁷

Teachers, administrators and sponsors follow Fethullah Gülen’s example of teaching students how to live a life deeply rooted both in Islam and in the modern scientific world via education.⁴⁸ Model living covers a range of moral behavior such as restraint from smoking, drinking, or gambling.⁴⁹ Teachers make themselves available to students outside of school.⁵⁰ After school activities (sports, movies, lectures) and informal relations with staff are designed to encourage character building. Women’s reading circles meet in the homes of families to allow for congregation and study. These typically involve the mothers and older women in the Turkish community, but students and local mothers are welcome.

Throughout Central Asia the Gülen schools play an important role in fledgling civil societies in that they operate outside of the state. They offer opportunities for social interaction and experimentation such as student newspapers, women’s reading circles, film festivals (in

42 Yavuz, 2003, p. 186.

43 Ali Bayramoğlu’s observations cited in M. Fethullah Gülen, *Essays, Perspectives, Opinions* (Rutherford: NJ, The Light Inc, 2002), p. 87.

44 Bekim Agai, “The Gülen Movement’s Islamic Ethic of Education,” in Yavuz and Esposito, 2003, p. 49.

45 “Bilim we terbiyâniň asyl maksady...” in Seyit Embel, “Ata Watanda buýsançly on ýyl,” *Türkmen-Türk Mekdeplerinde Buýsançly 10 ýyl* (Aşgabat: Türkmen-Türk mektepleriniň baş müdirligi, 2005), p. 11.

46 Elisabeth Özdalga, “Following in the Footsteps of Fethullah Gülen: Three Women tell their Stories,” in Yavuz and Esposito, 2003, p. 85. While an Instructor at ITTU, I lived in the on-campus dormitory with the female students.

47 M. Fethullah Gülen, *Essays, Perspectives, Opinions* (Rutherford, NJ: The Fountain, 2002), p. 72.

48 M. Hakan Yavuz, “Turkish Identity Politics and Central Asia,” in Sagdeev and Eisenhower, *Islam in Central Asia: An Enduring Legacy or An Evolving Threat?* (Washington, D.C.: CPSS, 2000), pp. 193-211.

49 Interview with Ahmet Çopursan June 7, 2007 in London, England.

50 Interview with teachers and students, 2004.

Turkmenistan all cinemas were shut down in 2002), study abroad programs and use of the internet. Most importantly, these private schools offer families a choice in education. One difference between the schools in Central Asia and some other regions—South Asia for example—is that former Soviet regions had high literacy rates but little opportunity for civil society building.⁵¹ In Turkmenistan, a country with arguably the most seriously deficient education policy in the region and one of the worst records on allowances for civil society, the contributions of the Gülen movement are especially impressive. Moreover, because of deficiencies within Turkmenistan’s educational system, the graduates of the Turkish schools in Turkmenistan are the only youth in a generation to receive a high-school education that meets international standards.⁵²

Another aspect of the Gülen schools in Turkmenistan that sheds light on the movement more broadly is the community’s interaction with that country’s government. Until recently, it was understood that Turkish businessmen often contributed to the financing of these schools in Turkmenistan as a necessary step in the bidding process for contracts with that Niyazow’s government. “It was understood during the trip that Turkmen officials stipulate that businessmen first make a financial contribution to the Turkish high schools in order to be able to win contracts from the Turkmenistan government.”⁵³ This comments perhaps more on Niyazow’s methods of governing than it does on the Gülen schools more generally. It does illustrate the “state-oriented” nature of the movement. The privileged place of Turkish businessmen in Turkmenistan has continued under the new presidency of Gurbanguly Berdimukhmedow

In Turkmenistan engaging that state has meant actually placing Turkish members of the *cemaat* in high-level government positions. Muammer Türkyılmaz, Turkmenistan’s Deputy Education Minister (*Turkmenistan Bilim Ministerligiň Orunbasar*) and Seyit Embel, Head of the Baskent Educational Center (*Başkent Bilim Merkeziniň Baş Ugrukdyryjysy*), have been critical to Baskent’s success and demonstrate the movement’s adaptability. In the initial years Turks held most administrative posts. As part of Turkmenistan’s *Milli Galkynys Hereketi* (National Revival Movement) President Niyazow mandated in 2004 that only ethnic Turkmen could be heads of schools. Today the Rector of the International Turkmen-Turkish University is an ethnic Turkmen as are the principals of the schools. Turks occupy only assistant principal or secondary administrative positions. However, Embel and Türkyılmaz remain in their positions demonstrating that there is flexibility in the relationship with the state. In fact, in March 2007 the new president of Turkmenistan, Berdimuhammedow, confirmed the state’s appreciation of Türkyılmaz’s work in Turkmenistan by reappointing him as Deputy Minister of Education.⁵⁴ Overall, the *cemaat*’s success owes much to a long-term view of its goals and its avoidance of postures that could be interpreted by local authorities as antagonistic. As Hakan Yavuz and other scholars have indicated, this *modus vivendi* is seen not only in Turkmenistan, but also in the movement’s approach globally.⁵⁵

51 Mohamed Nawab Mohd Osman, “Turkey’s Gülen movement and global Islamic activism,” Rajaratnam School of International Studies reprinted <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/news/sw/details.cfm?id=17551>.

52 Clement, 2005.

53 “Fethullah Gülen’s Missionaries, Turkish Daily News, September 14, 2001.

54 “Türkmen Milli Eđitimi, Türk Okullarının Kurucusuna Emanet,” Haberler, March 2007, p. 1.

55 M. Hakan Yavuz and John Esposito, *Turkish Islam and the Secular State: The Gülen Movement* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2003).

Conclusion

Professor John Esposito writes that today's *ummah* is engaged in a process of "Islamisation or re-Islamisation." That is, they seek ways to apply "Islamic principles and values to personal and public life."⁵⁶ While the Muslim community may today be experiencing a transition, it is not the *ummah*'s first encounter with change. Introspection, debate, reform (*ijtihad*), and renewal (*tajdid*) are natural and historically significant aspects of Islam. Since its inception the Muslim community has debated such questions as how the community would be shaped, whether it was acceptable to borrow aspects of other cultures, or how they could live as Muslims in the material, modernizing world. Scholars view the Gülen movement as part of this tradition, calling it "*neo-ijtihad*" or "search for a middle way."⁵⁷

The Gülen movement strives to demonstrate the compatibility of Islam and modernity through intellectual and spiritual pursuits. Calls for "*Aksiyon*" and morality based living have encouraged followers who are motivated to actively pursue charitable roles in building successful Muslim societies. The Gülen schools are a manifestation of that motivation.⁵⁸ The Gülen school system has been successful in so many different countries because of its flexibility and adaptability to local conditions.

Any contributions of the Gülen movement must be measured not only according to the standards of the movement, but also to the relative conditions of each specific locality in which members expand the *cemaat*, as well as within a historical context. Overall, the Gülen schools in Central Asia are comparable to Gülen schools around the world.⁵⁹ With the exception of occasional foreigners teaching languages or locals teaching social subjects, teachers are hired from within the predominantly Turkish *cemaat* or from among the schools own graduates. The privately-funded schools remain independent of any state but do adhere to legal and educational requirements of the host countries; curricula are based on integrating quality education, emphasizing science and languages, with *terbiyā* (upbringing within a moral framework); and religion is never part of curricula. Graduates play a great role in staffing the schools and Turkish businessmen make up the majority of donors.

This case study of the schools in Turkmenistan illustrates how Gülen's philosophy plays out *in situ*. While a vital part of a faith-based movement, it is critical to acknowledge that Gülen-inspired schools offer families a choice in secular education thereby making contributions to civil society building as well as education. Turkmenistan's parents feel that their children receive better education, through high quality teaching, including use of Turkish, English, and Russian, in addition to the local language.⁶⁰ They also note that the Turkish schools are better equipped than state schools and have more advanced facilities (comfortable dormitories, good cafeterias, access to technology).⁶¹

56 John Esposito and Francis Burgat, eds. *Modernizing Islam: Religion in the Public Sphere in Europe and the Middle East* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003), p. 2.

57 John Voll, "Transcending Modernity," Ihsan Yılmaz, "Ijtihad and Tajdid by Conduct," and Ahmet T. Kuru "Fethullah Gülen's Search for a Middle Way between Modernity and Muslim Tradition," in Yavuz and Esposito, 2003, p. 246, 208-237, and 115-130.

58 John Voll, "Renewal and Reformation in the Mid-Twentieth Century: Bediüzzaman Said Nursi and Religion in the 1950s," *The Muslim World*, Vol. 89, No. 3-4, 1999, pp. 245-59.

59 Bayram Balci, "Fethullah Gülen's Missionary Schools in Central Asia and their Role in Spreading of Turkism and Islam," *Religion, State & Society*, Vol. 31, No. 2, 2003, pp. 151-177.

60 For comparable views see Yasar Sari, "Turkish Schools and Universities in Kyrgyzstan," *The Times of Central Asia*, June 8, 2006, p. 22.

61 A. Apay's analysis of parents' opinions of Turkish schools in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan concur with my

Muslim and non-Muslim families want high quality education that is not politicized and remains secular. States want institutions to respect their authority. The government in Uzbekistan closed the 18 Gülen schools there as well as the Turkish state schools. The atmosphere in Kyrgyzstan is simply more tolerant and allows for diversity in education. The Kyrgyz-Turkish schools sponsored by the *Sebat* Company have grown from 12 to 15 from 1997-2007.⁶² In Kazakhstan the schools have played a role in the population's hunger to revive a Turco-Islamic heritage that was weakened by its Soviet experience. The Foundation for Kazak-Turkish Education (*Kazak-Turk Egitim Vakfi*) acts as both a cultural center and an organization of civil society.⁶³ Turkmenistan's government has kept the schools on a short leash but it nevertheless allows them to operate as long as they pay homage to the state. This works because Turkish administrators attend Turkmen state functions and a small percentage of the curriculum gives the obligatory nod to state demands, such as including Niyazov's writings in coursework.

Başkent schools continue to function in Turkmenistan because the *cemaat* preserves a modern, secular curriculum content, takes an unobtrusive approach to imparting *terbiyâ*, and does not threaten the state, but rather engages it. In offering a quality education based in foreign languages (English, Turkish, Russian, and local) and natural sciences, the Gülen Movement provides Turkmenistan's youth an opportunity to prepare themselves as citizens of the new (post-Soviet) world order.⁶⁴ The success of these private, foreign schools, founded on Islamic values (*terbiye, ahlak, adab*) in a country where state-controlled, political idolatry had supplanted pedagogy, is perhaps the Gülen movement's greatest accomplishment in Eurasia.

own conclusion about Turkmenistan. See his "Turkish Higher Education Initiatives toward Central Asia," in *The Challenge of Education in Central Asia*, Stephen P. Heyneman and Alan J. DeYoung eds, (Greenwich, CT: InfoAgePub Inc, 2004), p. 82. See also Engin Demir, Ayşe Balcı, and Fusun Akkok, "The Role of Turkish Schools in the Educational System and Social Transformation of Central Asian Countries: The case of Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan," *Central Asian Survey*, 19, no. 1, 2000, pp. 141-55.

62 Demir, Balcı and Akkok, 2000, p. 149; Silova, forthcoming, p. 5.

63 Berna Turam, "National Loyalties and International Undertakings," Georgetown University, April 26-27, 2001. While the number of schools in Kazakhstan went down from 29-23 from 1997-2006, they still remain active and important. In 2006/07 5,613 Kazakh students graduated from schools run by the Turkish company Feza et Şelale. See Silova, forthcoming, p. 5.

64 M. Aydin "Turkey and Central Asia: Challenges of Change" *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 15, No. 2, pp. 157-177.