

THE FETHULLAH GÜLEN MOVEMENT AS A TRANSNATIONAL PHENOMENON

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Abstract

This paper investigates the apparent paradox thrown up by the distinctively Turkish roots and contents of Fethullah Gülen's philosophy on the one hand, and the movement's educational activities beyond Turkey and its promotion of interfaith dialogue on the other. It considers how far the movement has been able to transcend its 'Turkishness'. In the Turkic world, primarily in Central Asia and Azerbaijan, the paper offers an assessment of the extent to which the movement generates an emulative or transformational response, perhaps contributing to the emergence of a non-territorial 'Turkic' nation or identity. In that context, the paper considers the degree to which the movement can be seen as 'pan-Turkic' in terms of its aspirations and effects. Turning to its activities in the non-Turkic world, the paper tries to establish whether the movement should be regarded as a primarily Turkish or primarily Muslim agency, and what kind of impact this creates in host countries. In chiefly Islamic host countries, to what degree is the movement engaged, intentionally or otherwise, in a competition with more radical interpretations of Islam? Or is the movement's approach to Islam rooted too exclusively in a Turkish context? This leads into a consideration of whether the movement is an agency for a 'Turkish model' approach to blending Islam with modernity and democratisation, and whether this suggests either competition or tacit alliance with the Turkish state in this regard. Finally, with respect to interfaith dialogue, is the movement's contribution seen as narrowly Turkish in its applicability, or as resonating in and of utility to the wider Muslim world?

Introduction

This study will not confine its purpose to determining the extent to which the ‘movement’ inspired by the thoughts and writings of Fethullah Gülen can be regarded as an agency of transnationalism. It also intends to address the difficult question of what impact the movement, as an agency of transnationalist phenomena, might have. Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye famously defined transnational relations as ‘contacts, coalitions and interactions across state boundaries that are not controlled by the central foreign policy organs of government’ (Keohane and Nye, 1972, p.xi). One possible outcome of the activities of transnational agencies might be the creation of transnational networks of individuals and groups that interact, where possible, without direct reference to state authorities or territorial boundaries. These new social formations might impact on the power structures, values and ultimately state policies of both ‘sending’ and ‘receiving’ societies. Another outcome might be the generation of blurred, multiple, shared or shifting identities and value systems amongst individuals and groups that by their very existence offset the territorialisation of global politics and might even consciously resist it. This might take the form of a loosely-constructed transnationally shared ideational consciousness, or a much tighter, emulative cultural reproduction or hybridity. This article will consider the Fethullah Gülen movement in the light of these observations. However, although we can trace the interactions, ties, and influences linking individuals, groups and institutions across the borders of Westphalian states, the impact of transnational phenomena cannot readily be measured or even defined with precision. We must bear this in mind too when seeking to assess the Gülen movement’s significance.

When considering the Gülen movement’s transnational activities, or indeed those of any comparable phenomena, we must also guard against the risk of slipping into an unexamined assumption that transnational activities are necessarily welcome, especially in ‘receiving’ countries, or that they invariably produce positive outcomes - at least not in an unambiguous and unmitigated way. Transnational phenomena might be simultaneously transcending in their impact, and perceived as competitive and threatening by receiving states and societies. A state can and might choose to mediate between its citizens and external influences, and existing social values and structures might generate defensive reactions to unwelcome externally-derived intrusions and challenges. ‘Receiving’ societies should not be assumed to resemble ‘blank pages’ on which anything can be written, or pliable material out of which we can construct anything we wish. The more transnational phenomena are seen as intrusive, as imports from one state, society or value-system into another, the more they might generate nationalist or otherwise culturally-protective forms of resistance. Transnational interactions can as easily highlight differences, and attachments to such differences, as they can create new, transformative and shared social formations. They might generate negative reactions, in other words. They might also be broadly neutral in impact. In our exploration of the Gülen movement’s impact, we must open our minds to the possibility of reactions, outcomes and consequences such as these.

‘Islam was ‘transnational’...long before there were nations’ (Vertovec, 2003 p324), and the notion of a global Muslim ummah has continued to provide a source of resistance to the territorialization and nationalization of global politics. The current discourse on Islam, at least in much of the western media, sometimes implicitly assumes that it is solely as a radicalized and violent variant that modern Islam adopts a transnational garb. The kind of radical Islam associated with the al-Qaeda network is additionally seen as resistant to globalization understood as Americanization or westernization, although it is simultaneously enabled by globalization via its exploitation of the modern media, the internet, international travel and emigration.

This type of Islam seeks to protect an idealized and essentialist Islam from the impurities, temptations and corruption of a Godless and materialist west. The often unstated assumption in the west is that traditional, moderate, and locally-flavoured Islamic tradition and practices are passive, defensive or vulnerable in the face of this globalised onslaught from an angry, violent Salafi inspired interpretation that appears to vindicate Samuel Huntington's 'Clash of Civilizations' thesis.

Yet the traffic in the trans-border exchange of ideas and influence that is taking place within the Islamic world is not all one way, so much so that it might even be argued that non-essentialist and more distinctly culture-bound variants of Islam are also undergoing something of a revival. This certainly appears to apply in Turkey's case (Mardin, 2005 p157). The Fethullah Gülen movement,¹ named after its Turkish founder and inspiration, is actively engaged in disseminating to a world beyond Turkey's state boundaries, as well as within them, an approach to Islam and to its relationship to politics and other faiths quite at odds with that propagated by Islamic fundamentalism. Although the Gülen movement is far from being the only source of moderate Islamic ideas actively engaged in the competition for influence in today's globalised Islamic space, it is one of the largest and most active. It is a major participant in a global contestation over what Islam is and what role it should play, and its message could hardly be more at odds with that brand of Islam typically dubbed 'fundamentalist'.² Specifically, it qualifies to be considered as a transnational phenomenon, and as contributing to and manifesting the spirit of globalization, via both its geographically dispersed educational activities and its commitment to dialogue with other faiths. Each of these areas of activity will be discussed below.

The Gülen Movement's 'Turkishness'

Yet its roots are quintessentially Turkish, located in Turkey's historical baggage, its domestic political circumstances, and in a version of Islam that arguably has more currency in Turkey than elsewhere. This rich 'Turkishness' endows this globally-engaged movement with a paradoxical and sometimes quixotic character. The Gülen movement offers an example of a transnational phenomenon that nevertheless retains and indeed lauds its national flavour. Although the purpose here is to explore the transnationalism of the movement rather than the ideas of its founder, so powerful is Fethullah Gülen's inspiration that mention must be made of him. He began his career in Turkish fashion as a state-appointed religious preacher in 1953, and began to acquire a serious following, sometimes referred to as the Fethullahci, in the wake of his appointment to Izmir in 1966, where a loose network of students, teachers, professionals, businessmen and the like took on his name. The movement's first venture into the wider propagation of its philosophy came in the form of summer schools in and around Izmir. It soon established teaching centres (dershane), largely to prepare religious students for university admission. As its activities blossomed, so it attracted the attention of Turkey's secularist state establishment. Gülen himself served a 7-month spell in prison in the early 1970s for propagating religion, and again attracted uncomfortable attention both during the 1980s and in the late 1990s, in the wake of the 'soft coup' of 1997. Gülen and his followers are regarded with suspicion by Turkey's secular establishment to this day, and this partly

1 Articles, speeches, interviews etc by Fethullah Gülen can be found at the movement's website at www.fGülen.org. See also Yavuz and Esposito (eds), 2003; Hunt and Aslandogan (eds), 2006; *The Muslim World*, 95(3), July 2005: Special Issue; West, 2006; Aras and Caha, 2000.

2 For a comparison of these two approaches to a globalised Islam, see Hendrick, 2006 pp11-29.

explains his preference for domicile in the US.³

The network did not openly emerge as a major educational, social and religious movement until 1983, when in the wake of the military coup of 1980 the Turkish General Staff expanded the space for religious activity. Such policies were inspired by the so-called 'Turkish-Islamic synthesis', which emphasised a fusion between Turkish national identity and the Islamic faith. The hope was that religiosity would offer a more conservative and spiritual, and politically less threatening, antidote to the leftism that had contributed to the social chaos of the preceding decade. Thus the rise of the Gülen movement formed one element in the more general 'Islamisation' of Turkish public life that has been in evidence since the 1980s (Narli, 1999). Under the protective cover of the premiership of Turgut Özal, himself a sympathiser, the movement opened schools (there are now around 150 such schools in Turkey alone), universities, a television channel (Sanyolu TV), a radio station (Burc FM), a daily newspaper (Zaman), several other periodicals, and a bank (Asya Finans) set up in 1996 to raise investment funds for the Turkic republics. The network also spawned a Journalists and Writers Foundation⁴ and a Teachers Foundation, each of which publishes journals and organizes symposiums and conferences, frequently abroad.

Notwithstanding its subsequent phenomenal growth, in many respects the nature of the movement remains true to its origins. It consists of a mix of largely professional male members, sympathisers, and affiliates, whose relationship to the movement varies considerably. It ranges from extremely pious individuals, often teachers and preachers, whose lives are dedicated to the propagation of the values and ideas of Fethullah Gülen, to more occasional and functional fellow-travellers, such as businessmen and even politicians. Partly for this reason, and the blurred distinction between members, followers, and sympathisers, estimates of the movement's 'membership' vary considerably. One source suggests a figure anywhere between two hundred thousand and four million Turks (Aras and Caha, 2000 p33). The movement should not be envisaged as a centrally-organized body. It is loosely structured and decentralized, and each of its ventures are individually financed and run on a voluntary basis by members of and sympathisers with the network. This explains why estimates of the number of schools and other educational establishments run by the movement can also vary.

Although the thinking of Fethullah Gülen has continued to evolve, with an intensified emphasis on the philosophy's more universalistic, pluralistic, liberal, and democratic qualities in recent years (Yavuz, 2005 p45), it remains rooted in Turkish-Ottoman experience. His belief is that, as Turkish society is overwhelmingly Muslim in faith, the state and its citizens should not have become as alienated from each other as he insists has been the case in Republican Turkey. The 'top-down' imposition of the sometimes anti-religious secular dogma associated with Turkey's Kemalist state has served to distance its citizens from the governing elite. As the Turkish novelist Rasim Ozdenoren expressed it, modern Turkey is 'like a transgendered body with the soul of one gender in the body of another'.⁵ Gülen draws inspiration from the Ottoman rather than the Republican model of state-society relationships. Although the empire's rulers were guided by their faith, and indeed held custody of the Caliphate, the leadership of the Muslim world, the Ottoman system of governance was not theocratic. Public laws were formulated on the basis of the state's needs rather than in accordance with Islamic law (Shari'a). Indeed, Gülen's thinking is quite distinctly state-centric, and this too gives a quite Turkish flavour to Gülen's ideas. This statism might be thought to overlap with Atatürk's,

³ For details of allegations made against Gülen in 1999, see Özdalga, 2005 pp439-440.

⁴ Its website can be found at www.gyv.org.tr.

⁵ Quoted in Aktay, 2003 p.134.

but again Gülen prefers to look back beyond the Republic to the Ottoman era. The state has a functionally secular role to provide internal and external security and stability for its citizens. It would be preferable if a state's rulers are people of faith, but they should not use their secular authority to implement religious dogma. Gülen is not in favour of the political implementation of Shari'a, which in any case is mostly concerned with private and personal faith-inspired behavioural expectations.

Thus, for Gülen, the key to Islam's influence and utility in the modern world does not lie through direct political activity and organization, and he is opposed to 'political Islam' as such. Indeed, he sympathised with the 1997 'post-modern coup' that removed Erbakan's Welfare Party from power, although Gülen was himself caught up in the crackdown on religious activity that came in its wake. He believed that Erbakan and his followers were embarked on the first steps towards an 'Iranianization' of Turkish political and social life. Gülen sympathised with the 1980 coup too, regarding it as appropriate and necessary that the state protect itself and its citizens against the chaos and violence that was threatening to engulf Turkish society. According to Gülen, Turkish Islam's more flexible, adaptable, spiritual and less doctrinal traditions have enabled Republican Turkey and Turkish society more broadly, with its democratization, free market economy, and secular political system, to incorporate aspects of modernity to an extent barely found elsewhere in the Muslim world. All this very much accords with Gülen's vision of an Islamic, but modern and progressive, Turkey of the future. The movement has itself profited from Turkey's post-1980 economic, social and political liberalization, of course, which has created a space for its media, educational and financial activities free from the control of the statist secular establishment. In this sense, we might argue that the movement is in large measure a by-product of the impact of globalization on the wider evolution of Turkish politics and economic management.

Thus, Gülen sees no contradiction between Islam and modernity. Indeed, he insists on the desirability of Islam's embrace of science, reason, democratization, and tolerance. Although Gülen shares Atatürk's assessment that the relative economic and moral poverty of the Islamic world is explained by its spiritual and intellectual decline, for Gülen the problem is not Islam per se. His assessment of the Turkish and Ottoman experience of Islam is that religion should not become a dogma, but can be adaptive, open, flexible, rational, and tolerant, and not closed and shielded from other faiths, other ideas, and from scientific and technological progress. Indeed, another root of Gülen's thinking is the 'folk Islam' and pronounced Sufism, or spirituality, of Anatolian Turkish Islam.⁶ Specifically, and as with a number of other Turkish sects and brotherhoods, Gülen derives inspiration from the writings of the prominent Kurdish religious authority Said Nursi (1877-1961). The Nur (Light) or Nurcu movement that Said inspired was distinguished by its advocacy of reason, progress, tolerance, and a distance from direct political involvement. It too did not regard western science, openness and modernity as necessarily contrary to the spirit of Islam.

Modern Turkish society is also intensely nationalistic, and some of this flavour too has been absorbed by the Gülen movement. Perhaps Gülen's Erzurum birthplace – a kind of Turkish frontier town abutting the Caucasus, Kurdish regions, and former Armenian-populated lands, where both Turkish nationalism and Islamic faith is particularly strongly felt – has influenced his thinking. In any case, the movement's philosophy fuses its brand of Islam with a Turkish nationalism. After all, its theological and cultural roots, as well as its key personnel and resource base, lie in Turkish practice and experience. This conscious 'Turkishness'

6 For more on this, see Gokcek, 2006; Saritoprak, 2003; Michel, 2005; Yavuz, 2004. Not all are convinced of the uniquely Sufi-influenced or distinctiveness of Turkish Islam, however. See Özdalga, 2006.

has encouraged the movement to engage far more actively with the Turkic world than anywhere else. Turkish society and much of its political elite was quick to make overtures to Central Asia, Azerbaijan, and other traces of an ethnically and culturally pan-Turkic world in the immediate aftermath of the Soviet break-up. Turks enthused over the rediscovery of a world from which their forefathers originated and with whom they shared ancient cultural and linguistic roots. At its headiest, the hope in Turkey was that a political, economically and culturally tightly-knit entity would emerge that would take modern Turkey as its inspiration.⁷ Gülen followers too were swept up in this mood, and this largely explains why the full-scale emergence of the Gülen movement as a transnational educational community essentially coincided with the 1991 Soviet collapse, which opened the way for an extension of its activities into Turkic Central Asia and Azerbaijan, purportedly Turkic republics and regions of the Russian Federation such as Dagestan, Karachai-Cherkessiya, Tataristan, and Bashkortostan, other former Soviet states containing Turkic minorities such as Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova, and into the Balkans. Even in Iraq, the Gülen School's pupils are mainly ethnic Turkmen (Balci, 2003a. p156). Thus, the Gülen movement can be said to have thrived largely as a response to international, as well as domestic, 'opportunity structures' that presented themselves (Kuru, 2005).

The Gülen Movement's Transnational Educational Activities

Gülen propagates a kind of 'educational Islamism' as opposed to a 'political Islamism' (Agai, 2003 p50). Furthermore, education curricula should emphasise science and technology as much, or more than, they incorporate faith teaching. Gülen also advocates the transmission of spiritual, moral and behavioural values, of tolerance, respect, openness, and the like.⁸ Through the internalized spiritual transformation of individuals will come a wider social transformation and, at least in Islamic societies (including Turkey) in which Gülen institutions operate, a (re-) 'Islamisation' of modernity. Thus, politics in Turkey and perhaps in other Islamic societies in which the movement operates should be 'Islamized' only via a bottom-up process and indirectly, in which people and state are reunited in a kind of organic way, through a shared attachment to and internalization of faith. In this sense, the Gülen movement's mission in the Islamic societies in which it operates can be said to be a political project, but one that aspires to achieve its goals indirectly. People of faith as well as learning, a 'Golden Generation', should be cultivated and encouraged to dedicate their lives to the service (*hizmet*) of the people. It is an approach that resembles a kind of 'long march through the institutions', and Turkey's secular establishment, and some secularists elsewhere, are occasionally unsettled by it.

Yet overt religious teaching, and even explicit mention of Fethullah Gülen, is generally absent from Gülen educational establishments, both in the Islamic world and elsewhere. This is partly but not entirely explained by the need to tread carefully in the presence of political authorities suspicious of religious or foreign activities within their borders. This delicacy about the movement's nature and involvement raises a question of whether the Gülen movement's educational establishments, especially beyond Turkey or the wider Turkic world, constitute much more than a commercially-based transnational educational foundation. For example, one searches in vain for any sign either of Gülen's inspiration or of any notable religious focus on the website of the Gülen-sourced Virginia International University in the US (www.viu.edu).

⁷ For an in-depth study of this phenomenon, see Bal, 2000.

⁸ For a discussion of the movement's approach to education, see Agai, 2003; Michel, 2003; Aslandogan and Cetin, 2006.

viu.edu). There has even been speculation as to whether the movement's universalist ethos and its emphasis on 'activism through good deeds' is leading to a kind of secularism akin to that which befell those earlier Protestant missionaries that the Gülen movement can be said to resemble (Özdalga, 2003).

The Gülen movement's external activities are characterized by a marked concentration in Turkic Central Asia and Azerbaijan. There are half a dozen Gülen-sponsored universities in Central Asia, and numerous other educational, welfare and economic institutions and activities. One can readily see why the movement might have assumed that in Turkic Central Asia and Azerbaijan the likely receptivity to its overtures would be high. After all, the Turkish state made a similar assessment in the immediate aftermath of the Soviet collapse. The region shares a linguistic and ethnic root with Turkey, and a 'folk Islam' that, as in Turkey, incorporates numerous Sufi sects and has absorbed pre-Islamic traditions, beliefs and rituals. In fact, the very existence of a Turkic world is a reminder that many of the processes that we associate with globalization are not at all new. The history of the Turkic peoples is part of 'world history' - of the rise and fall of empires, cultures, and civilisations; of their interpenetration with and resistance to other cultures; of their capacity to absorb and reconstitute. Modern Turkish interest in this 'Diaspora' can be seen as a resuscitation of this earlier global interconnectedness. Furthermore, the Soviet era left behind a legacy of secular education and a commitment to science, progress and modernity that might broadly be thought to correspond with Turkey's circumstances and the Gülen movement's aspirations (Yavuz, 2003 pp39-40). This suggests some scope for cultural reproduction in the region, whereby the Gülen network's Central Asian elites could in time take on the forms of their Turkish counterparts, blending to generate a new, distinct and perhaps de-territorialized transnational social formation. In the longer term, this could have important ramifications, and lend support to the emergence of a pan-Turkic world linked by overlapping and fused identities. This could in turn ease the development of economic interactions, and even encourage closer state-to-state relationships. Such an evolution would not quite accord with the adoption of the 'Turkish model' that Ankara's secularists and some of its western advocates had hoped for, but it might dovetail with the aspirations of pan-Turkic nationalist elements in Turkey.

In the Turkic territories of Central Asia and elsewhere, much of the push behind the network's penetration of the region came from devout and conservative Turkish businessmen who were willing to finance educational activities 'because of their commitment to Gülen's Turko-Islamic worldview' (Yavuz, 2003 p39). This sector of society has been instrumental in 'Islamizing' Turkey's face too, via its support for the AKP (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi), its backing for MUSIAD (the Independent Industrialists and Businessmen's Association), and by generally offering a model of a religious, conservative Anatolian elite quite distinct from and at odds with the secular Kemalists. In other words, they are inclined to see themselves, and indeed are, an ascendant class. Furthermore, these business groups have frequently fused their commercial ventures with their support for the Gülen network's activities in Central Asia (Balci, 2003a. pp154-155; Peuch 2004a). As an illustration of the form the Turkish presence in the region can take, in Kazakhstan, the most important location for the Gülen network's activities abroad, the Kazakh-Turkish Education Foundation (KATEV) in Almaty functions as a cornerstone of the resident Turkish community, and is supported and frequented by Turkish business and charitable groups and by the Gülen network (Turam, 2003 pp188-189). This kind of presence has in turn generated a close working relationship with Turkish embassies in the region, whose staff readily facilitate the activities of Turkish religious networks that are otherwise frowned upon by the state in Ankara (Balci, 2003b). The Gülen network's

transnationalist activities might in this way be furthering Turkey's economic interests abroad as well as contributing to a shifting of Turkey's domestic political arrangements.

However, some caution is necessary here. To begin with, and as with so many transnational phenomena, the receiving country can affect the impact of the transnational agency, positively or negatively. Intentions do not always readily translate into outcomes, and cross-border 'intrusions' can sometimes stimulate or further entrench an essentialist nationalism. The pan-Turkic strain that runs through the Gülen movement's approach stresses the shared ethnic and cultural origins of the Turkic people. As one observer has expressed it, '...the followers of the Gülen community aspire to reconnect Central Asians with their Turkic origins by spreading Turkish Muslim culture and morality to that region' (Turam, 2003, p187). It appears that the movement's followers in the region typically regard Central Asians as their Turkic blood brothers, and aspire to create individuals oriented towards Turkey and 'Turkishness' as well towards Islamic progress and enlightenment. Indeed, there may have been a greater receptivity to 'Turkism' than to Islam in the region (Balci, 2003a. p153; Turam, 2004).

However, there are indications that a shared Turkic ethnic and linguistic root might not be sufficient to remove all barriers to a fuller interpenetration and blending. The movement's educational establishments in the region are frequently referred to simply as 'Turkish schools', and at least initially some inhabitants of Central Asia seem to have resented the speed with which Turkish institutions replaced Soviet/Russian ones after 1991 (Peuch, 2004b). Furthermore, there have been indications of a Turkish chauvinism towards the Turkic peoples of Central Asia, whether intentional or not. Students in the movement's schools abroad might be expected to sing the Turkish national anthem as well as their own, and raise the Turkish as well as their own national flag (Peuch, 2004b). Instruction is chiefly in English, but Turkish is also extensively used, in addition to local languages where necessary. Furthermore, the overwhelming majority of the teachers and administrators in the movement's institutions abroad are Turks from Turkey rather than locals (Balci, 2003b). This sense of a 'foreign' and intrusive penetration has occasionally combined with a dislike of the perceived religious, missionary self-righteousness of the movement's teachers, whose piety and dedication can grate with more secular, perhaps non believing, Central Asians. They can even seem to be imbued with a distasteful 'big brother' attitude (Miller, 2003).

Additionally, the determined and autocratic secularity of the region's political leaderships, and their post-Soviet prickly sensitivity to anything they perceive as external meddling in their affairs, puts the Gülen movement's reception in the Turkic world very much at the mercy of the region's governments. In 1994 and again four years later, Uzbek President Islam Karimov cracked down on the movement's activities in his country, including a ban on the distribution of *Zaman*, such that the movement has minimal presence there today. It is unclear whether this was a reaction to the presence in his country of a religious group that he did not control, or whether it indicated retaliation against the Turkish state's harbouring of Uzbek opposition leaders. Either way, Turkish prime minister Bülent Ecevit felt obliged to deny any Turkish wrongdoing towards Uzbekistan, which served to strengthen the perception that the Gülen movement was in some way representative of the Turkish state (Peuch, 2004b; Aras and Caha, 2000 p28; Balci 2003a. pp155-157). In 2005, Turkish teaching staff at the Islamic theology school at a university in Turkmenistan was sacked by the country's autocratic leader President Saparmurat Niyazov. The move was linked with a suspicion that the regime was becoming increasingly aware of and uneasy about both the pan-Turkic and Islamic ideology of the Gülen network in the country (Institute for War and Peace Reporting, 2005). Beyond former Soviet Central Asia, the Taliban regime closed down the Gülen movement's activities

in Afghanistan in the late 1990s owing to its disapproval both of its brand of Islam and of external interference in the country (Kuru, 2005, p262), and Fethullah Gülen has also claimed that his movement was denied permission to open a school in an Azeri (Turkic) region of Iran through Tehran's suspicion of its pan-Turkic aspirations (Kosebalaban, 2003 pp179-180). Such incidents constitute examples of how the non-state activities of transnational enterprises can nevertheless become entangled with state-to-state interactions, and can as easily reinforce negative tendencies in such relationships as help overcome them by transcending them.

An additional source of resentment at the activities of the movement in Central Asia is its elitist nature, a notable feature of its activities in Turkey too. In this sense, the movement's activities can be seen as 'translocal' rather than transnational, as a vehicle for relatively exclusive and restricted interpenetration by narrow sectors of societies rather than more mass-based trans-border interactions. It is relatively rare for children of the disadvantaged, even if devout, to gain entry into Gülen schools. The fees and entrance requirements are high, and the good reputations the schools have acquired for the quality of their technical education, their use of English as a language of instruction, and the high behavioural standards they set, have combined to ensure that places are at a premium. Typically, successful applicants in Central Asia and elsewhere in the post-communist world are the children either of the wealthy or of government officials (Miller, 2003; Balci, 2003a. pp164-165). This has to be appreciated against the background of a collapsed educational, social, and economic infrastructure throughout much of the region. State spending on education has plummeted throughout Central Asia in particular, leading to school closures, a shortage of teachers, a degradation of the physical infrastructure, and widespread corruption surrounding school and college admissions and test results (Silova, Johnson and Heyneman, 2007). It should not be a surprise to anyone that foreign-owned schools providing quality education to the offspring of those best placed to profit from or to protect themselves against the wider social collapse might be resented by those whose future is likely to consist of poverty, unemployment, and emigration. In so far as this is true, then the laudable long-term aspirations of the Gülen movement's activists could be obstructed or derailed by the more immediate injustices with which they become associated.

However, we should be wary of excessive generalization concerning the nature and impact of the Gülen movement's activities abroad. Largely as a consequence of its devolved and voluntaristic nature, the precise characteristics of each establishment might differ just as the motives behind their establishment can vary (Peuch, 2004b). It might also be that from the mid-1990s onwards the movement, or at any rate Gülen's own thinking, shifted from a chauvinistic Turkish Islamic identity towards 'global educational activities that encourage the national identities of the countries in which it is operating' (Agai, 2003 p63). In this context, it is worth noting that the movement has a presence in the form of a variety of educational institutions in around fifty countries, and now supervises as many or more schools abroad as it does in Turkey – in excess of 150, although the unstructured nature of the movement means no precise figure can be given. Gülen schools and other educational establishments are globally far-flung, and can be found in such places as the Balkans, Russia, Armenia, the US, Australia, China, Cambodia, sub-Saharan Africa, India, and in western countries where Turkish minorities are located, such as Germany and France. Indeed, in western Europe the movement's schools have served to reinforce or preserve Turkish and Muslim identities otherwise vulnerable to dilution and distortion as a result of interaction with host societies, although the simultaneous commitment to accommodation to and tolerance of host country

customs is strong (Bilir, 2004; Irvine, 2006). A quite different assessment might be made of a Gülen educational initiative in a non-Turkic location such as the Philippines. Here, in an area where the denominational split between Muslims and Christians is roughly half and half, a Gülen school employs many Philipino teachers (some of whom are Christian) and admits many Christian students. Furthermore, and in keeping with the movement's commitment to interfaith dialogue, strong and healthy links are maintained with nearby Christian institutions. Even in Central Asia, non-Muslim students might be granted admission to Gülen establishments (Michel, 2003).

Interestingly, even in decidedly non-Turkic countries such as India and Mongolia, portraits of Atatürk are on show, Turkish is taught, and the Turkish national anthem sung. The Turkishness of Gülen schools is certainly more evident than their Islamism. This emphasis on Turkish language and culture has even won over some of the usually suspicious representatives of Turkey's secularist political class.⁹ It should also be noted that, wherever they are found, Gülen educational establishments abide by local curricula requirements. They do not directly propagate Islam, but rather emphasise virtues such as respect for elders, politeness, modesty, and hard work. In other words, they teach by example. As elsewhere, this approach accounts for the popularity of Gülen schools in Africa, where there are over fifty Turkish schools in thirty countries, many of them in largely Christian sub-Saharan Africa.¹⁰ It is difficult to assess, however, what the ultimate impact might be of a globally-scattered body of well-behaved, hard-working, well-educated individuals with a knowledge of and sympathy with Turkish culture. It is hardly likely to do harm to Turkey's image and interests abroad, or to the more general cause of global understanding and tolerance. On the other hand, the relative scale of the Gülen movement's presence is so small, and Turkey's footprint in such regions otherwise so light, that it is hard to see what measurable good it might do either.

Is it possible to assess the contribution the Gülen movement's educational activities are making to Islam, to Turkey's interests and image, and to global dialogue and tolerance? As we have noted, we would surely be well advised to differentiate in our assessments, and to avoid conclusiveness. It is too early to tell, and too difficult to estimate. This is especially so with respect to the movement's ventures in non-Turkic, and non-Muslim, worlds. In any case, their role in the Turkic world looms larger and is conceivably more portentous. Fethullahci schools represent only around ten percent of Central Asia's education system (Peuch, 2004b), albeit a share disproportionately patronized by the economic, intellectual and social elite. It could be that, in a tacit partnership with the Turkish state, the movement's activities will over the longer term intensify the emotive and material bonds between Turkic peoples – or their elites - and states (Balci, 2003a. pp166-167). As one observer has expressed it, the Gülen movement has 'an ethnic agenda, which calls for the realisation of Turkic homogeneity in Central Asia. It is this ethnic politics that makes Gülen an effective international actor' (Turam, 2003 p192). Alternatively, if its activities serve to 'encourage the national identities of the countries in which it is operating' (Agai, 2003 p63) and perhaps also assist the survival of local variants of the Islamic faith, it might help generate local bulwarks against a de-nationalized Islamic fundamentalism and increase belief in the viability of a Turkish-style fusion of modernity and Islam. There is scope for differences of view as to which of these two propositions is closest to reality, but both might contain elements of truth. Even in the face of opposition, unease or ambivalence from Turkey's Kemalist elite the movement could in time have a transformative impact on the region – although we should be wary of looking for an

9 'CHP deputies: Turkish schools abroad are a source of pride', Zaman, 21 March 2007.

10 'What are Gülen's missionaries after?' Sabah, 19 February 2007.

‘arrival’ at rather than a potential journey towards a more ‘Turkish Islamic’ future.

The movement might also help generate emulative reactions more widely throughout the Islamic world. Kemalist Turkey has often been presented as a model of modernity and democratisation, but ‘the primary condition for being a model is its chance of being accepted. The Turkish model, with its radical interpretation of secularism and confrontation with religion, does not have a strong chance of being accepted other than as a western Trojan horse in the Islamic world’ (Kosebalaban, 2003 p183). The Gülen movement, on the other hand, with its heady and promising combination of faith, identity, material progress, democratization and dialogue, might offer a model more attractive to and more worthy of emulation by Muslim states and societies struggling to orientate themselves towards a more dynamic and open future. For this reason, a more determined engagement by the Gülen movement in those parts of the Islamic world seemingly prone to take a quite different course, such as parts of the Arab world and Iran, would be especially interesting. Yet the movement has largely shunned involvement in the Arab world or Iran. This is partly explained by its occasionally dismissive attitude towards the role and practice of Islam in these countries (West, 2006 p292). Even so, overtures to the Arab and Iranian worlds occur, and may be intensifying. Thus, the 12th meeting of the network’s Journalists and Writers Foundation, the Abant Platform, and its first anywhere in the Muslim world outside Turkey, was held in Cairo in February 2007.¹¹ In such guises, the movement has already emerged as an element in Turkey’s ‘soft’ power, whether the state appreciates it or not. Indeed, it forms part of a more general challenge to Kemalist power and tenets, both in domestic Turkish politics and society and in the face Turkey turns towards the outside world.

Interfaith Dialogue

In its sponsorship and support for interfaith and intercivilisational dialogue, the Gülen movement seeks both to counter the impact of the more violent fundamentalist strains in modern Islam and to undermine wherever it can Huntington’s ‘Clash of Civilizations’ thesis. These are transnational activities, but are global in their reach and potential impact. Fethullah Gülen’s championing of interfaith dialogue has varied and complex roots. In part it springs from a profound recognition and embrace of the shared theological origins of Islam, Christianity and Judaism – although in his appeal for interfaith dialogue and tolerance Gülen incorporates Buddhism and Hinduism too – and the Prophet’s injunction to respect the ‘people of the book’. The transcendental quality of faith itself is for Gülen a unifying force that outweighs theological differences. His commitment to dialogue with the western or Judeo-Christian world is also related to his admiration for western modernity, liberalism and technological and economic prowess, and his belief that the Islamic world can and should adopt elements of the west’s dynamism. Gülen’s explicit references to the ‘Global Village’ express an assumption that the phenomena of globalization have so bound together the fates of peoples that conflict between them serves no-one’s interests. Characteristically, he again draws upon the multi-faith and multi-cultural example of the Ottoman Empire, which he adduces as evidence of and inspiration for the capacity of diverse peoples to live together harmoniously and fruitfully. The empire was officially tolerant towards its non-Muslim subjects, and sought to incorporate many western practices, such as female education, the rule of law, and constitutionalism, in addition to its technology. It is fitting, therefore, that the Gülen movement’s dialogue activities focus on interfaith relations within Turkey as well as at the regional and

¹¹ ‘Abant meeting in Muslim state for the first time’, Turkish Daily News, 26 February 2007. For the official website of the Journalists and Writers Foundation, see www.gyv.org.tr

global levels.

If judged by the words and thoughts of Fethullah Gülen, his movement not only embraces globalization, but also seeks to contribute to and shape its direction. However, little is achieved by words and thoughts alone. More substantively, Gülen met with Pope John Paul II in Rome in 1998, and has also met with Patriarch Barthelomeous, head of the Greek Orthodox Fener Patriarchate in Istanbul, the former Chief Rabbi of Turkey's Jewish community David Aseo, and with numerous other high-profile Jewish and Christian figures.¹² Tracing the range of interfaith activities of the Gülen movement is difficult, given its devolved nature and its sometimes coy approach to self-publicity, but the movement has sponsored or contributed to, and sometimes dominates, a confusing diversity of often overlapping interfaith organizations. Many of the movement's interfaith platforms are US based, perhaps partly owing to the considerable market for interfaith dialogue among segments of the large actively Christian US population. Examples are the Institute of Interfaith Dialog (www.interfaithdialog.org) and the Interfaith Cultural Organization (www.uga.edu/ifco). The Gülen movement takes the credit for organizing the Inter-Civilization Dialogue Conference in 1997 to counter the 'Clash of Civilizations' thesis. In 1998 it initiated the annual Eurasian Meetings, and in Turkey it has brought together leaders of the three Abrahamic religious communities (Kuru, 2005 p.263). The movement also claims to have provided much of the inspiration for the European Union-Organization of Islamic Conference summit in Istanbul in 2002, in the wake of the 9/11 attacks (Kosebalaban, 2003 pp181-182).

Its chief instrument of interfaith and intercultural dialogue is the Abant Platform of the Gülen-inspired Journalists and Writers Foundations, which itself sponsors the Intercultural Dialogue Platform and the Dialogue Eurasia Platform. In its various meetings, conferences, panels, and publications, the Abant Platform seeks to propagate tolerance and modernity and the contribution Gülen's ideas might make to them, and brings together intellectuals, writers, activists and others to discuss a wide range of current issues. For example, early in 2007 it organized a panel in Turkey aimed at encouraging dialogue between the Sunni majority and the Alevi minority. The Platform's initial meetings were held at Abant in Turkey, but the first of its annual meetings to take place abroad was held in Washington DC in 2004, followed by Brussels and Paris. As we have noted, it was not until February 2007 that it held its first international meeting in the Islamic world, in Egypt. This can be interpreted in a number of ways, but it can appear to reinforce the impression that the movement has at least until recently been inclined to turn its back somewhat on the non-Turkic Islamic world in its interfaith as well as its educational ventures.

In its very nature, interfaith dialogue is more about the dissemination of ideas and the battle for hearts and minds than it is an institutional power struggle. This is a process, not an event that produces winners and losers. As such, it is not and may never be possible to definitively assess the impact of the Gülen movement's transnational interfaith engagement. Nevertheless, and particularly in light of the international atmosphere in the wake of the 9/11 events, any initiative that seeks to reduce the suspicion, hostility and misunderstanding between the Islamic and other worlds will be welcomed in most quarters. This is true not only at the macro or global level, but also on a more local scale, where intercommunal and interfaith relations have sometimes been threatened by the ripple effects of 9/11 and its aftermath. This is an area where a local sense of alienation and exclusion can generate acts of global significance, as the UK discovered with the July 2005 London bombings and other terrorist acts

¹² Fethullah Gülen's website contains transcripts of speeches and interviews in which he outlines his reasoning on interfaith dialogue. Also, see Saritoprak and Griffith, 2005; Weller, 2006.

planned or carried out by British-based Muslims, and where globally-significant events such as those of 9/11 can undermine neighbourhood harmony across the globe.

Interfaith dialogue is a growth area. There are over 250 interfaith groups, councils and forums in the UK alone. At both local and national levels in the west (although less so in most of the Muslim world and anywhere else where civil society is less developed), and at a transnational level globally, religious representatives and thinkers find themselves engaged in a constant round of initiatives, conferences, panels, and the like. Websites, publications and fora proliferate. This is a truly transnational phenomenon, and has created a transnational consciousness among its participants. Members of the Gülen movement are at the heart of much of this activity, and have come to be seen by many not of the Muslim faith as inhabiting a place very much towards the more accessible end of the spectrum of Muslim opinion. However, an empirically-inclined and sceptical political scientist is obliged to ask some hard questions about the impact of much of this activity. First of all, those engaged in interfaith dialogue are, after all, preaching largely to the converted – to each other. It is not at all clear that the fruits of this intense activity spill over into areas of society or consciousness that are not engaged. Secondly, for many secularists, rationalists and disbelievers, faith is the problem more than it is the solution. The history of interfaith violence, oppression and intolerance is long and rich. It is useful and constructive to be reminded that not all Muslims think and act as do adherents of al Qaeda. However, such reminders will not dislodge the observation that al Qaeda's activists are also devout and sincere in their faith, and they too claim to act in the name of Islam. And there is a third observation that the hardened political scientist is obliged to make, which is that even those committed to interfaith dialogue can commit acts or make statements that put back the cause of inter-religious harmony. Pope Benedict XVI's comments in September 2006, appearing to question the scope for reform of Islam and whether it had ever contributed anything that was good, offer a case in point.

None of this is intended to decry the virtue of interfaith dialogue. Nor is it even to deny its value. In the present atmosphere, it is a welcome antidote to the 'Clash of Civilizations' thesis, and counter to those who seem determined to prove Huntington right. Rather, the point is that intense interfaith activity at the transnational level should not too readily be assumed to convert into expanded transnational understanding. In a battle for hearts and minds, it is those not yet won that need to be reached.

Conclusions

The Gülen movement's Islamic inspiration combine with its Turkic identity to serve as a reminder that transnationalism is not at all a recent phenomenon. Historically, neither religions nor ethnic groups and cultures have been great respecters of artificially-constructed politico-geographic boundaries. Furthermore, both the spread of faith and the movement of peoples have long been central features in the unfolding of the human story, and in their diversity and their unity both the Islamic and the Turkic worlds demonstrate how unifying and centripetal forces are in perennial competition with pressures towards fragmentation and separation. The Gülen movement's embrace of dialogue with other faiths, particularly the Abrahamic, and its approach to a Turkic world from which Turks themselves have been for centuries largely estranged, indicate how even deep ruptures between societies and cultures can conceal the scope for rediscovery, commonality, and perhaps transformation. Yet, if transnationalism isn't new, more recent historical developments have intensified and expanded its scope. Both the capacity of the Gülen movement to grow in its country of origin, Turkey, and the opportunity it has exploited to expand its activities and influence on such a global

scale, including into regions of the world long kept secluded, are testimony to the increased interconnectedness and transparency of the modern world.

It is evident that the Gülen movement is a transnational actor on a major scale, through both its educational and its interfaith programmes. Its non-state nature is clear and its global reach substantial. Its activities will impact on 'the Clash of Civilizations' and the evolution and image of Islam in the modern world. It stands to play a substantial role in the evolution of the Turkic world, in terms of its cultural unity, its modernity, and the role Islam assumes in the region. It has become part of Turkey's face abroad and an expression of Turkey's 'soft power' in particular. In this respect, it could offer to much of the Islamic world a more digestible and accessible 'model' for development and democratization than that usually associated with Turkey's ardently secular Republic. Yet the movement's transnationalism is in some respects bounded, limited in its scope, reach and impact by the prioritization inherent in the movement's various activities. Its disproportionately heavy presence in the Turkic world is more than matched by its seeming indifference to the non-Turkic Islamic world, especially its Arab neighbourhood – much of which, it must be said, is unlikely to welcome its presence in any case. Its educational elitism leaves many – perhaps those most in need of its services – untouched, both inside and beyond Turkey. Its interfaith dialogue too focuses largely on the cultivation of those (mostly in the west) who share its commitment to such activities. It leaves those who do not share this commitment, or who otherwise have limited access to it, vulnerable to the proselytizing of less savoury groups. Its activities in non-Turkic and largely non-Islamic parts of the world might be likened to the work of the cultural agencies of the major globally-active western powers such as the US, the UK and France. They are unlikely to harm Turkey's economic prospects and diplomatic image, and are indeed likely to benefit them.

However, in the relative absence of so many of the other attributes of power possessed and disseminated by the major powers – military, political, technological and economic – it is hard to calculate just how much direct advantage will accrue to Turkey and its people as a spill-over from the movement's activities abroad. There is perhaps insufficient Turkish political, technological and economic presence and 'follow up' to the Gülen movement's activities for Turkish influence to fully take root and make a truly lasting impact. Consider by contrast the substantial cultural, economic, political, linguistic, and even religious interpenetration between the UK and France and the Anglophone and Francophone worlds respectively. On the other hand, through Turkey's large Diaspora, its writers, artists, and film-makers, its economic output, and its more transparent social and political system, non-Turks – especially in the west – are acquiring a more nuanced and sophisticated appreciation of the complexities of Turkish society than that traditionally afforded by the Kemalist regime. The Gülen movement's contribution to that enriched understanding is substantial indeed, and almost entirely positive. This thought in turn raises the prospect that the most interesting ramification of the movement's transnational activities will be the indirect contribution they might make to domestic developments in Turkey itself. In understanding Turkey differently, external expectations of and policies towards Turkish domestic developments might gradually alter, and in directions that could help create space for a Turkey that is more 'comfortable in its own skin' to emerge.