

RELIGION AS A SOURCE OF SOCIAL CAPITAL? THE GÜLEN MOVEMENT IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

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Abstract

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

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

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

The hesitancy at the beginning turns into friendship,

the distance into understanding, stiff looks and tensions into humorous jokes, and differences into richness.¹

Abant is boldly moving towards an institutionalization. The objective is evident: Talking about some of the problems the country is facing, debating them and offering solutions; on a civil ground, within the framework of knowledge and deliberation. Some labelled the ideas in the concluding declarations as “revolutionary,” “renaissance,” and “first indications of a religious reform.” Some others (in minority) saw them “dangerous” and “non-sense.” In fact, the result is neither a “revolution” nor “non-sense” It is an indication of a quest for opening new horizons or creating a novel vision.²

When and under what conditions does religion become a source of cooperation rather than conflict in the civil society? The Gülen movement is an Islamic social movement that bases its philosophy on increasing religious consciousness at the individual level and making Islam an important social force in the public sphere. It is this intellectual and social activism that raises the Gülen movement of Turkey as a global phenomenon to the focus of socio-political analysis.

The Gülen community brings different sectors of the society together to create and facilitate a ‘common intellect’ to brainstorm and offer ‘civil responses’ to social issues. The movement sees this as a more subtle, but more effective, and legitimate way of influencing public debate and policy. Hence, the movement initiated a series of symposiums, known as Abant Workshops in Turkey. The scope of the meetings was later expanded to include a wider audience in Europe, the U.S., and the Middle East.

In early 1990s the Gülen Movement launched a silent but persistent public relations campaign. Fethullah Gülen openly met with the prominent figures of government and politics, and gave interviews to some popular newspapers and magazines. With a thriving media network, private schools, and business associations the movement seemed to have entered a new stage in its relations with the outside world. This new stage was not a simple outreach effort; it was rather a confident step to carve a niche in the increasingly diversified Turkish public sphere. The instigation of a series of workshops known as Abant Platforms was one of the biggest steps in this process. The workshops brought academics, politicians, and intellectuals together to discuss some of the thorniest issues of, first, Turkey, such as secularism and pluralism, and then the Muslim World, such as war, globalization and modernization. This paper seeks to explain the motives behind this kind of an ambitious project and its possible implications for the movement itself, for Turkey and for the Muslim World in transition.

1 The 13th Abant Meeting Opening Video Presentation.

2 Mehmet S. Aydin, Opening Remarks for the 2nd Abant Meetings, *Abant Platformu: Din, Devlet ve Toplum* (Gazeteciler ve Yazarlar Vakfı Yayinlari, 2000), pp.9-12.

Religion as a Source of Social Capital in Civil Society

In order to understand the involvement of religious groups in public life one needs to look at the three domains of the public sphere: the state, the political society and the civil society (Casanova, 1994). The state refers to the continuous administrative, legal, bureaucratic and coercive system with institutions, regulations, and enforcement. The state level primarily includes symbolic and legal functions. The constitution, civil service and judiciary are some examples of venues in which religion can work within the state apparatus. The political society is an arena in which societal groups contest to gain control over the state apparatus and influence public policy. This contestation usually takes place through political parties, interest groups and lobbies. Many religious groups directly or indirectly become part of governing coalitions, political parties and interest groups.

The civil society is made up of a body of associations, groups and organizations beyond the immediate reach and control of the state. The civil society requires a certain reference to the public good, as opposed to pure economic market rationality and self-interest. Voluntary organizations and members of the associational life in civil society offer social services in education, health care, gender equality, minority rights, and issue-based platforms. Religious groups choose to utilize a combination of these three domains. The specific domains used by a group depend on its worldview and the cultural and political context. The Gülen movement primarily operates within the civil society, and sometimes interacts with politicians in order to promote some of their objectives in the civil society, such as dialogue, freedom of religion and democratization.³

The quality of public life and the performance of political institutions are significantly influenced by the norms and networks of civic engagement. Robert Putnam defines social capital as “features of social organization such as networks, norms and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit.”⁴ Civic engagement facilitates communication and creates social bonds, and social trust, which in turn makes collective action easier, and opportunism and cheating less likely. Participation in voluntary civic associations advances the socialization of individuals and cultivates values and mores regarding communal life, such as reciprocity, trustworthiness and friendship. Engagement in civic life exposes the citizens to politically relevant information and enhances their social skills (Putnam, 2000).

Social capital, or networks of civic engagement, is crucial to create a vibrant society with a meaningful dialogue among its constituents. Social capital can be understood at two separate but interrelated levels. One is the individual level pertaining to the degree to which individuals are “community minded” with a sense of the common good. The other level is more inter-subjective and structural, and relates to the absence or existence of trust between individuals in a society. In a way, voluntary organizations in the civil society play an important role in transforming anonymous masses into communities, and trust “lubricates” cooperation for mutual benefit (Smidt, 2003).

Religion is an important source of social capital in many modern societies. Religion as a body of beliefs, values and norms motivates believers to volunteer in community affairs to provide social services such as health care, soup kitchens, education, and helping the poor. Religion also provides a source of common identity to its followers and creates bonds

³ The movement has had dialogue with most of the center right and center left political parties in Turkey, with a notable exception of the Islamist Welfare Party. However, because of the overlaps between the constituencies, the movement has been closer to conservative (center right) parties, such as ANAP, and most recently the AK Party.

⁴ Putnam (1995), p. 67.

between them. Obviously, religion is only one source of social capital or civic engagement, albeit an important one.

Is there anything unique about religion when it comes to generating social capital? In comparison to ‘secular’ sources, religion can be an asset to promote a strong sense of reciprocity given its teachings of an after life and all-seeing omnipotent higher authority. In that sense, non-material basis of volunteering and self-sacrifice are key aspects of religious social capital. Additionally, most religions claim universal appeal, which in turn fosters a sense of common identity and purpose across ethnic, racial and economic classes. Some religious groups get involved in politics more directly while some others prefer to invoke ‘prophetic politics’, working as an outside critique especially in ‘moral issues’. Also, the fact that most religions are motivated with salvation rather than strict definitions of worldly success makes it possible for them to take bold initiatives and politically risky ventures. Other than these concrete aspects, religion also provides a symbolic language enmeshed in the grammar of the society by speaking the language of the masses and utilizing the ‘cultural capital’ (Smidt, 2003).

Then, is religion a source of conflict or cooperation in the civil society? The answer to this question depends on the way religion is used in the civic realm. Religious groups whose organizations are congregational tend to promote a more active and engaged laity than hierarchically structured groups (Harris, 2003). Teachings of religion also play a role in enhancing or hindering social capital formation. Religions that emphasize distinctiveness of their beliefs, especially the ones with exclusive evangelism, are more likely to be inward looking whereas religions that emphasize social justice and interfaith dialogue are more likely to work across faiths and socio-economic classes.

The Gülen movement demonstrates elements of a congregational organizational structure. Although there is a core cadre of devotees around Fethullah Gülen who provide the inspiration and know-how to others for building schools, opening cultural centres and language courses, the bulk of the movement is in the periphery. The idea of volunteering and committing one’s time and money plays a key role in the activities of the group. The movement employs an inclusive language vis-à-vis other religious, ethnic and ideological groups and claims to promote the religio-national⁵ interest of the host country. This has proven to be an important tool to appeal to the society at large and legitimate the movement’s social projects in face of questions on the basis of secular and national commitment of the movement.⁶

Abant Platform is a good example of a religiously inspired social capital formation in a society with ideological, ethnic and religious fault lines. The Gülen movement has been quite successful in utilizing its cultural and human capital in order to empower the civil society and expand the democratic space available for the formally excluded periphery vis-à-vis the centre.

A Brief History of the Abant Platform

In June 1994, Gülen movement introduced the Journalists and Writers Foundation (JWF) to the media in a much publicized cocktail. Fethullah Gülen, as the honorary president, made

5 A key term used by the movement in Turkey is “milli” which has religious connotations as well as national, as opposed to “ulusal” which is more secular.

6 The movement has been criticized on two contradictory grounds: Aiming to ‘infiltrate’ into the system to create an Islamic state; cooperating with Christian missionaries and Jews through interfaith dialogue activities to undermine the Muslim identity and territorial integrity of Turkey.

his first media appearance and gave warm messages to the public, emphasizing dialogue, tolerance, pluralism and democracy. In the subsequent years, the foundation organized iftar (fast-breaking) dinners every year with participants from different walks of life and gave “tolerance awards” to people who were seen as key contributors to social peace in Turkey. Later, the JWF formed three platforms with particular missions and focus: The Abant Platform, which has organized annual and semi-annual workshops on social issues in Turkey, Europe, U.S., and the Middle East. The Intercultural Dialogue Platform, which focused on increasing understanding between different religious, ethnic and cultural groups⁷. The Dialogue Eurasia Platform, which has worked with mostly former Soviet Republics to forge close cultural ties, and has since been publishing the DA Magazine in Turkish and Russian (with contributions from Russia, Turkic Republics of Central Asia and Turkey).⁸

The Abant Platform is a self-governing entity supported by the JWF. Its executive committee includes some key members of the foundation’s board of trustees as well as some independent academics.⁹ The themes of annual meetings, participants to be invited and organizational issues are addressed by the executive committee.

The mission statement of the platform mentions ‘dialogue and reconciliation in light of knowledge and expertise’ as the key principle. The platform aims to create a ‘common intellect’ that can define social problems, break them down into pieces, and brainstorm in a collective manner to deliberate the public and propose solutions. The idea is finding a common ground without necessarily giving up personal beliefs and values.¹⁰ The philosophical guru of the platform, Mehmet S. Aydin explains the notable success of the platform by stressing five traits of Abant:

- i.** Disengaging the so called controversial issues in deadlock from ideological and fanatical realm and bringing them into the world of knowledge and rationality.
- ii.** Formation of an “Abant spirit” that is intellectually brave and tolerant of opposing ideas.
- iii.** A democratic attitude by which a free debate and deliberation is possible.
- iv.** Based on dialogic logic with three steps: accumulation of knowledge, critical and analytical mind, and the existential step in touch with reality.
- v.** The possibility of meeting on the common denominator in spite of seemingly irreconcilable philosophical and ideological positions.¹¹

7 This platform organized interfaith trips and meetings in Harran, Urfa (Turkey), where Prophet Abraham was believed to have spent the earlier years of his life. The concept of “Abrahamic Religions” and commonalities between them were emphasized with Muslim, Jewish and Christian participants. The platform also raised awareness about the tragedy of Bosnian Muslims, organized interfaith prayer services for peace, and a celebration of the 700th anniversary of the asylum granted to the Jews, who escaped from persecution in Spain, by the Ottoman Empire.

8 For the mission statement and the board of trustee of the JWF, see the foundation’s official website: www.gyv.org.tr

9 The theology professor Mehmet S. Aydin, who served as the minister of state in charge of religious affairs in Justice and Development Party (AKP) cabinet (2002-2007) chaired the committee until recently. Another academic, professor of history, Mete Tuncay of Istanbul University, took over the position since 2006. Mete Tuncay defines himself as agnostic and his support for the platform gives the Abant Platform credit as an inclusive and non-confessional organization.

10 Harun Tokak, “Abant and the Feeling of Responsibility,” Opening Speech for the 1st Abant Meeting (1998).

11 Mehmet S. Aydin, Opening Remarks for the 2nd Abant Meetings, *Abant Platformu: Din, Devlet ve Toplum*, op. cit., pp. 10-11.

Format of the Meetings and the Participants

The platform chose Abant, a remote recreational area in Northern Turkey, as the venue for the first six meetings. Hence, the notions of “Abant Platform” and “Abant spirit” have been used to refer to the initiative. The participants can be divided into two categories. First group is the ‘core’ participants that include the platform’s executive committee, most members of the JWF’s board of trustee, and some other well-known academics.¹² These people have participated in almost all of the fourteen meetings. The second group consists of academics and intellectuals who are invited based on their expertise and the theme of the workshop, politicians depending on the political climate, and media representatives.¹³ The academics are primarily from the fields of theology, political science, history, law, philosophy and economics. The politicians who participated have been primarily from conservative parties and movements.

The workshop starts with an opening session where the executive committee introduces the topic, the participants and operational aspects of the meeting. Usually, politicians and a select number of community leaders deliver speeches on the importance of the Abant Platforms and their reflections on that year’s theme. Later, the workshops proceed either with some specialized committee meetings or thematic panels.

Meeting No	Academic	Media	Politician	Bureaucracy - State	Civil Society
1 st Meeting-1998	71	6	2	1	10
2 nd Meeting-1999	67	24	5	0	4
3 rd Meeting-2000	61	16	8	3	12
4 th Meeting-2001	55	13	16	0	16
5 th Meeting-2002	69	17	5	0	9
6 th Meeting-2003	63	21	0	8	8
7 th Meeting-2004	64	8	8	0	20
8 th Meeting-2004	68	4	10	8	10
9 th Meeting-2005	85	10	0	0	5
10 th Meeting-2006	36	20	0	9	35
11 th Meeting-2006	51	19	7	13	10
12 th Meeting-2007	55	27	0	6	12
13 th Meeting-2007	47	18	7	4	24
Average	61	16	5	4	14

Earlier the meetings were more in the form of workshops where different aspects of issues were debated to come up with some consensus conclusions-for the press release and concluding declaration. Later, however, this format was criticized to work as a forcing mechanism to forge consensus. Since the sixth workshop, the meetings were reorganized to be more like academic conferences with presentations and panels. This format change is also evident in the concluding documents. The first five meetings produced declarations with specific points and

12 Harun Tokak, Cemal Ussak, Huseyin Gulerce, and Serif Ali Tekalan from the JWF administration; and academics including Mehmet S. Aydin, Mete Tuncay, Niyazi Oktem, Durmus Hocaoglu, Hayreddin Karaman.

13 Politicians who have participated include Abdullah Gul, Bulent Arinc, Kemal Dervis, Mehmet Agar, Riza Akcali, Huseyin Celik, Ali Babacan, Ali Coskun, Cemil Cicek, Celal Adan, Ali Mufit Gurtuna. Journalists from a wide range of media outlets also attended: Toktamis Ates (Cumhuriyet), Fehmi Koru (Yeni Safak), Cuneyt Ulsever (Hurriyet), Cengiz Candar (Referans), Ali Bulac (Zaman), Nevval Sevindi (Zaman), Sahin Alpaz (Zaman), Alev Alatl (Zaman), Mustafa Armagan (Zaman), Besir Ayvazoglu (Zaman), Mustafa Erdoğan (Star), Ali Bayramoglu (Yeni Safak), Rusen Cakir (Vatan), Yasin Aktay (Yeni Safak), Emre Akoz (Sabah), Osman Ozsoy (Tercuman), Tarhan Erdem (Radikal), Ani Ozgurel (Radikal), among others.

the later meetings were summarized with concluding remarks and conference proceedings.

Themes

- i.** Islam and Secularism- Abant, Turkey (1998)
- ii.** Religion, State and Society- Abant, Turkey (1999)
- iii.** Democratic State and the Rule of Law- Abant, Turkey (2000)
- iv.** Pluralism and Social Reconciliation- Abant, Turkey (2001)
- v.** Globalization- Abant, Turkey (2002)
- vi.** War and Democracy- Abant, Turkey (2003)
- vii.** Islam, Secularism and Democracy: The Turkish Experience- Washington DC, US (2004)
- viii.** Culture, Identity and Religion in the Process of Turkey's EU Membership- Brussels, Belgium (2004)
- ix.** New Pursuits in Education- Erzurum, Turkey (2005)
- x.** Republic, Multiculturalism, and Europe- Paris, France (2006)
- xi.** Global Politics and the Future of the Middle East- Abant, Turkey (2006)
- xii.** Turkey-Egypt Colloquium: Islam, West and Modernization - Cairo, Egypt (2007)
- xiii.** Historic, Cultural, Folkloric and Contemporary Dimensions of Alevism- Abant, Turkey (2007)
- xiv.** Turkey-French Conversations II- Istanbul, Turkey (2007)

The topics discussed in the meetings underscore two important points. Firstly, the specific topics are chosen based on the context (time and space). After the indirect military intervention in politics against the Islamist Welfare Party government, Turkey struggled its way towards normalization of civil-military relations between 1997 and 2002. The first four meetings search in this context for consensus building on some of the intractable issues polarizing the country along the lines of Islamist vs. Secularist and the state vs. the society. After 2002, the themes were based more on global context than local. The 2003 meeting tackled the question of bringing democracy by force in face of escalating US threat to intervene in Iraq. The platform discussed the question of Islam and democracy in 2004 during the euphoria right after the 'success' of Operation Iraqi Freedom. It seems, by having this meeting at the very birth place of the Greater Middle East Initiative, the platform aimed to speak to the Western audience. The two Turkey-France conversations (2004 and 2007) were more focused on Turkey's EU membership with a broad multiculturalism outlook. France was symbolic in being one of the most vocal opponents of Turkey's full membership and its historical influence over Turkish intelligentsia in issues of secularism, republicanism and citizenship. In 2006, the Gülen movement, which has been criticized not paying enough attention to the Muslim World as much as they emphasize dialogue with non-Muslims, invited intellectuals from the Middle East including Arab, Jewish and Turkish to discuss the future of the Middle East. And most recently in February 2007, the platform co-organized a meeting in Egypt with the prominent Al-Ahram Institute to discuss Turkish and Egyptian experience with democracy, modernization and secularism.

Along with the platform's close consideration of socio-political setting, the second striking point is the increased frequency of the meetings by time. As a result, the participants and the target audience also expanded, becoming more diverse every year. The first meetings probe Turkey's chronic problems that are at the source of significant tension in the country. Secularism, state-society relations, Alevi-Sunni relations are just a few of those issues that

are still at the centre of public debate. Later, the platform looks into issues that are more global in nature but with clear implications for Turkey, such as democratization, war, and globalization. The meetings in the U.S. and Europe are more tuned toward bringing Turkey and Turkey's experiences with democracy, secularism and Islam to the forefront of discussion. This also aims to put up bridges between Turkish and the Western intellectual, and possibly policy, circles.

Results of the Meetings

The Abant workshops close with a concluding declaration or a conference report. These documents are then shared with the public with a press release and either sent or presented to statesmen and members of the political society. The JWF have also published transcripts and proceedings of some of the earlier workshops. Most recently, the Mehtap TV, a channel that specializes in cultural and educational programs and known for its ties with the Gülen movement, started to air the Abant meetings live. This is an important move to make these meetings more accessible to the general population.

The public declarations consist of three broad items:

- i. A belief in social harmony
- ii. A commitment to liberal-democratic values
- iii. A referral to Turkish and/or Islamic perspective.

The starting point for Abant meetings is the possibility and necessity of dialogue across different beliefs, values and identities. The organizers, sponsors, participants and supporters of Abant frequently stress the need for dialogue, open debate, consensus building and conflict resolution. One can see references to this conviction in almost every meeting declaration. The fourth meeting is in essence an embodiment of this position with philosophical and analytical underpinnings. The main purpose of pluralism is described as the recognition of difference and achieving a societal consensus. The consensus is not defined as transformation of differences, rather as finding a social compromise (similar to the concept of social contract) to be able to live together in spite of differences. Obviously, the virtue is to live in peace with a meaningful dialogue among the constituents of the society. The document celebrates diversity and openly calls for a new constitution based on a manifestation of the new social contract. The Kemalist ideology is criticized for attempting to homogenize the society in the prolonged period of nation-state building and blamed for “social engineering” in the name of modernization to attain the desired ideological and political outcomes.¹⁴

Another characteristic of the declarations is their liberal democratic tone. Freedom of religion and conscious along with the right of individuals to practice their beliefs is the central thesis of 1st and 2nd meetings, which examine secularism, and the social role of religion. There is also a clear liberal position in regards to state-society relations. By questioning the sacralisation of the state, participants portray the state in service to its citizens, contrary to the traditional state dominant Turkish political culture. In that sense, the state is urged to liberate itself from totalitarian, authoritarian and top-down ideological-doctrinal tendencies. The concept of *raison d'Etat*¹⁵ is rejected in favour of a full fledged rule of law and a neutral referee state.¹⁶ This speaks to the fallacy of creating a police state with human rights violations in

14 The concluding declaration of the 4th Abant meeting, www.gyv.gov.tr.

15 The French term used to describe the justification of overriding state power.

16 3rd meeting concluding declaration, www.gyv.gov.tr.

the name of national security and war on terror. The strongest critique of laïcité also comes from this avenue: Turkish secularism is not simply a separation of religious and political authorities, but a subjugation of religion to state control, which raises serious questions about the freedom of religious practice (e.g. the headscarf ban in public schools).¹⁷ Finally, the platform maintains that Turkey needs more democracy not less to solve its ethnic, religious and social problems.¹⁸

The Abant platform departs from a belief that religion, and particularly Islam, can be a positive factor in social, political and economic life. The 1st Abant meeting undertook the challenging question of the relationship between Islam and secularism. Being the first of its kind in Turkey and organized by a religiously-based civil society group, this meeting not only attracted quite an attention at the beginning, but also provoked some interesting public debate afterwards. The meeting ended with casting some doubts on some clichés and taboos in Turkey about the position of Islam on secularism and democracy. The participants agreed on positions such as:

- i.** There is no contradiction between revelation and reason according to the prevalent position in the Islamic scholarship.
- ii.** No person or group has a monopoly or divine authority over the understanding and interpretation of Islam.
- iii.** Muslims in the earlier periods of Islam engaged in more independent judgment (ijtihad) to solve problems in accordance with the general principles of the religion and necessities of the time. (This was a direct challenge to the orthodox position in Sunni Islam about the closing of the gates of ijtihad since the 12th century AD).
- iv.** There is not a necessary contradiction between the sovereignty of God in religious cosmos and sovereignty of people in politics.
- v.** State is a human construct, rather than a metaphysically and politically sacred entity (in response to the question of the existence and nature of an “Islamic state”)
- vi.** Other than the universal and basic democratic rights and the rule of law principles, Islam leaves the specifics of the regime type to societies. (Islam and democracy are compatible)
- vii.** Turkey should develop a more freedom based form of secularism (Anglo-Saxon version of secularism investigated in depth during the workshop)¹⁹

The reactions to these bold statements were mixed. Some Islamic intellectuals, such as Ahmet Tasgetiren, declined the invitation to participate and criticized its concluding document for being limited by the conditions of 1997 indirect military intervention in politics²⁰. Most liberals and conservative intellectuals, on the hand, praised the meeting for its brevity and sincerity.

The question of Islam and modernity assumes another pivotal position in the 7th Abant meeting in Johns Hopkins University, US. The American and Turkish intellectuals scrutinized the Turkish experience with Islam, modernization, secularism and democracy. Unlike the 1st meeting, the 7th meeting did not produce a consensus public declaration, the general tone was about the unique historical and contemporary dynamics in Turkey’s experience with Islam. I believe the intentions of the Gülen movement to sponsor such a meeting are twofold.

17 2nd meeting concluding declaration www.gyv.gov.tr.

18 3rd meeting concluding declaration, www.gyv.gov.tr.

19 1st meeting, (the comments in the parentheses are mine)

20 Tasgetiren is in the board of trustees of the JWF. He later participated in the 4th workshop.

Firstly, to offer an alternative face to Islam and Muslims after the negative effects of the 9/11: There are moderate Muslims who denounce violence, appear in public discussion and engage in open exchange with non-Muslims. Second is to make a statement in the US, and the world, public sphere that there are organic-native Muslim groups who take the responsibility to discuss the problems of the Muslim world in a genuinely open and sincere manner. Thus, the US policy-makers and the media are expected to pay closer attention to the people ‘on the ground’ before engaging into ambitious projects, such as the Greater Middle East Initiative.

The Gülen movement is very much in tune with globalization in terms of an increased connection between societies and a freer flow of information, ideas and economic goods across the boundaries of the nation-states. In spite of the global reach of the movement, the local characteristics are still salient. In the case of Turkey, the movement sees its Turkish and Islamic roots complementary and inseparable. According to Gülen, Turks played a significant role in Islamic history not only by defending the Muslim World militarily, but also by producing a remarkable civilization based on Islamic principles. He argues that by the 10th century Turkish Muslim scholars in Central Asia were able to understand the ‘universality’ and ‘spirit’ of the Islamic teachings and use new methodological tools for interpretation and inference. The Seljuk and Ottoman Empires benefited from this comprehensive jurisprudence to freely borrow from other civilizations and legal systems to make their Shari’ a based rule more flexible and in touch with the realities.²¹ From this historical account, the Turkish interpretation and practice of Islam is tacitly presented to other Muslim societies as an alternative to the more literal salafi Islam, popular in some parts of the Arab World. Although one can see this Turkish bias in most of the Abant workshops, the 6th meeting in Washington DC was the one that directly addressed the theoretical and practical meaning of Turkish Islam.

Broader Meaning and Implications of Abant

In many respects Abant is a unique enterprise. First, it is a genuine civil society initiative. It is ‘civil’ as it does not have any links with any branches of the state apparatus. It also does not directly promote economic or political interest of a group. This difference from an interest group is important to underline because it suggests a more civic and collective purpose to contribute to the public good as opposed to particular understanding of public good from an economic, political or ideological perspective. Think-tanks, business associations, labour unions, environmental groups and even human rights advocates are examples of interest groups that are formed by like-minded individuals with very particular goals. The Abant platform is primarily supported by the Gülen movement, yet its mission statement points to the interest of the society as a whole. This is in fact not more than a logistical and moral support. However, this does not mean that the movement gains nothing out of this leadership in the end. If you ask the activists in the executive committee, they will stress that a society in peace and harmony is in the interest of everyone including the members of the Gülen movement.²² In addition to this, I believe that the Abant platform along with JWF presents a much needed visibility to overcome the suspicions regarding the informal structure, and a possible secrecy, of the movement.²³ This in turn contributes to the legitimacy of the movement in the public

21 For an analysis of Gülen’s ideas and the concept of Turkish Islam, see Ugur (2004).

22 Author’s interview with members of the JWF, June 2007.

23 After a media campaign against him, Fethullah Gülen was tried by the State Security Court on grounds of forming a secret organization to change the secular nature of the Turkish state (2000-2003). He was acquitted, yet there is still an uneasy relationship between the movement and the Kemalist state bureaucracy. The popular support behind the movement, its economic power and the education and media network worry the state that the movement might

eye, which is quite crucial for the uninterrupted prospering of the educational and business network of the movement.

Another unique feature of the Abant initiative is its religious based inspiration and motivation. The Gülen movement is not exceptional in forming civil society organizations and using religion as a source of social capital. However, other religious groups mainly offer social services, such as health care, private education, and food and clothing for the needy. When it comes to public policy, most religious groups act as an interest group. In other words, they take open positions in moral issues, such as social justice, war, abortion, drugs among others. Many Christian churches participate in the democratic process, even hire registered lobbyists. Even if they form coalitions, they still retain their positions as a distinct group.²⁴ The Gülen movement, in contrast, does not openly take position in many issues, including the much debated headscarf question in Turkey. Rather, the movement takes a more indirect way to influencing the public opinion. Promoting platforms where different groups in the society, including non-religious and atheists, is an outcome of this indirect approach. In a way, the Abant Platform does not only consume the existing social capital by bonding (within the Gülen movement fellowship) but also creates more social capital by bridging (across different groups).²⁵ One needs to take into account the influence of the political culture in shaping such an approach. Unlike the liberal pluralist political culture in the US, for historical reasons²⁶ Turkey is closer to the republican tradition that emphasizes the ‘general will’ and public order over public sphere that legitimizes inclusion of particular moral, philosophical and ideological values. As we mentioned in the previous section, the Gülen movement uses a national (interest) based rhetoric, and this becomes the basis for their legitimacy in the Turkish public sphere.

A critical contribution of Abant in Turkey is the empowerment of the civil society vis-à-vis the state. Many civil society organizations in Turkey function as agents of the state, jeopardizing the autonomy of the civil society as a whole. One can see this especially in some Kemalist organizations, which are orchestrated by some retired army generals. During the most recent series of public demonstrations against the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey, the links between the military and the “civil” society organizations were hotly debated.²⁷

The success of Abant depends on two factors: its continued commitment to the democratic process (without getting entangled in every day politics) and its faith in the power of civil society. As a result of the public deliberations about various aspects of the social problems, a more informed, educated and cohesive public have already started to emerge, which in turn developed a self-esteem for challenging the state in matters of democracy, freedoms and the rule of law. The open dialogue and reconciliation that takes place in Abant demystifies social problems that were seen as intractable. This in turn depoliticizes social problems. And paradoxically, depoliticisation opens more space for the political society against the resentment of the state bureaucracy to reform. A civil society mindful of its interest in balancing the coercive power of the state and a political society that can transmit the societal preferences into policy and legislation are two indispensable elements of a functioning democracy.

want to capitalize this influence into political power in the future.

24 The New Christian Right and the Interfaith Alliance are good examples from the US.

25 For an extensive discussion of bonding vs. bridging social capital, see Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).

26 The strong Ottoman state tradition and the French influence on Turkish modernization.

27 See for example, “‘Vatanseverlik’ yarışındaki örgütler emekli asker dolu. Al sana ‘sivil’ toplum!” [Organizations competing for ‘patriotism’ are full of retired army generals, a ‘civil’ society!], *Radikal*, 17 February 2007.