Perspectives on the Gülen Movement

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The world is changing—for better or worse depends on one's social, political and economic perspective. This change is variously amplified within Islamic and Muslim societies, which are seemingly in constant flux in the neoliberal era. The economic dynamics of this era shape and remake our daily lives as they are expressed within the shifting theo-politics that partially defines and certainly affects these regions. As daily life is altered social movements respond by pivoting or anchoring themselves in relation to over-arching changes emblematic of the neo-liberal state. No movement is static and each must balance its relation to local communities as well as to the broader global currents of change. In this way, seemingly localized movements are required to orient part of their vision to more contemporary forms of expression of the state and its actors. Among Islamic-framed movements, we can see this glaringly in the cases of the Muslim Brotherhood, Jama'at, Hamas, and other such organizations. In light of these challenges and our responses to them, the Turkish Gülen or Hizmet (“service”) movement is no exception. Indeed, this movement presents an empirical example of an extensive contemporary social movement mobilizing across social spheres within a decidedly Islamic and global social context. This issue of Sociology of Islam turns its gaze toward this movement in a number of global settings and socio-political contexts.

In recent years, particularly given Turkey’s resurgence as a powerful economic player in the global economy, the Gülen movement has become a salient player in the social, political and economic landscape of the Middle East, Europe, Central Asia, Africa and the United States. In the 1960s, Fethullah Gülen had a small group of followers in Kestanepazari, in Izmir Turkey. By the 1970s, following population trends motivated by economic liberalism, many in the movement community moved to Turkey’s largest cities, organized study groups and established once-a-week meetings to collectively read the Risale-i Nur; risales written by Said Nursi.
throughout the first half of the twentieth century and a foundational text within the movement. This pattern of reading and interpreting this *tafsir*, and the bonding of followers achieved through a more modern (and not uncontroversial) exigesis of classical Islamic texts, strongly connected to vibrations of a newfound twentieth century view of world connectedness. Nursi wrote these *risales* through two major world wars and significant militarized conflict in Asia. The Gülen movement, relying on these texts, was then forming in the shadow of globally dividing wars in Asia, particularly the Southeast; wars that had their own roots in global divisions over economic social policy pitting the Soviet socialist model against the liberal market model of the U.S. and much of Europe. This collective social action and tight bonding of the Gülen followers throughout the 1970s prepared the movement to take advantage of the Turkish military coup of September 12th, 1980. Within Turkish politics, this event opened a new avenue for Islamic groups and movements already at work in Turkey. The neoliberal conditions of the military regime opened opportunities for those groups whose view of the theo-secular balance across all spheres of social life aligned with on-the-ground neo-liberal political conditions of the day. The Gülen movement was ideally suited to take advantage of this opening aided by economic transformations of the Turkish economy, which were guided by a powerful subscriber of neo-liberal ideas, Turgut Ozal. First as Prime Minister then as President, Ozal created economic and social opportunities for the movement through his policies of privatization and change in the relations between the state and the economy, which necessarily, in Turkey, intersected with expressions of Islam. These opportunities grew exponentially under the conditions of economic liberalization of the global economy of the 1980s and 1990s. Coincident to these developments, and certainly exacerbated by the ongoing reconfiguration of the global economy, the collapse of the Soviet Union generated unexpected economic and political consequences for the Turkish-speaking world. The Gülen movement and its followers were able to economically leverage the Central Asian economic gap left by the collapse of the political center of the socialist economic model. Many followers of Gülen invested heavily in Central Asian economies, particularly Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan. In this era, they also extended their growing network of schools from Turkey to the Central Asian republics. These Gülen-inspired “Turkish schools” were openly welcomed by the bureaucratic elite of Central Asian states and were actively supported by Turkish presidents Turgut Ozal and Suleyman Demirel.

The economic and social benefits obtained in Central Asia and Turkey led the Gülen movement to seek more political power within the Turkish