Civil Society and Islamic NGOs in Secular Turkey and Their Nationwide and Global Initiatives: The Case of the Gülen Movement

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Abstract

The Gülen movement engages in interfaith and intercultural activities and works towards a peaceful coexistence and alliance of civilisations. The Gülen movement successfully turned its spiritual, religious, intellectual and human resources into effective social capital and utilized this social capital in promoting interfaith dialogue and in establishing educational institutions attracting students of diverse ethnic, religious and socio-economic backgrounds.

1 Introduction

This study endeavours to show that while the faith-based Gülen movement is directly engaged with interfaith and intercultural activities and works towards a peaceful coexistence and alliance of civilisations, at the same time, it is simultaneously engaged in concrete educational projects that indirectly foster an understanding of intercultural dialogue; that help peace-building in global conflict zones and that transform its social capital into sustainable development.

To achieve this aim, after briefly looking at Islam in Turkey, civil society and Islamic NGOs, we will look at the man and his ideas who initiated the movement associated with his name and then we will focus on his (and the movement’s) discourse and initiatives on dialogue, tolerance, acceptance and alliance of civilizations. In the second part of the paper, we will briefly elaborate on how his message of dialogue, acceptance, and alliance of civilizations and so on is applied in sensitive fields such as multi-ethnic societies and global conflict zones.

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2 Islam in Secular Turkey, Civil Society and Islamic NGOs

Turkish Republic had not allowed pluralism and democracy to operate until 1950. During these four decades a positivist and staunchly secularist elite ruled the country. Islamic identity and discourse were to a great extent de-legitimized and marginalized by the Republican Kemalist elite. The role of Islam in the public sphere has been radically marginalized and the state attempted to confiscate and monopolize even this marginal role, leaving no official room for private interpretations of Islam. Even though the Turkish Republic has followed assertive secularist policies, Islam is still deeply rooted in the minds and hearts of the people. The state, through its secularist policies and programs of westernization, endeavored to eradicate the value system of the Muslim people in the country without providing, at the same time, a satisfactory and all-encompassing ideological framework which could have mass appeal and was capable of replacing Islam. The positivist Kemalist ideology could not fill the gap which Islam was supposed to have forcefully vacated. Religious leaders, their successors and the religious functionaries, have regained their influence in public life and have continued to attract masses into their religious atmosphere. Local Islam survived despite all attempts of the state. Islam in its all sorts of manifestations is pervasive in a modern sense in Turkish society. After all Sufi brotherhoods and lodges were closed down by the Turkish Republic; they did not challenge the state, as a result of the Sunni understanding of preferring a bad state to anarchy, chaos and revolution. Nevertheless, they continued their existence unofficially without making much noise and without claiming any public or official role. In return, the officials turned a blind eye to their existence. As a recent study on Turkey reconfirmed “(t)he vibrancy of Islam is remarkable in almost all areas of Turkish life. This Islam is neither a replacement for, nor an alternative to, the modern world: it is an integral part of life” (Shankland 1999: 15, see for detailed data Shankland 1999: 54-61, see also Yilmaz 2005: ch. 4).

Turkey can no longer be explained by centre and periphery paradigm. There are now centers and peripheries in Turkey. In today’s Turkey, centres and peripheries –just as identities- are intermingled and the boundaries between them have become blurred. Periphery is no longer composed of low or folk culture. It is no longer composed of villager, religious, uneducated and oppositional masses. We can argue the same for the centre from the opposite angle. Islam is an obvious reality of some of these centres and peripheries. In today’s urban spheres in Turkey’ Islam is represented not only
at an individual level but there are countless institutions, official or unofficial. Sufi brotherhoods, Islamic communities and faith-based movements appeal also to white-collar workers and upper-middle class sections of the society. These communities, movements and businessmen who are associated with them operate several companies, dormitories, schools, Islamic charities, hospitals, journals, dailies, radio and TV stations and so on. They also run several other types of NGOs and civil society institutions. Their activities range from poverty eradication to human rights advocacy to interfaith & intercultural dialogue. Faith-based Gülen movement is only one of these many Islamic entities but it is probably the biggest one in terms of number of people who are associated with it; variety of the areas it is interested in; number of countries it operates and the interest it attracts from the media and academia – local, national, international. Thus, in this study we will only focus on the Gülen movement’s civil society and NGO activities both in Turkey and the globe. We will specifically focus on the movement’s interfaith & intercultural and intercivilizational dialogue activities and initiatives.

3 Gülen and the Movement Associated with His Name

Fethullah Gülen is a Turkish Muslim scholar, thinker, author, opinion leader, and preacher emeritus. He has inspired many people in Turkey to establish educational institutions that combine modern sciences with ethics and spirituality. His efforts have resulted in the emergence of the Gülen movement. Gülen is now “one of the latest and most popular modern Muslims that Republican Turkey has produced” (Kadioglu 1998: 18). The actual number of people inspired by Gülen’s works and sympathizers is not exactly known. But it is agreed that it is the largest civil movement in the country. In newspapers, he is at times referred to as the unofficial civil religious leader of Turkey (Ozgurel 2001).

Gülen’s teaching offers “a contribution that is devout, and looks for the renewal of Muslims through deeper engagement with the sources of Islam. At the same time, this Islamic depth calls for deployment of an appropriate ijtihad that is directed towards Islamically faithful engagement with the realities of the current historical and geographical and socio-political contexts. All of this, together, is then directed towards tajdid or “renewal” of Islam and of Muslims that can actively develop and enrich both the ‘bonding’ and ‘bridging’ social capital that religions can offer to the wider civil society” (Weller 2007: 283).
Gülen has influenced those who share his thoughts and aspirations, numbering a few million, to establish over 1000 educational institutions such as primary and secondary schools, colleges and universities that endeavor to combine modern sciences with ethics and spirituality, in over 110 different countries; from Kazakhstan to Tanzania, from United Kingdom to Australia. In addition to his contribution to the betterment activities of education in Turkey and the World at large, he is also renowned for his endeavors for the establishment of mutual understanding & acceptance and tolerance in the society. His social reform efforts, begun during the 1960s, have made him one of Turkey’s most well-known and respected public figures. His dedication to solving social problems and satisfying spiritual needs have gained him a sizeable audience and readership throughout the world. Fethullah Gülen does not have an official status and his authority is based solely on his religious and scholarly credentials. Gülen’s interfaith approach has three religious bases: a history of revelation and prophecy, the commonalities among faiths, and the Qur’an’s explicit sanction of interfaith dialogue (Kayaoglu 2007: 523).

In the first phase of his life Gülen gathered his students into a quasireligious community which aimed to form them into a generation of pious and educated Muslims. Gülen saw these communities as a way of building a new generation of morally superior persons (Penaskovć 2007: 411). His movement has worked towards inculcating individuals with this desire and practice, and the effects can be seen through the numerous charitable works the people associated with the movement have developed. As such, the movement has an important effect in building civil societies as the bases of civilization, through individual empowerment and societal empowerment (Krause 2007: 171). Empowerment is achieved one, when the individual develops and advances his/her own skills, education and consciousness and two, when other individuals benefit from that person’s charity, education, or guidance (Krause 2007: 171). Gülen’s teaching also offers both a critique of the political instrumentalisation of Islam while at the same time providing a basis for active Muslim engagement with the wider society in ways that are based on an Islamic robustness and an Islamic civility (Weller 2007: 269).

Gülen has lead the establishment of many charitable organisations, hospitals, schools, universities, media outlets, journals, poverty eradication foundations, and interfaith & intercultural dialogue institutions. Volunteerism is a cornerstone to the success of the movement’s institutions, as well as the support of small businessmen, the social elite and community leaders, and powerful industrialists. With donations
from these sources, trusts and foundations have been especially to establish schools and to provide scholarships to help students (Krause 2007: 166). The Gülen movement shares much in common with many Western, Christian, philanthropic initiatives in education and public discourse of the past three centuries, particularly in North America and it cannot be easily understood in the limited context of the Muslim world (Barton 2007: 650). The movement exemplifies an institution and mode of action that is indispensable to decision makers and policy makers struggling with the strains of ideological cleavages and growing fear and threats of terrorist and racist action. A look at four major components of civility – tolerance, cooperation, reciprocity, trust - illustrate how the teachings and philosophy of the Gülen movement is a vehicle for the development and securing of civil societies” (Krause 2007: 171). Analysing empowering effects that result from the Gülen movement’s efforts, captures a deeper understanding of how their mode of action enables greater well-being, health and the ability of individuals to be in better positions to take greater control over their choices. Empowerment is achieved through its educational and charitable efforts. The movement is dedicated to education in a broad sense (Krause 2007: 169).

The Gülen movement is based on an Islamic philosophy that embraces a ‘common good,’ and emphasises the universality of values, spirituality and principles of justice – in short, the welfare of society and all individuals within that society. Gülen’s work and movement has become an active force within civil societies, as can be seen in the numerous activities pursued, and its growing presence in an increasing number of countries outside its origins, Turkey (Krause 2007: 165). The movement has become “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” (Park 2007: 59). Tracing the range of activities of “the 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” (Park 2007: 57). As emphasised by John O. Voll, “in the clashing visions of globalizations, Fethullah Gülen is a force in the development of the Islamic discourse of globalized multicultural pluralism. As the impact of the educational activities of those influenced by him attests, his vision bridges modern and postmodern, global and local, and has a significant influence in the contemporary debates that shape the visions of the future of Muslims and non-Muslims alike” (Voll 2003: 247). The movement has also “already emerged as an element in Turkey’s ‘soft’ power, whether the state appreciates it or not” (Park 2007:
4 Gülen on Tolerance, Acceptance and Dialogue between Civilizations

Gülen sees diversity and pluralism as a natural fact. He wants those differences to be admitted and to be explicitly professed. Accepting everyone in their otherness, which is broader and deeper than tolerance, is his normal practice (see in detail, Unal and Williams 2000: 256-258). Even "a relatively cursory reading of some representative works of Gülen yield elements for a paradigmatic perspective that is indicative of new possibilities for Muslim interpretation of, and sensibilities toward, interfaith relations and dialogue” (Pratt 2007: 405). Gülen’s message of tolerance and dialogue originally started as a response to certain specific tensions within Turkish society. The notions that he developed of both tolerance and dialogue fit well within the traditions of ancient Greek thought as well as more recent developments in the application of speech act theory and the conception of communicative rationality. By linking these notions as he does, Gülen supplies a unity of the two notions that has application on a global level (De Bolt 2005: 12). Gülen has linked tolerance and dialogue in a new way that provides an important message within a global context that offers an alternative to conflict (De Bolt 2005: 1). For Gülen, tolerance is achieved through a form of education that does not deny the place of religion, nor denies the place of what is known as ‘secular’ learning. This is merely a constructed dichotomy that bears little relevance in the true attainment of building a holistic self and society (Krause 2007: 172).

Gülen proclaims “the Muslim priority for peaceful and harmonious relations with the wider world, including with religious neighbours” (Pratt 2007: 391). He believes that dialogue is a must today, and that the first step in establishing it is recognising but transcending the past, disregarding polemical arguments, and giving precedence to common points, which far outnumber polemical ones. In his opinion, a believer does not hesitate to communicate with any kind of thought and system; while one foot should remain at the centre the other could be with other ‘seventy-two nations’ (Rumi’s famous metaphor); Islam does not reject interaction with diverse cultures and change as long as what is to be appropriated does not contradict with the main pillars of Islam. He unequivocally puts that “the method used by those who act with enmity and hatred, who view everyone else with wrath, and who blacken others as infidels is non-Islamic, for Islam is a religion of love and tolerance” (Unal and Williams 2000: 120).
Gülen does not take refuge in any invocations of an idealised past as a solution to the weakness of Islam in the present. Rather, he seeks to provide a clear analysis of the kind of global and historical context that has led some Muslims into seeing the world in terms of an epic, militarised global struggle of almost Manichean dualism between dar-al Islam and dar-al harb (Weller 2007: 276). He is more concerned with dar al-hizmet (see in detail Yilmaz 2003). This reflects a movement away from an instrumentalisation of religion in politics to a public life of service based on religious motivations, contributing to civil society as one contribution alongside others (Weller 2007: 282).

He speaks to the importance of knowledge and education, which if done properly can avert any clash of civilizations. Mr. Gülen equates knowledge and power. Everything in the future will be in the orbit of knowledge” (Penaskovic 2007: 411). His “positive response to the clash of civilizations thesis consists of three parts encapsulated in the words, tolerance, interfaith dialogue, and compassionate love” (Penaskovic 2007: 413).

Whilst Huntington thinks in terms of polarities, Gülen espouses a more holistic view of global politics. Gülen sees Islam and the West working together in a harmonious fashion. In this connection the operative term for Gülen is dialogue. Gülen also “takes a transcendent point of view, that is, he looks at global politics through the lens of his Islamic faith” (Penaskovic 2007: 415). Gülen is aware of the fact “that the tendency toward factionalism exists within human nature. A meaningful and nonetheless necessary goal, he says, should be to make this tendency non-threatening and even beneficial” (Vainovski-Mihai 2007: 419). He also entirely understands the growing interdependencies of today. He invites to a emotional coexistence through dialogue across differences and on the basis of joint ethical criteria (Vainovski-Mihai 2007: 426). Gülen’s philosophy of peace and his efforts are not considered isolated instances in Islam; in fact, the entire heritage of Islam is considered to be the foundation of Gülen’s understanding of peace (Saritoprak 2007: 636).

5 Utilizing Social Capital in Empowering Civil Society and Peace-Building

5-1 Faith-based Initiatives on Dialogue between Civilizations and Peace-building

Gülen visited and received leading figures, not only from among the Turkish population, but from all over the world. Pope John Paul II at the Vatican, the late
John O’Connor, Archbishop of New York, Leon Levy, former president of The Anti-Defamation League are among many leading representatives of world religions with whom Gülen has met to discuss dialogue and take initiatives in this respect. In Turkey, the Vatican’s Ambassador to Turkey, the Patriarch of the Turkish Orthodox Church, the Patriarch of the Turkish Armenian community, the Chief Rabbi of the Turkish Jewish community and many other leading figures in Turkey have frequently met with him, portraying an example of how sincere dialogue can be established between people of faith (Gülen 2004: xiii).

Gülen pioneered in the establishment of the Journalists and Writers Foundation in 1994, well before mushrooming of dialogue activities in the post-9/11 world, the activities of which to promote dialogue and tolerance among all strata of the society receive warm welcome from almost all walks of life. The Foundation also works as a think-tank in related issues. The Journalists and Writers Foundation’s activities to promote dialogue and tolerance among all strata of the society have been warmly welcomed by people from almost all walks of life. Journalists and Writers Foundation sponsors the Abant Platform, the Intercultural Dialogue Platform, the Dialogue Eurasia Platform and Medialog Platform. The movement tries to bring all scholars and intellectuals regardless of their ethnic, ideological, religious and cultural backgrounds (The Abant Platform). This platform is the first of its kind in Turkish history where intellectuals could agree to disagree on sensitive issues such as laicism, secularism, peaceful co-existence, and faith & reason relations. 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. In February 2007 that it held its first international meeting in the Islamic world, in Egypt (Park 2007: 57). Abant Platform is an “example of a religiously inspired social capital formation in a society with ideological, ethnic and religious fault lines” (Ugur 2007: 155).

Gülen’s dialogue and peaceful coexistence discourse has also led to the establishment of new institutions all over the world, like the Dialogue Society established in 1999 in London or the Rumi Forum, the Rumi-inspired foundation
established in 2000 in Washington DC. Such enterprises underscore the ambition to
consolidate and make manifest the trend toward a general but a renewed Rumi form
of humanism (Ozdalga 2003: 70-71). There are now hundreds of dialogue associations
and charities all over the world founded by the movement’s Muslim and non-Muslim
volunteers motivated by Gülen’s teachings. Through these charities, these volunteers
initiate and engage in interfaith and intercultural dialog with people of different faiths,
backgrounds, and cultures.

5-2 Peaceful Co-Existence in Multi-Ethnic Societies and Global Conflict Zones

The Gülen movement has been able to convert its social network and spiritual
capital into creative, especially educational, projects (Kucukcan 2007: 187). The
movement provides intermediary networks that contribute to the integration of
individual citizens to state (Ozdalga 2005: 433).

The movement’s schools in areas where ethnic and religious conflicts are
escalating, such as Albania, Kosovo, Macedonia, the Philippines, Banda Aceh,
Northern Iraq, Darfur and South-eastern Turkey have played remarkable peacemaking
roles in decreasing levels of conflict in these areas (Saritoprak 2005: 423, see also
Kalyoncu 2007). Case studies of Gülen-inspired organisations in Singapore, Indonesia
and Cambodia show how they have applied his ideas to enable inter-religious dialogue
and offer an effective alternative to legalistic teaching of Islam. The case studies
allow for comparison of the movement’s approach to a Muslim-majority and Muslim-

The movement “has succeeded in forging policies and programmes that bring
different ethno-religious communities together as a necessary first step towards
civil society: common problems facing the different ethno-religious communities
are identified, then solid services to address those problems are provided, requiring
collaborative effort by the different ethno-religious communities. In this way the social
potential of those communities is mobilised and channelled to achieve shared goals
which enrich the society as a whole” (Kalyoncu 2007: 597). Moreover, movement has

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1 The only Cambodian non-religious and non-discriminatory educational facility operated from a Muslim country is Phnom Penh’s
Zaman International School. It was founded in 1997 and is associated with the Fethullah Gülen movement. Classes are taught in both
Khmer and English. Its kindergarten, primary and high schools are attended by Khmers, resident foreigners and a few Chams. For them,
except from the high standard provided by the school, its explicit agenda of instruction on an inter-racial and inter-religious basis, coupled
with its prestige as an institution operated from Muslim lands, serves to make the school a valuable alternative to both secular private
schools and Islamic schools, Bruckmayr 2007: 347.
not only mobilized Turks, but also Turkish citizens of Kurdish, Arab, and Assyrian Christian descent in the city to cooperate on challenging their common problems such as the ensuing insecurity, infrastructural and socio-economic deprivations resulting from the clashes the Turkish security forces and the terrorist organizations such as the Marxist PKK and the pro-violence radical Islamist Hizbollah, that also deepened the ethnic and to lesser extent religious fault-lines (Kalyoncu 2007: 599). In this socio-political and economic context, the movement has encouraged people from different ethnic and religious backgrounds to establish educational, cultural and civic institutions that have changed the attitudes and practices of the ethno-religious groups in Mardin (Kalyoncu 2007: 599). The educational institutions run by Turkish citizens of Turkish, Arabic and Kurdish descent together have minimized, if not eradicate, the perception of Turk-Kurd enmity through which PKK has garnered popular support (Kalyoncu 2007: 602-603). In short, the movement’s utilization of social capital in establishing educational, cultural and civic institutions has paved the way for a more cohesive, participative and thus sustainable civil society.\(^2\)

The movement does not only give priority to poorer countries such as Kyrgyzstan (Keles 2007) but also to areas where ethnic and religious conflicts are escalating, such as Albania, Kosovo, Macedonia, the Philippines, Banda Aceh, Northern Iraq and these schools are believed to “have played remarkable roles in decreasing levels of conflict in these areas” (Saritoprak 2005: 423). In Skopje, Macedonia when civil war was

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\(^1\) For the purposes of this study, we only focused on two interrelated activity areas of the movement: dialogue and educational activities. But in other areas mentioned previously the movement is also very active and has started making a global impact. For instance in the area of poverty eradication, the movement’s recently established organization -Kimse Yok Mu- has been very active and influential. In the words of Thomas Michel, the movement’s “Kimse Yok Mu is a new but quickly-growing organization that has its origins in 2002 in a television program with the same name on Samanyolu TV... During the month of Ramadan in 2007, Kimse Yok Mu fed over 1,800,000 people both in iftars and with food packages. In 2006, Ramadan tents were constructed not only in seven cities in Turkey but also in the Philippines, Indonesia, Pakistan, Lebanon and Ethiopia; by 2007, the number of fast-breaking tents reached 22 cities in Turkey and in another ten countries (Mongolia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Lebanon, Sudan, Afghanistan, Kenya, Ethiopia and the Philippines.) After the underwater earthquake and resulting tsunami in the Indian Ocean that on 26 December 2006 devastated parts of Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India, and Thailand, and produced a death toll of over 128,000 people in Indonesia alone, Kimse Yok Mu was one of a host of international agencies that provided emergency relief and engaged in the effort at reconstruction of the region... In 2007, Kimse Yok Mu began its aid programs in Africa. Beginning with Ethiopia and Kenya, the association now assists people in Niger, Uganda, Central Africa, Cameroon, Senegal, Guinea, Congo, Burkina Faso, Chad, Togo, Ghana, Liberia, Madagascar, Benin, Mauritania and, since March 2006, a special campaign for Darfur in the Sudan. In Asia, the association has projects, in addition to those mentioned above, in Bangladesh and the Philippines. In Bangladesh, the association dispatched rescue and relief teams after the 2007 hurricane. The most recent campaigns have been responses to the recent tragedies in Myanmar and China. Already in May, 2008, the first team of volunteers and aid supplies from Kimse Yok Mu arrived in Myanmar and were given permission to distribute emergency assistance – vegetables, rice, drinking water, and disinfectant materials - to victims of the cyclone. It was teachers in the schools run by members of the Gülen community already in Myanmar who were able to coordinate the humanitarian relief efforts,” Michel 2008, see also Koc 2008.
going on in the region, members of different ethnicities were sending their children to the movement’s school in the region and while their parents were fighting, the children were living peacefully under the roof of the same school (Saritoprak 2007: 637). Afghanistan is another example of community which is highly diversified with various ethnic groups such as Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek, Aimak, Baluchi, Kyrgyz, Turkmen, Nuristani and Pamiri among other small ethnic groups and in this country there are several Gülen schools including the ones solely for girls (Saritoprak 2007: 603-604). Another country where Gülen schools operate is Philippines which is an example of a community stigmatized with an enduring Muslim-Christian fighting (see in detail Michel 2003: 69-84). Minority Moro Muslims in Philippines are populated in the autonomous region of Mindanao in Southern Philippines. After the end of the colonialism, the conflict in Philippines has transformed into an enduring one between the Muslim minority and the Christian majority. Thomas Michel states that the Gülen schools in Philippines are “peace islands in the sea of conflict” as the schools bring together both Christian and Muslims students together under the same roof. Gülen movement does not take part in “the conflict. Instead, they prefer to identify common grounds where they get together and cooperate to tackle their common problems” (Kalyoncu 2007: 605). In the African context, “field research about Kenya’s Gülen-inspired schools suggests that the schools have been functioning not only as a secular alternative to religious, Christian missionary schools and Islamic schools, but also as barriers to potential ethno-religious conflict between Kenya’s local Christian tribes and its politically empowering Muslim minority” (Kalyoncu 2008: 350). There are two Gülen-inspired charity organizations operating in Kenya: the Omeriye Foundation and the Respect Foundation. The Omeriye Foundation provides services in the fields of education, relief and healthcare and “the Respect Foundation focuses its efforts on interfaith dialogue aiming to bring together deeply fractured faith communities in Kenya to cooperate in community projects” (Kalyoncu 2008: 359). Similarly, “the Gülen-inspired civil society initiatives in Uganda seem to have introduced the local Ugandans with a pragmatist approach to development by seeking to instil in them the notion of relying on their own resources instead of international aid” (Kalyoncu 2008: 350).

Northern Iraq is a unique case with highly fractured community along the ethno-religious differences. The community composed of Kurds, Sunni Arabs, Turcoman, Shiites, and Assyrian Christians experiences conflicts along the line of these ethno-religious differences. The fact that “neither of these ethno-religious groups inherently
possesses democratic political culture further minimizes the prospect of easy
development of civil society in Northern Iraq” (Akyol 2008: 28). In such a context, “the
role of non-governmental organizations in preventing ethnic conflict and supporting
the peace building process has been vital” (Akyol 2008: 28). The movement’s
“schools in the Kurdistan region of Iraq have played in building trusting cross-ethnic
relationships” (Akyol 2008: 28). There are currently 10 Turkish schools -ranging from
nursery level to university- in Iraq. Eight of these schools are in the Suleymaniye
(3), Arbil (5) and Kirkuk (2). Unlike the standard Kurdish schools in Gülen schools
“all students have to study four languages, Turkish, Arabic, Kurdish and English, in
the first year, thus improving the opportunities for effective dialogue. This policy
clearly demonstrates how Gülen’s inclusiveness and how his movement works within
fragmented societies by valuing each group and by constructing the desired society
model in their schools” (Akyol 2008: 47). The schools “have prepared and set up
the preconditions for understanding each others’ needs and that in so doing they are
able to build confidence between antagonistic parties. In that sense they can serve
as mediators between the nationstate Turkey and the semi-autonomous Iraqi Kurdish
federal region. They are well placed to open channels of communication and to
specify the needs of the Kurdish community in Iraq” (Akyol 2008: 28). The schools in
the region are spreading the concept of tolerance, dialogue, democracy, and pluralism
that are essential for a cohesive and sustainable society. They are also “promoting
non-violent conflict resolutions by showing how to approach to social problems
through collective cooperation” (Akyol 2008: 51). It is plausible that in the long run
perceptions and attitudes of people in the region will change in the Gülenian line of
thought that advocates peace and non-violence as important elements of democratic
political order (Kucukcan 2007: 196). Thus, educational activities of the Gülen
movement in the region will “open up a political and social space for an alternative
approach to the prevention of ethnic conflict. More importantly they present an
alternative way of thinking about ethnic conflict resolutions based on an increasing
level of social, cultural and trade contacts between conflicting parties” (Akyol 2008:
51).

6 Concluding Remarks

The Turkey-originated faith-based Gülen movement, with its several Islamic
faith-based NGO initiatives, successfully turned its spiritual, religious, intellectual
and human resources into effective social capital and utilized this social capital in promoting interfaith & intercivilizational dialogue and in establishing educational institutions from primary school to university levels attracting students of diverse ethnic, religious and socio-economic backgrounds.

The Gülen movement has been successful in employing its social capital to empower the civil society and to expand the democratic space available for the periphery (Ugur 2007: 155). A critical contribution of the movement is the empowerment of the civil society vis-à-vis the state (Ugur 2007: 155). Thus, in the Turkish context, “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” (Ugur 2007: 162).

Peace-building studies have elaborated on certain elements that are essential for building and maintaining peace. Two of these elements are education and knowledge. Gülen movement’s greatest efforts and contributions are related to these two fields (Saritoprak 2007: 636). The movement draws on Islamic teachings that are mostly no different from most other religious teachings, thus enabling the movement to build bridges between faiths and the pursuance of common interests for the good of mankind and society. In this way the movement is positioned to root itself in a variety of contexts making it an ‘outward-looking’ form of organisation, as opposed to an ‘inward-looking’ form of organisation which comprises the dominant mode of religious-based and interest-based organisation (Krause 2007: 266).

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 (Park 2007: 56).

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 (Park 2007: 59).

The movement might also help generate emulative reactions more widely throughout the Islamic world. The Gülen movement, 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 (Park 2007: 54).

Bibliography


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