The disturbing meme depicting criminals impaled on hooks with the words “The ideal method of execution for [the members of] the Fethullah Terrorist Organization: The Ottoman Way” is making its way around Turkish social media. Apparently, the image itself - which cannot be published here due to its graphic content - originally comes from a traditional miniature illustration in an Ottoman manuscript and was recently appropriated as the lead image in a similarly titled article published on the pro-government haber7.com media website.¹ This article begins with a note of fond nostalgia for a time when the punishment of rebels against the state could be quick and decisive because governments did not have to worry about the inconvenience of “inquiries” and the “courts.”²

I can remember a time—just a little more than a decade ago—when pride in Selçuk and Ottoman heritage among Turks took the form of everything from celebrating the great mystical poet Jalal al-Din Rumi (depicted just beneath this recent meme), to emphasis on the traditional Ottoman embrace of ethnic, cultural, and even religious heterogeneity, to reveling in the stunning beauty of Ottoman art and architecture. And now, look where we are. Some (certainly not all) are stoking the flames of an intolerant populist nationalism which takes perverse delight in touting as an Ottoman solution to the current problems of social tension and political unrest in contemporary Turkish society, nothing less than brutality and torture.

What happened?
As many of you know, last year at this time, the lives of so many good, decent, and innocent people were changed forever. A still nebulous group of criminal conspirators staged an attempt to overthrow the democratically elected government of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of the Republic of Turkey. Before the attempt was completely quelled—and long before any legitimate and lawful investigation could take place—President Erdoğan appeared on national television and accused M. Fethullah Gülen, the widely revered spiritual leader of the global service movement known as Hizmet, of being the mastermind of the coup attempt.

Given that the previous few years were witness to a deterioration in the always cautious but nonetheless impactful mutual affinity between Erdoğan’s Justice and Development Party and the Hizmet Movement, Erdoğan’s utterly unfounded accusation was not entirely surprising. Well before the events of July 15, 2016, Erdoğan had been looking either to enlist the unqualified support of the Hizmet Movement in his authoritarian quest for nearly unlimited executive power, or to demonize them as the ultimate enemy of the Turkish people around which he could rally a new coalition of secularists and Islamists. Since Gülen had already made clear that the commitment to real democracy must supersede loyalty to any one leader—no matter how successful he or she may have been in the past—it was nearly inevitable that Erdoğan would turn against the man and the movement he once rightly per-
organizations have engaged in the blatant civil rights and other civic organizations. Not only has this Purge done irreparable damage to the lives of countless innocent men, women, and children. Tragically—and ironically—it also served to entice President Erdoğan, a man who many of us once thought might one day be hailed as a “Muslim Mandela,” in the ignominious hall of those many dictators who have hijacked their own peoples’ legitimate aspirations for liberty and prosperity as a means of feeding their own insatiable lust for power.

Among many other human rights violations, Erdoğan’s Purge has resulted in the immoral imprisonment of tens of thousands of loyal Turkish citizens—excluding kindergarten teachers and elderly grandmothers—who have been the victims of his ruthless quest to consolidate power.

Similar pro-Erdoğan dynamics are at work in other countries. This is especially the case in certain nation states with Muslim-majority or substantial Muslim populations where the government wishes, for economic and other reasons, to stay on good diplomatic terms with the current Turkish regime, and where there are substantial popular pro-Islamist sentiments which, especially in gloomy fog of the dashed hopes of the so-called “Arab Spring,” have elevated Mr. Erdoğan to the profoundly ironic status as icon of “Muslim democracy.” Governments from Malaysia to Turkmenistan to Nigeria have been pressured by the Turkish government to shutter Hizmet institutions and extradite countless school teachers, entrepreneurs of social cohesion, business people and aid workers to Turkey for prosecution as criminal insurgents and “terrorists.” In some cases these efforts are still being met with principled resistance. In many cases they have tragically succeeded.

The good news in all of this is that, one full year after the illegal and immoral coup attempt and the equally illegal and immoral Purge, the Hizmet Movement still survives as a testament to the power of a sincere faith in God and human goodness, even in the face of vile oppression.

I humbly implore all who read these words to join me in giving thanks to al-Hafiz (the Divine Protector) for continuing to watch over Mr. Gülen and all the good people of Hizmet. Join me in imploring al-Shafti (the Healer) to bring comfort to all those brave Turkish citizens who lost their lives one year ago and those who continue to suffer the effects of both the criminal coup and the tyrannical Purge. Join me in begging al-Shahid, (the Witness), al-`Adl (the Source of All Justice) to expose the guilt of those truly responsible for the coup as well as the Purge, so that the innocent may at last be set free. Join me in praying to al-Nur (the Light) to illumine the path of all the noble people of Turkey, and all who support them, so that they may find the path to mutual forgiveness and thus come together to forge a more just future for all.

Notes
2. “Devlete başkaldırmış isyan edenler hakkında sorgu, soruşturma, mahkeme vesaire gibi işlerle pek fazla vakti harcanmayıp kararın hemen verildiği günlerden bir infaz örneği.”