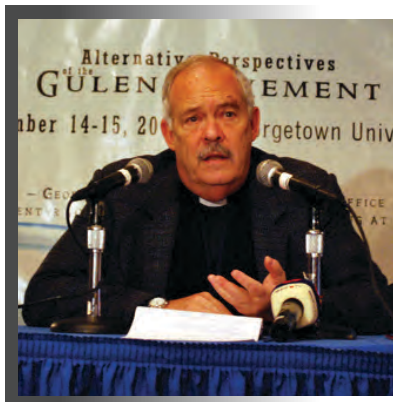


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THE GÜLEN COMMUNITY

WHO TO BELIEVE - POLITICIANS OR ACTIONS?

In the aftermath of the attempted coup on July 15, 2016, Turkish government has launched an unprecedented purge – with no evidence linking a vast majority of those purged to any illegal activity.

On July 15, 2016, while President Erdoğan was vacationing in the Mediterranean coastal town of Marmaris, Istanbul and Ankara were shaken by an attempted coup d'état carried out by certain members of the Turkish armed forces.

About seven years before that, in May 2009, I received an award at the International Turkish Olympiad. The festival was essentially a cultural event consisting of Turkish songs, dances, and poetry recitals performed by students

from Turkish schools around the world. It took place in a modern convention hall in Ankara with thousands of spectators in attendance. The event was sponsored and organized by members of the Hizmet movement, a Muslim community inspired by the preaching and writings of Turkish scholar Fethullah Gülen. When I, together with a handful of other recipients, mounted the stage to accept our awards, there to shake our hands was the smiling Prime Minister of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

The incident underlines how less than a decade earlier relations

between Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (known by its acronym, the AKP) and the Hizmet movement guided by Gülen's teaching were characterized by cooperation and respect. Foreign observers in Ankara even referred to Hizmet as "the religious wing of the AKP." Although inaccurate even in those days, such a characterization reflected a commonly held view among Turks and others that there was some kind of ideological link between the AKP and the followers of Gülen.

There is no doubt that the Gülen supporters had great influence



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(Left). International Festival of Language and Culture has been a trademark festival of the Hizmet Movement. (Below) Mehmet Ali Birand, late Turkish journalist, had warned years ago that future politicians would go after the Hizmet movement with a view to annihilating it.

in Turkey. They ran the best high schools and college prep institutions, and students from those schools, year after year, obtained the top scores in the standardized college entrance exams. Hizmet members published *Zaman*, the most widely circulated and highly regarded newspaper in Turkey, referred to by Erdoğan himself as "the guardian of democracy in Turkey." Hizmet members published scores of professional journals and popular magazines. They established associations of medical professionals, teachers, and business leaders. They set up hospitals and clinics, and in Turkey's highly polarized society they conducted national "dialogues" that brought together Turkish thinkers and leaders: Right and Left, Sunni and Alevi, Turk and Kurd, and Muslim, Jewish, and Christian.

However, storm clouds were gathering. Perceptive observers could see trouble ahead. In a prophetic column in the left-center *Hurriyet* newspaper on October 5, 2010, the late political commentator Mehmet Ali Birand noted:

"I don't know whether they are aware of it, but a danger that needs to be taken very seriously awaits the Gülen movement. In the eyes of Turkish society, which believes conspiracy theories, the Gülen movement is mythicized beyond its real dimensions. The power and influence of the Gülen movement is being so exaggerated that if no precautions are taken, this imagined power will one day destroy it... If the cur-



rent trend does not change, future politicians will go after this movement with a view to annihilating it."

Birand, who claimed to be neither a member of Hizmet nor opposed to it, believed that, "The power attributed to the Gülen movement is enormously exaggerated. It does not reflect the truth but the winds of exaggeration..."



The first overt sign of tension between Gülen, who lives in retirement in the United States, and Erdoğan can be dated to the pro-democracy Gezi Park protests of June, 2013, when Gülen criticized the Turkish government's heavy-handed suppression of the protests. The real break came later that year when investigators reportedly associated with Hizmet pursued charges of corruption leveled against the sons of various ministers of the Turkish government, implicating Erdoğan's own son. Since then, Erdoğan (President of the Republic since 2014) has sought to destroy Hizmet and break its influence on Turkish society. After last summer's failed coup, Erdoğan has accused Gülen of masterminding the coup and his followers of carrying it out. The government has undertaken a "McCarthyite" witch-hunt, resulting in the dismissal and arrest of university presidents, police chiefs, military officers, and newspaper editors, and the imprisonment of an estimated 60,000 Turkish citizens.

Erdoğan's anti-Hizmet campaign has even affected U.S.-Turkish relations. The Turkish govern-

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ment has demanded Gülen's extradition to Turkey, while Secretary of State under President Obama, John Kerry, noted that the United States does not extradite residents on the basis of unsubstantiated requests, even those made by Heads of State. He noted that the process of extradition must begin with the presentation of hard evidence of wrongdoing and that no evidence of the involvement of Gülen or Hizmet associates in the failed coup attempt has been forthcoming.

Unsatisfied with the Obama administration's refusal to bow under pressure, the Turkish government looked to the future: they discussed, with retired US Army General Michael Flynn, ways that judicial processes might be bypassed in order that Mr. Gülen might be "removed" from the United States and sent to Turkey. The fact that such actions could

violate U.S. laws does not seem to have been a deterrent either to Flynn or to the Turkish authorities concerned. Flynn was at the time an advisor to presidential candidate Donald Trump, and he later briefly served as National Security Advisor to President Trump before being fired for lying about his relations with Russian officials. It is evident that the Turkish government was willing to engage in underhanded and apparently illegal activities to get Gülen extradited from the United States.

Guilty or not guilty?

For those who know Mr. Gülen personally or have had contact with the open-hearted and idealistic members of the Hizmet movement, claims of subversive "terrorism," (in Erdoğan's words) seem incongruous. I have known Mr. Gülen for over 20 years and find the retired, soft-spoken Qur'an-teacher to be preaching and living a par-



ticularly attractive interpretation of Islamic faith. His bedrock concept is that of *ikhlas*, which means doing everything, no matter how modest or unassuming, wholly for God's pleasure. This spiritual principle, which is hardly original or unique to Islam, has motivated Gülen's followers to commit themselves to administering and teaching in schools in places as diverse as Phnom Penh, Brussels, Accra, and inner-city Milwaukee and Cleveland. They are digging wells in Somalia and Mali, running clinics in Kenya, and establishing interreligious dialogue programs in more than 200 locations in the United States.

Many Americans have come to know the Hizmet movement personally through the well-organized cultural trips to Turkey sponsored by these local dialogue associations. For many non-Muslims, the trips are their first direct encounter with an Islamic community devoted to peacebuilding and being a living expression of God's compassion and mercy.

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have been to their annual retreats, where they encourage one another to live up to their lofty Islamic ideals. I have heard the testimony of Catholic leaders in Turkey and Turkish Jews that the Gülen followers are their partners and allies in striving to build a truly inclusive Turkish society. I have talked to Christian students from Mozambique and the Philippines, graduates of Hizmet schools, who are grateful for the excellent educational foundation they received. Could all this good work simply be public posturing, a façade to hide a conspiracy aimed at achieving domination and power? I suppose that it's possible, but it seems pretty far-fetched and unlikely.

One might say that an outside observer's positive opinion of the Hizmet movement begs the question of whether members of the movement, with Fethullah Gülen as mastermind, were in fact behind the July 2016 coup. Despite all his bluster, threats, and posturing, Erdoğan has not been able to produce any credible evidence linking the coup attempt to a Hizmet plot. The most he has been able to offer are a few statements by implicated generals, obtained under duress,

which could be interpreted as suggesting a tenuous link with Gülen. For his part, Mr. Gülen has categorically denied any involvement in the coup, which he condemned, and called for an international impartial investigation into the coup and its background, a suggestion which Mr. Erdoğan has summarily rejected. One must ask which of the two would like to see the truth come out, and which is trying to keep the facts from coming to light.

I originally published a version of this article in *Commonweal* magazine in November 2016. Since then, Mr. Erdoğan has continued to make unsubstantiated claims about Hizmet involvement in the coup. He is not talking about the possible sympathy of one or another military officer toward Fethullah Gülen, but a centralized, organized effort conceived and directed by Gülen and carried out through the institutions and networking of Hizmet members. This scenario has been investigated with the professional expertise of the intelligence services of the United States, Germany, the United Kingdom, the European Union, and NATO, who have clearly expressed their views of who they believe to have been behind the coup. None of them has been convinced by Erdoğan's noisy but empty accusations.

I am not alone in asking Mr. Erdoğan, "Please produce evidence, if you have any, for your claims. Otherwise, why should anyone take your word for what appears to be a slander of this conscientious religious leader and a community that is doing much good in the world? Could your anti-Hizmet campaign be an act of revenge for the whistle-blowing against your family members, or a distraction aimed at preventing a continuing investigation of the corruption charges?" ■