

Can you tell us about the horizons that the Hizmet Movement has reached, both within and outside of Turkey?

This movement consists of people who came together around universal values, such as holding every human being in high esteem; regarding differences not as a reason for fighting, but rather as an element of diversity; accepting everyone as s/he is; and especially helping youth through education. Its participants have grasped the Hizmet Movement within a framework that could be considered “Quranic reasonability,” a means of serving these values through educational institutions, hospitals, humanitarian aid organizations, and dialogue projects. Although the Movement can be considered “Islamic”—since most participants are Muslim, and thus, it draws its inspiration from Islamic sources—it is also a humanistic movement in that the participants embrace the entirety of humanity by serving everyone. So far, they have been welcomed, and their projects have been embraced in 160 countries by people of different religious and ethnic backgrounds.

The movement had opened hundreds of educational institutions and hospitals in Turkey before they were shut down by the Turkish government. While these institutions were shut down solely for political reasons, God willing, they will not be erased from the hearts of the people who have dedicated their lives to this movement.

In trying to shut down the Movement’s schools worldwide, the Turkish government achieved its goal only in some countries by engaging in smear campaigns, bribing governments, and using bilateral relations as a means of blackmailing. In Western countries, and in others where international laws are respected, like Egypt, the Movement’s activities continue despite Erdogan's pressure.

The pressure and the oppression in Turkey have forced Hizmet Movement participants to scatter throughout the world, which means it is time for the Movement to integrate with the world and play its role as the common value of humanity.

We know that you've been influenced by the Nur Movement in your understanding of Hizmet in Turkey. What are the commonalities and the differences between the two movements?

I never met Bediuzzaman (Said Nursi). When I was in Erzurum, I noticed that Bediuzzaman’s students adopted a modest lifestyle like that of the Prophet's companions. I was particularly impressed by Bediuzzaman’s knowledge, vision, and devotion to serving Islam. Although his writings are not the first or the only source of my inspiration, I can say that they have a special place among my sources of inspiration. While some Nur Movement participants joined and endorsed the Hizmet Movement from the very early days, there were also those who did not approve of, and even criticized, certain activities of the Movement. They criticized our preference for reading books other than *Risale-i Nur*,

Bediuzzaman's magnum opus. They also criticized us for opening private schools, hospitals, and colleges. They did not approve of our policy of publishing books other than *Risale-i-Nur*. A more important difference in opinion concerned engaging with political parties. Some groups within the Nur Movement had been politicized by providing unconditional support to AP and DYP [two center-right political parties] in the past and, more recently, to Erdogan's AKP. We, on the other hand, were able to maintain our independent stance by acting based on principles. All these considerations aside, I have always respected the Nur Movement's participants, who served Islam at a time when religion and religious people were attacked in Turkey.

You are recognized as the representative of social Islam. Do you accept this recognition?

I don't consider myself to be a pioneer of anything. I've never viewed myself as more than an ordinary Muslim. It would be a huge compliment to me if God were to accept me as one of His ordinary servants. The participants of this Movement have displayed an exemplary idea of service to humanity through their actions. People observing the Movement in different parts of the world have interpreted these actions, and some have appreciated them.

Although I am not sure what is meant by "social Islam," my friends and I believe that while we strive to practice our religion with all its essential values, everyone can adopt any lifestyle, as long as they don't violate others' freedom. Just as it is a grave mistake to confine Islam to mosques, viewing it as an ideology and using it as a smokescreen for political purposes is also a betrayal of Islam. Muslims, together with others who share universal values, can and should serve their own communities and humanity in general. At the same time, we should hold everyone in high esteem, and as part of respect for the "will" God has bestowed on them, we should accept all people as they are.

Do you consider the current position of the Hizmet Movement adequate?
How can Hizmet's activities be improved in the future?

We are thankful for all the blessings God has given us so far, and we feel sorry for not being able to thank Him enough for those blessings. We believe that the difficulties the Movement participants are going through now will be conducive to self-renewal, reinvigoration, and new initiatives. I believe that the forced migration of the Movement participants will result in the adoption of a global identity through the renunciation of ties with Turkey. This global identity could be embraced by everyone in the world.

What are the challenges the Hizmet Movement is currently facing?

Turkey and the Hizmet Movement have been going through hard times since its beginning. The 1960s and 1970s witnessed anarchy and chaos, thousands of young people killing each other. In 1980, a military coup took place, and everyone was affected. Although there was some relief and global opening during the term of Prime Minister Turgut Ozal, we took a step back in the 1990s, when the pressure on religious people intensified. In 1999, a smear campaign was launched against me, and legal

cases were opened, but I was acquitted despite pressures on the judiciary. After this period, a short period of freedom and democracy emerged, but it didn't last long. The current political party, which came to power by promising to expand democracy and its freedoms, broke all of their promises once they seized power. They tried to use the Movement for their own political agenda. When we rejected this, they wanted to annihilate us through all sorts of lies, slanders, fraud, and plots.

To this end, they planned and executed a self-staged coup attempt on July 15, 2016. By saying “self-staged,” I don’t mean to undermine the loss of many innocent lives in this tragedy. May God grant them mercy, and patience and strength to their families. The Turkish government convinced the public of the credibility of its scenario through propaganda via pro-Erdogan media, which make up the majority of media outlets in Turkey. But nobody other than the Turkish public believed in such a made-up scenario. The government committed oppressions and atrocities unheard of in history. They imprisoned and tortured tens of thousands of innocent women, the elderly, doctors, teachers, and students without any credible evidence. They obtained signed confessions through severe torture, even imprisoned pregnant women and new mothers along with their babies. They caused the deaths of ill detainees by not allowing them to take their medications. These are not my own personal claims. The widespread torture has also been reported by the United Nations and some other human rights organizations.

Almost a million victims who were not able to leave the country have been deprived of social life and subjected to a boycott similar to the one faced by the Prophet Muhamad (pbuh).

Those in power have expanded their witch-hunt to other countries. Turkish diplomats regard it as their primary duty to take over Hizmet Movement-related schools and transfer them to the government-owned Turkish Maarif Foundation, or to completely shut them down. On top of that, ignoring all international laws, they try to abduct the teachers working at these schools and take them to Turkey.

But all of these oppressions caused something the government never thought of: the Hizmet Movement is now globally known. Everyone has seen that we are not in the same boat with those who use Islam for their own political gains, enabling some curiosity and sympathy towards the Movement. This is also God’s blessing, but it came with a heavy price.

Has there been a decline in the number of Hizmet supporters since you parted ways with Erdogan?

Those who know the Hizmet Movement well or who have loved it from day one haven’t changed their stance, with a few exceptions. However, those with weak connections have distanced themselves from the Movement due to pressure or fear. This, in keeping with social psychology, should be considered normal in a country where the government has made a scapegoat of the Movement. The Turkish government has been effective in some countries through bribery, threats, and the use of bilateral relations for blackmail, taking over Hizmet Movement-related schools and transferring them to the government-owned Turkish Maarif Foundation or completely shutting them down. However, in all democratic countries, including the United States, Europe, Australia, Egypt, Nigeria, Kenya, and South

Africa, they couldn't bribe people, they couldn't buy the laws, and they failed. Some Western countries have opened their doors to those who fled Turkey.

Oppression can go on to some extent, but the terms of politicians are limited. They will leave office one day through democratic means. But this movement, based on love and voluntarism, with the grace of God will continue to exist in people's hearts where conditions are not yet favorable, and in the form of institutions where conditions allow.

Due to your sincere efforts, schools, hospitals, and cultural centers have been opened. These institutions have played a great role in enlightening minds. Do the Movement's activities continue at the same pace?

It is a duty to serve humanity for the sake of God the Almighty, both from a religious and a humanitarian perspective. The main tenets are obvious, and they don't change. It is necessary to operate in different fields, primarily in education, for a future where people live in harmony and peace, embracing each other, holding everyone in high esteem, accepting everyone with tolerance and respect. However, depending on the time and conditions, the forms and the formats of these services can change.

Accepting everyone as s/he is, moderation, and common sense are the most important aspects of the Hizmet Movement. Is it fair to say that moderation and common sense are currently absent in Turkey since Erdogan consolidated his authority?

Unfortunately, nowadays such values have been sacrificed for politics in Turkey. Hizmet used to represent moderation in Turkey, but now radicalism has replaced moderation due to the polarizing attitudes of Erdogan. The religious schools have been politicized, and religious education has been utilized for politics. The people have been made to see each other as enemies. It will take years to fix the damage inflicted on the society. As for the Hizmet participants, despite all the inhumane treatment and oppression, they have always respected authority and the rule of law and have never resorted to violence. They ask for nothing but justice, even for their oppressors.

You serve as a role model for interfaith dialogue and tolerance of difference. In your opinion, has Hizmet expressed itself fully in these areas?

The Hizmet Movement's openness to dialogue and living together has caught the attention of many and has been appreciated. The movement's participants, while making efforts to represent Islam in the right way, have also served as a good model for integrating it with compatible aspects of modernity. They have played a role in undoing misperceptions about Muslims in the West. However, it can't be said that the Movement has been thoroughly made clear in Muslim-majority countries. In the 1990s, in Turkey, interfaith dialogue activities were viewed as a compromise and a dilution of Islam. Smear campaigns were launched against the Movement. Erdogan's administration has lately represented the Movement as an agent of foreign powers, or as a pawn of the Vatican, the CIA, or

MOSSAD. Some groups associated with Erdogan have spread the same propaganda in Muslim-majority countries, and they continue to do it. Thus, it is hard to say we have been able to represent ourselves in the best manner in Muslim-majority countries.

In our previous visits, we did not come across people with ISIS's mindset. Do you think the recent emergence of such people in Turkey is happening due to the Hizmet Movement's removal from Turkey?

It has been observed by the media and international observers lately that a great number of terrorism experts within the security forces have been discharged from their duties, due to political considerations, and that some of them have been put in jail. It has also been reported by several news outlets that Erdogan, by various means, has been supporting some armed radical groups and using them to become a regional power. So, it is possible to state that terrorist organizations like ISIS and their sympathizers have attained a more comfortable position in Turkey.

What must be done to eradicate terror and terrorist organizations like ISIS?

There are things to be done by Muslims, strong nations, and international organizations. Muslims must stop blaming the foreign policies of the Western countries, and they must engage in self-assessment. Why are so many Muslim youth falling prey to the traps of terrorists? As Muslims, it is our duty to provide our youth with proper schooling that is fully equipped with religious education, as well as with natural and social sciences. Universal ethical principles must be part of the curriculum, and human rights and fundamental freedoms must be fully enabled in our societies. As for the strong nations, they need to view the problem of terror as something that can be solved through other than military and intelligence methods, such as by political, economic, and sociological means. They have to take steps to integrate Muslims into their countries and design their foreign policies while valuing the lives of people in other countries as much as the lives of their own citizens. The United Nations and European Union must take measures to protect human rights and freedoms everywhere in the world, and implement sanctions designed to prevent violations of human rights.

What is main reason for the disagreement between you and Erdogan? In fact, some experts argue that Erdogan was one of your loyal students.

Those who know me, and the Movement closely know that Erdogan has never been one of my students. We have fundamental differences in many areas. That Erdogan uses religion as a smokescreen for his political agenda is the most important one. Let alone his not being one of my students, we have never been close to each other. We have talked to each other only a few times. Our friends' support for Erdogan's party was due to their stance regarding democracy, freedom, and human rights. Movement participants also used to support other political parties who favored democracy, defended our membership in the European Union, and emphasized basic rights and freedoms. But once Erdogan and his party made a 180-degree turn from those values, our support couldn't continue anymore, and that is exactly what happened.

Another important reason for our disagreement has been the fact that the Hizmet Movement, which successfully operates schools worldwide, has not approved of Erdogan's goal to become “the leader of the Muslim world” and has never supported this goal in the international arena. That is why Erdogan now uses all the power at his disposal, including diplomats and the intelligence service, to shut down Hizmet schools worldwide or to transfer them to the Turkish Maarif Foundation. They also try to abduct or extradite the teachers of these schools and jail them in Turkey.

Some say that your idea of Hizmet has drawn its inspiration from nationalism, liberalism, and democracy, whereas Erdogan's stance is based on the idea of a transnational Islamic Caliphate. Is that true?

Neither I nor those in love with Hizmet started this journey based on Western ideologies. Our reference point has always been Islamic values, which constitute universal values as well, best represented during the life of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh): holding every human in high esteem, embracing equality before the law, empowering women in society, promoting the rule of law, and practicing participatory democracy. These are both Islamic and universal values. It is easy to compare our stance to some ideologies, but our source is well known.

But it is also well known through his words and actions that Erdogan views himself as the leader of Muslims worldwide, and he utilizes Turkey's resources to take credit for himself in the world. Even people in his entourage call him “world leader.”

Some political parties and authorities in the West are trying to portray the Ihvan Movement, of which Erdogan is a member, as a terrorist organization. What do you think of those efforts?

There might be some people within Ihvan who have been involved in terrorist or violent acts. Such involvement could never be justified. My stance on terrorism has always been the same from the very beginning: “A true Muslim cannot be a terrorist, and a terrorist can never be a true Muslim.” Therefore, Islamic groups must take a firm stand against terror and violence. Otherwise, Islam's bright face will be tarnished, which would be a betrayal of Islam.

However, in different countries of the world, taking a wholesale approach and associating certain people who have never been involved in violent acts with terror is not right, either. This would be an unfair treatment of those who are removed from terrorism. Such an approach could also push non-violent people into the lap of radical movements.

Why does Erdogan—who transformed Turkey from a country with zero problems with her neighbors into a country with no friends—blame you for all of the problems?

Erdogan indeed has turned Turkey from a country with zero problems with her neighbors into one with zero friends. He interfered in the domestic affairs of neighbor countries by trying to re-design them through the activities of radical groups. By declaring himself as the leader of the Middle East and

as the Islamic Caliph, he justified what he had done. I have never approved of such things. That is why he declared the Hizmet Movement an enemy. By putting the blame on the Movement for every negative situation, he tried to achieve his political goals. For example, by using a legal corruption investigation in December 2013 as an excuse, he politicized the entire justice system, thereby clogging it. By dismantling and re-shuffling the police forces, he eliminated all personnel with many years of experience, leaving the nation's security system exposed to threats. He enabled his friends to purchase large media groups, which act as mouthpieces for his government. He was able to silence the rest of the media either through lucrative commercials and advertisements or through sheer threats. As a result, without any independent media outlet, voicing the facts has become impossible. He also used the July 15 coup attempt as an excuse to weaken the military and place it under his own auspices. In brief, Erdogan has made the nation's institutions the instruments of his political goals, and he has polarized the people to unprecedented levels.

Erdogan needed an imaginary enemy to tighten his grip on the system. When the Hizmet Movement refused to serve as an instrument for Erdogan's political goals, he pointed to it as an enemy and made his constituents believe his rhetoric. It could be said his choice of the Movement for a scapegoat is understandable, because he was so sure that not even one member of the Hizmet Movement would raise his or her fist against him, nor would any retaliation take place, despite all this oppression and injustice, and despite the smear campaign.

How do you interpret the event of the July 15 coup attempt?

I condemned the coup attempt while it was ongoing, and I immediately rejected all the accusations directed against me. I called for the establishment of an international investigation commission and promised to accept its verdict and return to Turkey if it found me guilty. But, unfortunately, Erdogan did not respond to my open call. This shows that he has a lot to hide. In fact, Erdogan's government wasn't able to convince the world on this matter. I think of this coup attempt as a self-staged coup that helped Erdogan tighten his grip on Turkey. The facts, God willing, will be revealed in the future.

You, not Erdogan, are the representative of moderation and common sense. Despite this, why doesn't the international community do enough to protect the Hizmet Movement from the oppressions of Erdogan and the AKP?

We would expect to hear stronger voices from the countries that have been friends and allies of Turkey. We cannot say that they failed to raise their voices. Some concerns have been expressed at the administrative and parliamentary levels, and some leaders have called again for the rule of law. But such efforts have not proved to be effective. On the other hand, a number of countries have not complied with Erdogan's diplomacy, which uses bilateral relations for blackmail. They have protected Hizmet volunteers and institutions from possible harm and have opened their doors to those who escaped from the oppressive regime in Turkey. I am especially grateful to countries like Egypt, Sweden, Norway, Germany, the United States, Canada, Australia, and several others.

How do you interpret the transition from a parliamentary system to a presidential system during Erdogan's term?

There are different administrative systems in the world. They can change from one country to another. But the main issue is guaranteeing universal democratic principles, such as the separation of powers, the rule of law, basic human rights, and freedom. I don't think these principles are being treated with due respect, nor will they be respected in the future in Turkey.

How do you view the early elections? Are these Erdogan's efforts to stay in power till 2029?

It can be said that behind every political step over the last few years, there is Erdogan's desire to stay in power by himself.

Could Turkey's integrity be in danger if Syria is divided, since there are ethnic groups such as Kurds and Alawites?

I have expressed my opinion about Syria before. An administration where Sunni Arabs, Nusayrites, Kurds, and non-Muslims all see themselves being represented would be the best solution. To reach that goal, an opportunity should be given to the administration for a gradual and democratic transition.

My friends who follow the news closely are telling me that the opposition is not accepting any solution in which the current government is involved. However, I think, to avoid more losses, it would be more appropriate to adopt the principle "agree to the good if the best can't be had."

Do you believe that Erdogan and the AKP will stay in power till 2029? Or can the Turkish electorate change their votes?

The Turkish electorate can, of course, change their votes. However, the current election is not being conducted fairly. The media, the judiciary, and the business world are all under the tutelage of Erdogan. Under these conditions, it is too difficult to know what the Turkish electorate thinks.

Why do you think Erdogan is trying to harm Egypt with all his power?

He tries to present himself as the leader of the Muslim world. He is trying to influence the people of Muslim-majority countries through different means. That is why he tries to harm countries whose administrations do not allow him to interfere in their domestic affairs.

How do you see Egypt and the Egyptian people during the current troublesome times in the Middle East?

Egypt has an exceptional place in the Muslim world. It holds a geographic position as the cradle of many civilizations in history, it has been the birthplace of many important figures in Islamic history,

and it has served as a home to several academic institutions. Egypt still maintains its importance and special place, and its internal peace and stability are essential to the region.

Do you think Erdogan is serious about joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and purchasing S400 missiles from Russia?

NATO played a critical role during the Cold War in protecting Turkey. At the same time, the efforts toward NATO membership have contributed to Turkey's democratization. Turkey looked up to NATO member countries with their democracy and rule of law. Erdogan's current move is harmful for the alliance. But it is hard to be sure about Erdogan's sincerity. He has lied so many times that I don't know whether he is sincere this time or is using this maneuver to obtain concessions from the U.S. and Europe.

We know that your parents were a great influence in your religious education during your childhood. What would you like to say on this?

My mother was my first teacher in learning the Qur'an. She made me memorize the entire Qur'an in my early childhood. At that time, she was also teaching it to other children in our village, despite official pressures. Since it was forbidden to teach the Qur'an at the time, she was teaching in a barn with a hidden entrance adjacent to our house. Her heroic efforts had a great influence on me. From my father, I learned the love of the companions of the Prophet and respect for Islamic scholars.

You have a lot of publications. Are you writing any books nowadays?

Currently, I am writing articles for *Caglayan*, a monthly magazine. I am also editing books my friends have compiled of my religious conversations.