



Turkey's Gulen Movement and Global Islamic Activism

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CONTEMPORARY WRITINGS on Islam tend to portray global Islamic activism in a negative light. In such writings, the notion of global Islamic activism is often linked to the revival of the Islamic Caliphate as espoused by groups such as the Al-Qaeda and Ikhwanul Muslimin (Muslim Brotherhood).

For example, the Malaysian scholar Dr Farish Noor noted that the current trend in globalization is creating groups calling for the return of the Caliphate, the final 'War to end all Wars' and the rejuvenation of Islam in all its plenitude and authenticity. Utilizing the notion of ummah or a global Muslim brotherhood, these movements tend to create a dichotomy of 'Us versus Them' -- 'us' here being the Muslim World and 'them' being the Non-Muslim World. It is then predicted in the fashion of Samuel Huntington that there will be a clash between the Islamic civilization and Western civilization.

However the current globalization of Islam has also created other counter-movements advocating the reinterpretation of the Islamic message in light of contemporary realities. These movements are active in the development of education, alleviating poverty and creating inter-faith dialogues with other communities.

The Gulen Movement

An example is the Gulen movement. The movement is inspired by the teachings of Fethullah Gulen, a Turkish Muslim reformer. Gulen began his career in 1953 as a religious teacher in a government school. In 1958, he took up a teaching position at a mosque in Edirne and was transferred to the city of Izmir. His ideas spread among the grassroots that were supporting him and subsequently he gained official prominence during the premiership of Turgut Ozal. Having emerged from a traditional background of training in religion Gulen has sought to link the inheritance of Islam with the modern, globalised world.

To Gulen, Islam is composed of the main, unchanging principles found in the Quran and the Sunnah (the Sayings of the Prophet). He also believes that Islam can exist in different forms and that aspects of the religion are open to interpretation as espoused by the practice of Sufism. Based on the notion that Islam is an inherently open and tolerant religion, Gulen advocates acceptance and dialogue with the non-Muslim community. To advocate this notion of tolerance, Gulen met important Christian and Jewish religious leaders including the Pope, Chief Rabbi of Israel and the Patriarch of the Greek Orthodox Church to promote inter-religious dialogue.

Another interesting feature of Gulen's ideas is his belief that it is unIslamic for Muslims to advocate the formation of an Islamic state. He believes that Muslims must support and be active participants of democracy and a free-market economy, so as to align themselves with

the mainstream global processes. In accordance with his opposition to an Islamic state, he also does not favour the state applying Islamic law. He points out that most Islamic regulations affect Muslims in the private realm and that only a small segment of them concern the state and government and these provisions need not be enforced. He urged Muslims to focus on the more important aspects of modern life such as education and inter-faith dialogue which are seen to be more relevant in the current global context.

The social dimension of Gulen

In line with Gulen's vision, his followers have travelled around the world and created hundreds of modern highly-regarded schools worldwide. These schools first emerged in Turkey and in the neighbouring Central Asian countries but are now established in South and South-East Asia, Africa, Europe, and Australia. In Western Europe they built community centres and student hostels to provide support for students studying in the mainstream or public education system. Financing of the schools is secured for the most part by complimentary contributions from Turkish businessmen who have chosen to support this movement and view it as their Islamic duty to do so.

Despite being inspired by Gulen's ideas, none of these schools bear his name or are registered under his name. Rather, these schools are registered under the name of individual businessman or foundations. The curricula of these schools do not have any Islamic content and often follow the national curriculum of the country but is often imbued with a strong emphasis on wholesome human values. Scholarships are made easily available for talented pupils who cannot afford the school fees. These schools invariably follow the national curriculum, even in countries where private schools may be exempt from such a requirement. They tend to have premium English language departments and small classroom sizes.

The Jesuit priest Thomas Michel noted the pluralist nature of the students in the Gulen schools. For instance, Buddhists and Hindus account for a significant portion of the student community in Kyrgyzstan, a Muslim majority country. At the Sebat International School, a school run by the movement in the Kyrgyz capital Bishkek, students from the United States, South Korea, and Turkey appeared to be studying comfortably with those coming from Afghanistan and Iran. Turkish writer, Neval Sevindi, also points to the success of the movement in blocking the educational activities of extremist Muslim groups in Tajikistan, as the general masses prefer the schools of the Gülen movement.

Gulen in Southeast Asia

In Southeast Asia, the group has started schools in virtually all the Southeast Asian countries. Interestingly, the movement started a school in Cambodia in the late 1990s, when the country was just recovering from its historical turmoil. Last year, when the tsunami hit various parts of Southeast Asia, the movement was in the forefront in relief efforts and even built a school, the Fetah High School for orphans in Banda Aceh, started by businessmen and teachers who had earlier started a school in Jakarta. As in other parts of the world, the schools in the region also emphasize the need for inter-faith dialogue and tolerance throughout society. This is also practised in the schools. This is much needed in a region where literacy rates are low and religious conflicts are constant features.

The effectiveness of the Gulen movement lies in its ability to provide high standards of education to the local populace. Besides being set up by Turkish entrepreneurs and inspired by Gulen, these schools across the world have very little in common. Gulen schools in various parts of the world strive to teach the national curriculum of the country to their students. Dedicated Turkish teachers spend extra hours after regular curriculum time

providing complimentary academic assistance to their students. These sessions also provide platforms for character building.

The Gulen movement is an example of a transnational global Islamic activism that is making a positive impact on the rest of the world. Gulen's adherence to a humanistic and peaceful Islam has not only impacted Muslims but also non-Muslims. As seen from the example of the group in Tajikistan, the activities of his activism can also serve as a counter to the ideologies of extremist Muslims. As such, movements like the Gulen should be supported and the formation of similar groups encouraged.

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