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Book Review: M. Hakan Yavuz, John L. Esposito
(eds.), *Turkish Islam and the Secular State: The Gülen
Movement*

Ramazan Kilinc

University of Nebraska at Omaha, rkilinc@unomaha.edu

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Review of M. Hakan Yavuz, John L. Esposito (eds.),

Turkish Islam and the Secular State: The Gülen Movement

Ramazan Kılınç

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Turkish Islam and the Secular State: The Gülen Movement, edited by Hakan Yavuz and John Esposito, appeared on time when there is an increasing interest in Islam's engagement with the West and modernity. The global surge of so-called religious violence on the one hand, and the increase of liberal Islamic voices from all over the Muslim world on the other, requires a deep analysis of the contemporary Islamic movements. The Gülen movement is a good occasion for such an inquiry. The movement, led by Fethullah Gülen, has been one of the most vivid Islamic movements in the last decade. The movement has established a transnational education network, and led many interfaith dialogue activities all over the world. The transnational activities of Fethullah Gülen and his movement have been the subject of many academic works in the recent years. However, *Turkish Islam and the Secular State*, by bringing twelve contributors together, provides a comprehensive analysis of the movement. Although various chapters in the book examine different aspects of the Gülen movement, we may distinguish three main themes that the contributors revolve around: explaining the formation and rise of the Gülen movement, the Gülen movement's engagement with

modernity, and the movement's relationship with its constitutive individuals, the surrounding society and the nation-state.

[2] A group of articles in the volume tries to account for the formation and rise of the Gülen movement. Hakan Yavuz and John Esposito, in their introductory chapter, provide a historical analysis of Turkish secularization, and the evolution of the Islamic movements within this secular context. They criticize Turkish secularism as being based on 'a radical Jacobin laicism that aimed to transform society through the power of the state and eliminate religion from the public sphere' (p. xvi). What allowed the emergence and rise of Islamic movements in this restrictive secular environment was the structural transformations. Transition to multi-party system, urbanization, industrialization, the implementation of liberal reforms after 1980s in the Özal era empowered the Islamic groups to manifest a religious activism. Yavuz's following two chapters (respectively on the Nur movement in general and the Gülen movement), takes on this argument and enrich it by two additional factors: the strategic interaction between the state and the Gülen movement; and the discursive repertoire that the Gülen movement utilized in expanding its influence. Yavuz successfully shows how the Gülen movement acted strategically not to deteriorate its relations with the secular state until June 1999 when 'the antireligious Kemalist establishment' (p. 43) launched an organized fierce attack on the Gülen movement. The Gülen movement moved from a statist position toward a more liberal stance after 1999 under the conditions of the new domestic and global context. In addition to these structural and strategic reasons, Yavuz also identifies ideational resources (Said Nursi's *Risale-i Nur* and Fethullah Gülen's ideas in his books and other audio-video materials) which enabled the movement to assert a religious activism in the 1990s and 2000s.

[3] John Voll (Chapter 12) expands Yavuz's structural argument by introducing the influence of the impact context. According to Voll, what makes the Gülen movement an important Islamic social actor is the fact that Gülen's ideas and activities fit with the realities of the evolving global context. Voll asserts that the two underlying features of the new global context, globalization and desecularization, transcend the 'modernist' imaginary. Globalization facilitates the emergence of new forms of cultural and societal life that combine the aspects of the 'global' and the 'local', while desecularization questions the antagonistic relationship between the 'religious' and the 'secular' and brings new hybrid forms. The Gülen movement, for Voll, is a successful social movement because it

provides 'a vision that transcends the modern in a context of 'glocalization' and 'relicularization'' (p. 245).

[4] In contrast to Yavuz and Voll, Yasin Aktay (Chapter 7) uses an interpretive method to explain the formation of Gülen's political identity. Applying Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutical approach, Aktay explains the formation of Gülen's political identity by reference to two historical elements: diaspora and stability. Aktay argues that the destruction of the Ottoman Empire led the Turkish Islamic intellectuals to develop a diasporic discourse which defines the 'position of the Islamist Subject with relation to the political power' (p. 132). Accordingly, Islamic subject is perceived marginal to the centers of the political power. This diasporic discourse, for Aktay, has strongly informed Gülen's political philosophy. The idea of stability, which has historically been championed by the Sunni *ulema*, led Gülen to develop a tacit cooperation with the state, and to favor stability and order over anarchy and civil war.

[5] These five chapters develop our understanding of the formation and the rise of the Gülen movement in different ways. Regarding the plethora of the essentialist arguments in the last decades, Yavuz's (and Esposito in the introductory chapter) suggestion of a very dynamic model which combines structural, strategic, and cultural approaches is very innovative and an important contribution in itself. However, structure seems to be the underlying force among these factors. One gets the impression that agency and culture are epiphenomenal to the structure. One way to get rid of this flaw might be to specify the conditions under which structural, strategic or cultural variables work. To develop synthetic theories in a coherent way is only possible with middle-range theorizing, which allows the specification of conditions under which certain mechanisms work while others do not. Voll's 'global context' argument may be incorporated into this synthetic model. Although, it seems that there are epistemological obstacles to integrate Aktay's interpretivist analysis with Yavuz's synthetic approach, the recent developments in the philosophy of science offers new ways to do so. Conditional theorizing again is a relevant ground for such a synthesis.

[6] A second strand of articles examines the Gülen movement's engagement with modernity. Ahmet Kuru (Chapter 6), who engages with this question directly, argues that Fethullah Gülen's ideas constitute a middle way between modernity and Muslim tradition. Suggesting the possibility of multiple modernities synchronically, Kuru contends that Gülen's ideas reconcile dichotomies between modern science and Islamic knowledge, reason and revelation, the idea of progress and the

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conservation of tradition, and individual free will and destiny. Kuru emphasizes that Gülen's middle way is not an eclectic, hybrid synthesis of modernity and Muslim tradition; rather his idea of the middle way prioritizes the interpretation of Islam by the Islamic subject (agency) within specific spatial and temporal contexts. This contextual interpretation, for Kuru, is 'both compatible with and critical of modernity and Muslim tradition' (p. 130). Begim Akai's (Chapter 3) analysis of Gülen's educational vision concurs with Kuru's arguments. Akai argues that Gülen combines the elements of modernity with the Islamic ethics and practices in his educational institutions. Voll, in a similar vein, locates Gülen into a category what he calls 'beyond modernity', according to which Gülen's vision bridges 'modern' and 'postmodern'.

[7] Yavuz gives a dynamic picture of the interaction between modernity and Islam. Islamic movements are being changed by the structural transformation of modernity. However, this is not a one-way causal flow. He also makes an important contribution by acknowledging the efficacy of the Islamic social movements to transform the modernity itself. He calls this process the 'vernacularization of modernity'. Thus, Islamic movements and modernity, in Yavuz's conceptualization, are both subjects and objects of change; there is an intersubjective relationship between modernity and Islamic social movements. İhsan Yılmaz (Chapter 11), in another occasion, sees the Gülen movement as an opportunity to prevent the postmodern fragmentation of the Islamic legal sphere. Yılmaz argues that the inherent pluralistic nature of Islamic jurisprudence allows the emergence of many authorities who eclectically and pragmatically construct their own interpretations of the Islamic law against the challenges of modern times. This results in the postmodern fragmentation of the Islamic legal sphere. The Islamic social movements, which have the capacity to transform the public sphere, may prevent the fragmentation of the Islamic legal sphere by gathering their followers around certain discourses and practices. Yılmaz argues that by its increasing influence, the Gülen movement has the capacity to renew the Islamic discourse and practices so as to empower it to meet the challenges of modernity.

[8] The chapters that examine the Gülen movement's engagement with modernity make two important contributions. First, they problematize the linear understanding of modernity and suggest the possibility of multiple modernities. This allows them to situate the Gülen movement, which develops its own discourse of modernity, into the wider context of Islamic modernities. Second, by identifying religion as an important factor in transforming modernity, they show the ways by which

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religion engages in public life. As opposed to the conventional view which regards religion as a challenge to the modernity, the contributors of *Turkish Islam and the Secular State* demonstrate how the Gülen movement enriches modernity by participation in democratic processes and civic activities in national and global contexts. However, given the analyses of Yavuz, which show how the Gülen movement itself has changed according to the changing environmental conditions, Yılmaz's examination of the impact of the Gülen movement on the transformation of the sociopolitical sphere seems a must exaggerated and unbalanced argument.

[9] Another set of articles examines the relationship that Gülen movement builds with its followers, society, and the nation-state. These articles contribute to the debates of civil society, nationalism and individual autonomy. Berna Turam (Chapter 10) examines the Gülen movement's activities in Kazakhstan to provide empirical support for her larger question of the possibility of a civil society in a non-Western social context. She concludes that although the Gülen movement is a nationalist and statist movement, it is still an actor of civil society. Strong national loyalties enable the movement legitimacy and recognition in the international area, which in turn empowers its status as an international social actor. By demonstrating how the Gülen movement reconciles several types of nationalisms and internationalisms in its activities, Turam reveals the innovative capacities of the social movements to create new forms of civic associations in a non-Western context. Turam's findings on Gülen movement's relationship with its followers and with the society can be a starting point for further research: She argues that the movement displays a 'striking homogeneity in its inner core' (p. 187) with its fixed, rigid, and rule-based boundaries while it tolerates differences and celebrates the pluralistic quality of public life in the whole society.

[10] While Turam depicts the Gülen movement as 'nationalist', Thomas Michel (Chapter 4) sees the movement more universal which emphasizes 'humanistic' values. Michel, through analyzing Gülen's educational ideas and his activities in Philippines, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkey, contends that Gülen integrates secular educational system with spiritual values. The spiritual values transmitted to the pupils in Gülen's schools are not necessarily Islamic, but they are universal humanistic values. Gülen's followers in Michel's description are more autonomous than what Turam describes. Elizabeth Özdalga (Chapter 5), conducting in-depth interviews with the women teachers in Gülen's schools, explains how Gülen's followers form their selves, ethics and inner space through their involvement in the community. Regarding individual autonomy, Özdalga, at least for her research sample, concludes

that although Gülen's followers are strongly attached to the community, 'there is room for self-reflexivity as well as for individual initiative and autonomy' (p. 114).

[11] Although these authors examine the role of the individual, society and nation-state in Gülen's movement comprehensively, we still need further elaboration. First, there is an ambiguity whether or not the movement pursues a 'nationalist' stance in its activities all over the world. Empirical studies that travel Turam's arguments to the non-Turkic contexts may shed light on this issue. Second, the degree of individual autonomy in the Gülen movement also needs more elaboration. Conducting more in-depth interviews with the followers from different segments of the movement may be functional in doing so. Finally, although the volume as a whole examines the movement's conception of self, society, and nationalism, it fails to develop a comprehensive analysis of Gülen's relationship with the state. Although Yavuz, Aktay and Turam take a bit on this issue, the Gülen movement's political dimension is understudied in the volume. The promise of the volume's title, *Turkish Islam and the Secular State*, has not been fulfilled.

[12] The other two chapters that do not fall into any of the above categories in the book describe important aspects of Fethullah Gülen and his movement. Zeki Sarıtoprak (Chapter 8) focuses on Gülen's attitude toward Sufism and identifies the characteristics of Gülen's spirituality. Hasan Kösebalaban (Chapter 9), employing Alexander Wendt's constructivist theoretical framework, depicts Gülen's conception of foreign policy. Kösebalaban, by examining Gülen's ideas on issues central to Turkish foreign policy, concludes that Gülen perceives Iran as enemy, the West as rival, and the Turkic world and Muslim communities in the Balkans as friend.

[13] In sum, *Turkish Islam and the Secular State* offers new ways of studying Islamic movements, engages with important questions such as how an Islamic movement deals with the complexities and challenges of modernity, and how an Islamic movement approaches the issues of individual autonomy, civil society, and nation-states. Its weaknesses notwithstanding, this volume remains an important point of reference for all those who are interested in Islamic social movements in general and the Gülen movement in particular.