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## Between secular education and Islamic philosophy: the approach and achievements of Fethullah Gülen's followers in Azerbaijan

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Fethullah Gülen is the leader of a very influential Islamic community in Turkey, one of the most important and most transnational Islamic movements in the world. In Azerbaijan, inspired and influenced by his ideas, many Turkish businessmen and educators have endorsed and supported his movement, most importantly with a huge network of private high schools. When this community arrived in Azerbaijan just after the end of the Soviet Union, its main objective was to encourage Islamic revival in this newly independent state where Islam had been weakened by Soviet anti-religious campaigns. However, after a few years, the movement has changed its strategy, terminating religious activism and limiting its engagement solely and uniquely to secular and modern education. However, through successful, modern education, the movement is able to promote Islamic philosophy and ethics. If the ultimate objectives of the movement are unclear, it is evident that it wants to contribute to future elites from its ranks and to be influential in Azerbaijan. Because of this lack of clarity, the movement constantly attracts controversy.

**Keywords:** Islam, Islam in Azerbaijan, Turkey, Fethullah Gülen, Turkish-Azerbaijani relations.

### **Introduction: Turkey's religious policy abroad**

In 1991 the Soviet implosion and heightened unrest in the Persian Gulf resulted in a severe identity crisis in Turkish foreign policy. A huge "Turkish world" emerged on the international scene after 70 years of Soviet repression in Central Asia, forcing Turkey to turn its attention to the east. Developing diplomatic relationships and forming new political, economic and cultural policies towards the Caucasus and Central Asia was perceived as a strategic chance for Turkey to step forward as a key regional power (Çaman and Akyurt 2011).

Turkey was caught, however, between balancing an ambiguous European policy while trying to appeal to a public confused by newly introduced liberalism. Consequently, the new Turkish foreign policy borrowed arguments from both pan-turkist and religious lines: the revival of Great Turkestan, Turkey's historical mission as a bridge between East and West and Turkey's unique synthesis of Islam and nationalism. Despite an overall lack of knowledge about this vague but large Muslim area extending from the Caucasus to China, Turkish diplomats raised the spectre of a "clash of civilisations", where Soviet ideology would be soon replaced by an anti-Western Islamic fundamentalism, in order to gain support from Western countries (especially the United States) for Turkish influence in the region (Polonskaya and Malashenko 2008). Once invested with the mission, Turkey took up the challenge but struggled to tie down the newly independent states to the east.

Since resuming its seat within the Muslim world and related institutions like the Islamic Council Organisation, it has fallen to Turkey to promote a Western-friendly Islam. Thus, the mission that Turkey claimed (or with which it was entrusted) against this new geopolitical background – one barely visible at the beginning of the 1990s – was to export a Turkish model of moderate and pro-Western Islam with sufficient materialistic liberalism to support economic development.

Despite its secular character, which remains strong on the internal political scene, the status and image of religion during the 1980s encouraged the emergence of private religious groups, which the Turkish state later exploited as a "missionary avant-garde" to implement new foreign policy objectives in terms of religious cooperation. Consequently, Turgut Özal, through religious conviction and his

concern to balance the power of the army with civilian elements, facilitated the introduction of various religious movements, specifically brotherhoods, into Turkish politics, including in its foreign affairs. Therefore, when Turkey promoted its “Turkish model” to the South Caucasus and Central Asia in order to check the rise of fundamentalism, indirect appeals were first made to these private religious groups, assessing them in terms of their levels of state loyalty and alleged state control over their activities, as well as their financial capacities to support and even boost official policy, as defined by diplomats with input from the Board of Spiritual Affairs (*Diyamet*).

One of these communities, established by Sait Nursi and structured progressively into a larger movement, whose disciples are named after their master, the so-called *nurcu*, later fragmented into various factions. One of the most important of these factions is the group of Fethullah Gülen, also called Gülenists or *fethullahci* after their charismatic leader. Indeed, by the end of the 1980s, some of Nursi’s disciples began to follow the advice and encouragements of Fethullah Gülen and were soon ready to cross borders to export their brand of philosophy to the Muslim states of the former Soviet Union. They counted on their own special triptych of strong points: education, media and trade. Their pioneering approach and proven successes paved the way for an alignment with official policy during this tumultuous period. The *fethullahci*, or disciples of Fethullah Gülen as they prefer to be designated, were so fast and reactive that they were the first to arrive in Central Asia and the Caucasus. Supported by a large grassroots movement in Turkey, they played a major role in promoting Turkish influence in these former Soviet states, thereby gaining strength and international visibility.

The aim of this article is to analyse one dimension of this Turkish religious influence in a post-Soviet state, Azerbaijan, and to focus on the complexities and ambiguities attaching to the activities of Fethullah Gülen’s movement in the Azerbaijani context. But most importantly, the aim of this contribution is to explain a paradox: why and how the movement of Fethullah Gülen, which is an authentic Islamic movement in Turkey, adopts a non-religious attitude in Azerbaijan, in order to be more successful in its strategy of soft power. Our hypothesis is that because this religious movement has surpassed a solely Islamic identity, becoming a sort of post-Islamic movement, it is able to act on its religious discourse without mentioning it explicitly.

### **Fethullah Gülen: a *nurcu* leader**

Today, when considering their activities outside of the Turkish borders, Nursi’s followers are more often referred to as *fethullahci* than as *nurcu*. Lead by Fethullah Gülen, who appears to be Nursi’s legitimate heir, it is they who have successfully spread Nursi’s message (albeit with a kind of Gülen imprimatur) and legacy all over the world and specifically throughout the former Soviet Central Asian states and Azerbaijan.

For a clear understanding of their activities, we should take into account the historical background in which the *nurcu* movement emerged in Turkey between the 1920s and the 1940s (Mardin 1989). By refusing the title of brotherhood, and in accordance with the law of 1925 banning all religious organisations, the *nurcu* evolved and developed in the 1950s through a religious liberalism established by the new Democratic Party led by Adnan Menderes. The movement strengthened around Sait Nursi (1873-1960), a scholar and theologian who dedicated his life to the reconciliation of modern science with religion. Sait Nursi dreamt of introducing sciences into the *madrasas* and religion into modern schools. To achieve his dream he even considered opening an Islamic university in Eastern Turkey.

Sait Nursi’s *Risale-i Nur*, or “Epistle of Light”, provides us with 6,000 pages of thoughts and personal interpretations of the sacred Koran informed by mysticism.<sup>1</sup> Initially written in Ottoman Turkish at the beginning of the twentieth century, and finished much later in reformed Turkish, the text is difficult and can only be read with the aid of dictionaries and glossaries. Beside the form, the content is quite abstruse for non-scholars and has proven open to exegesis. Consequently, comments and essays explaining the *Risale* prevail on the original text, with the result that the most famous analyst becomes the movement’s most important person (Yavuz 1999).

Fethullah Gülen was born in 1938 in Erzurum (Eastern Turkey), where he was initiated into Nursi’s philosophy at a very young age. Later he lived in Edirne where he received a religious education and worked as an employee for the official *Diyamet*. He later moved to Izmir where he preached for the same public administration, but at the same time he began to acquire his own circle of disciples, organising conferences, editing religious works and journals and opening private religious schools.<sup>2</sup> Gülen was arrested and briefly imprisoned for the first time in the context of the 1971 military coup, along with many other religious and political figures; he spent a second term in jail six

months after another coup in September 1980. He was released under conditions of a general amnesty thanks to President Turgut Özal, who had initiated a policy of friendly cooperation with religious and conservative activists within Turkish society. While there were precursors to such cooperation in earlier eras (even under the military establishment), the 1980s saw a religious liberalism from which Gülen, close to power when civilian rule resumed in 1983, was able to benefit. He developed a large and influential network of schools, and his branch of the *nurcu* movement soon gained autonomy and even began to overshadow other *nurcu* groups, such as *Yeni Asya* (New Asia) and *Yeni Nesil* (New Generation).

In order to spread his views, Gülen utilised different media tools created by his followers, such as the TV channel *Samanyolu*, newspapers such as *Zaman*, and many journals such as *Sizinti*. He remained in constant contact with political leaders, as well as with various religious figures. Following the publication of *Ufuk turu* (“general review”) in the daily *Zaman* newspaper in 1995, he was considered and qualified as a tolerant and liberal religious leader, supportive of secularism.<sup>3</sup> The political right wing, however, used him against the *Refah* (Welfare Party), which embodied a more traditional political Islam.

The silent coup on 28 February 1997 marked the end of the honeymoon period between the state and religious leaders, when the National Security Council initiated a fight against the so-called *dini irtica* (“religious reaction”). Following the coup, all the *Refah*'s supporters and then all the *Fazilet*'s supporters and proponents were eliminated, and Gülen, together with his closest collaborators, became the focal point for all naysayers of political Islam. In 1998 the Council made public a report on Gülen heavily implying that his unspoken objective was the introduction of a fully Islamic regime in Turkey. In 1999 public TV channels broadcast videos with evidence of an infiltration strategy, the alleged aim of which was to take control of the state. Gülen-inspired schools were accused of educating new elites opposed to the regime, as well as to the secular principles of the Turkish republic, and a preliminary investigation was opened by the State Security Court. Officially exiled for medical reasons to the United States, Gülen was arguably considered *persona non grata* in his own country; in 1998 he was cleared (acquitted) but he preferred to stay in the US. Although the Gülen movement is experiencing trouble in Turkey, it has never been so powerful abroad, thanks to its extensive educational network. It was somewhat illogical that while Gülen was threatened with arrest in Turkey should he return, his disciples continued to successfully develop educational activities, schools and media and to strengthen the movement at home and abroad.

### **The international strategic approach of the Gülen movement and its role in the former Soviet Union**

The core of the Gülen community success in the 1990s lies in the skill of its followers in permeating national borders and introducing a specific policy in the post-Soviet Central Asian states, in a context where Turkish diplomats had failed due to lack of inspiration and vision, despite this initiative being a high Turkish foreign policy priority.

According to the development strategy of the *cemaat* (religious community), the area left vacant by the outgoing communist regime became the favoured target. As early as 1992, Gülen's followers were among the first to settle in these newly independent states, establishing publishing houses and educational institutions, with the financial support of local small and medium-sized businesses and industries (Balci 2003). Such income, together with funds gathered from various sponsors and associations in Turkey, allowed for the publishing of local editions of the daily newspaper *Zaman* in each national language. *Zaman*'s head office works together with the local editorial offices and a press agency, providing Turkey with accurate, reliable information about developments in the Caucasus and Central Asia. From the beginning of the 1990s, the Turkish edition of *Zaman* was one of the best-informed newspapers covering the region.

However, for a more effective implementation of its philosophy, the Gülen community has relied heavily on its large network of schools, which are fast developing beyond the borders of the former Soviet Union. Indeed, the movement is involved in and manages more than 500 educational institutions scattered across the five continents in more than 60 countries.<sup>4</sup> Among these, Azerbaijan, always favourable to Turkish influence, is no exception and has turned out to be a key experimental site for the *cemaat*, or community, the most popular term used of the movement.

### **The Gülen *cemaat* in Azerbaijan: tactics and activities**

Individuals affiliated with Fethullah Gülen arrived in Azerbaijan in the early 1990s, at a time of high political crisis in the country. In typical fashion it developed along three intrinsically related axes: media, trade and education.

In 1992, when *Zaman* opened a satellite office in Baku, Azerbaijan was experiencing a severe paper crisis due to the chaotic and disorganised distribution networks existing between Azerbaijan and Russia, now both newly independent states. This crisis had condemned local newspapers to almost total paralysis. At the time *Zaman*, occupying offices in the media building *Azərbaycan Nəşriyyatı*, was better equipped than other newspapers in the building, enjoying high-tech material and the latest technology tools. Printed on high-quality paper with a colour front page and offering articles and analyses written by professional journalists, *Zaman* benefited from the crisis and gained a solid reputation. The recently recovering Azerbaijani printing industry has since closed the gap, but *Zaman* still stands out on account of the quality of its information and modern approach, including an online edition, first and foremost in the Azeri language, but also in Turkish, English and Russian versions (*Zaman* newspaper).<sup>5</sup>

First published in Cyrillic Azeri with only its titles in Latin Azeri, *Zaman* has now complied with the law and is entirely written in Latin Azeri. Issued three times a week, this newspaper does not concentrate on spreading a religious message but dedicates several pages to international issues, reporting on Turkish news with reviews from the Turkish press and Turkey's relationships with Azerbaijan and the rest of the Caucasus. Its weekly supplement, *Bazar*, is a major forum in which Turkish businesses can advertise and which covers the movement's schools and their successes in the educational field on a regular basis.

Small and medium-sized Turkish businesses and industries in Azerbaijan are mainly managed by the movement's sympathizers, and thus have played a major role in establishing the *cemaat* in this area. These businessmen, who are referred to in Turkey as *esnaflar*, gather in trade associations and support the schools. For example, the stationery chain *Nil* and biscuit and chocolate manufacturer *Ülker*, among others, are well known to be Gülen advocates. Showing strong organisational skills, Turkish businessmen have created their own association locally known as *Azərbaycan Türkiyə Sənayəti və İsadamları Beynəlxalq Cəmiyyəti* (International Association of Turkish and Azerbaijani Manufacturers and Businessmen, TUSIAB; [www.tusiab.org](http://www.tusiab.org)). TUSIAB's origins emanate from Gülen's movement, although not all members share his religious or political views.

However, the most interesting of the TUSIAB companies is *Çağ*, which manages all the movement's schools and other educational institutions throughout Azerbaijan.<sup>6</sup> With two high schools and one Islamic university in Baku, Gülen's followers, compared to other foreign initiatives in this sector, have proven their ambition and dynamism. But what makes them much stronger and more influential are the many other schools they have created and managed in smaller provincial towns such as Ganja, Lenkoran, Sheki, Quba and in even more remote or less developed areas such as Agdas, Mingeçaur, Sumgait and Ali Bayramli.

The school network functions in conjunction with a parallel network, named *Araz*, of intensive study courses designed to prepare high-flying students for competitive entrance examinations to universities and which are equal to the *dershane* in Turkey. All these institutions employ both national and Turkish teachers and trainers, teaching classes in both the national language and in English (with particular emphasis on sciences and computing). With significant financial support from businesses, these schools provide students with up-to-date high-tech equipment, therefore applying the latest methods of contemporary teaching and widening the gap between Gülen movement schools and state education, which lacks both means and methods. In the summer months, popular linguistic courses abroad in the United Kingdom or the United States are organised for students. Remaining loyal to Sait Nursi's dream, the schools provide access to the sciences, with which students are kept busy for a large part of the week. Their elitist approach to learning eases the way for the recruitment of hand-picked students through demanding examinations. Students take part in competitions – the Olympiads – organised for each subject at regional, national and international levels, the tutors paying great attention to their training and success in these public exhibitions as they play a major role in the promotion of their schools. The schools pride themselves on achieving a more than 80 percent success rate of candidates to university entry level and on a great number of graduate students continuing their studies in Europe or America. Admission fees to these schools are high in comparison to the national living standards. However, at the moment, good students from poor backgrounds are partially sponsored by

the Azerbaijani and Turkish businessmen's association. Qafqaz University (<http://www.qu.edu.az/>), established in 1993 and officially registered under the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Education in 1995, is one the country's best private educational institutions. It is composed of four departments: engineering, administration and business, law and philology.

### **An education policy serving an original form of schooling and influence**

*Nil*/stationery shops are the only site where there is collusion between Gülen high schools and religious obedience. Beside the school textbooks, edited by *Çağ*, on the same shelves are displayed the religious literature of Sait Nursi and Fethullah Gülen: essays and popular books giving access to their texts, philosophy and religious principles, Gülen's published interviews (*sohbet*), issues of *Zaman*, tapes of Koranic readings, videos and Sufi music, altogether an extensive and wide-ranging religious literary output.

In the high schools of the *Çağ* group, religious education is not in the spotlight. Indeed, despite their private status, all the schools of the movement are under the control of the Azerbaijani state Ministry of Education where the educational policy is completely secular; high schools have a secular curriculum, without any religious education. Optional religious courses, which were originally available, were removed from the students' timetable. However, religious thoughts and principles are passed on to students in a more subtle way. After classes, under the rubric of *sohbet*, a kind of informal "tea and talk" party, students can meet their teachers and *belletmen* (tutors or 'seniors', who are themselves Turkish students and whose studies are sponsored in exchange for tutoring national students and leading them in "the right way"), usually in the schools' halls of residence or in private. During these *sohbet*, religion is discussed, pages of Nursi's or Gülen's works are read and debates take place around a given subject.

In public, i.e. in classes and in school in general, the religious message is never explicit, but systematically implied in the model of social moral behaviour, which is exhibited by all teachers, tutors and administrative staff. Indeed, Fethullah Gülen theorised the difference between *tebliğ* (spreading faith through debate, a classic method also named *da'wa*) and *temsil* (exemplary nature and perfect representation), giving greater credence to the latter (Balci 2003).

All Fethullah Gülen sympathisers who came from Turkey to work in these schools, be they teachers, tutor-students or administrators, must behave according to *temsil* principles. Teachers usually attend preliminary courses in Turkey in preparation. Among Turkish students, some come from Turkey and belong to the *cemaat*, others are recruited in universities. As they often lack financial support to study, the possibility of sponsorship by the *cemaat* is particularly attractive. Through these courses, teachers progressively learn more about the community's philosophy and gradually become more sensitive to the ideas of the *cemaat*, the core idea being to link virtuous behaviour with social and professional success.

Businessmen close to the movement encourage religious practice, both discreetly and officially for charity purposes, by organising circumcision parties, by offering meat for *Aid el Kebir* (sacrifice day) or *ifrar* parties (the evening breaking of the fast during Ramadan). Abroad as much as in Turkey their schooling and influence is so subtle and barely noticeable that it is difficult to judge its impact and estimate the number of new followers educated through this system. However, as far as Azerbaijan is concerned, several figures are available and give an idea of the *cemaat* presence there (Aliev 2012). In 2013, the movement has 12 high schools, one university and at least 13 *araz* courses for the preparation of students for university accession exams. In these educational establishments some 250 teachers, of which 120 come from Turkey, are teaching 2,000 pupils and students.<sup>7</sup> As for "converted" Azerbaijanis, it is much harder to provide estimates. The *cemaat* is not a brotherhood, and there are no external signs or religious rituals distinguishing a follower from any other person in the street. Many people may "invisibly" join the movement the only signs being speaking both Turkish and English, behaving "correctly", and achieving success in study and professional careers.

### **Azerbaijani perceptions of Gülen's community**

The key to Gülen's successful proselytism lies in his pragmatism and absence of aggressiveness. It is important here to underline the specificity of what is meant here by proselytism. It does not imply in this case conversion of local populations to Islam, as Azerbaijanis are already Muslim; more important is the invitation to the local population to be supportive of the movement's activities in education and

in their way of life. This method consists of preaching by example; the perfect example being academic and professional success. All the services available in Gülen schools answer a pragmatic demand from students and their parents, but Gülen's followers are also able to answer the spiritual needs of students because their religious philosophy complies with the leading religiosity.

First, the *fethullahci* satisfy a concrete need for a solid education for young people concerned for their future. Their success is partly due to the heirs of the former Soviet educational system failing to adopt modern practices. This has resulted in a lack of means and premises, overcrowded classes and an absence of textbooks in the national language, as well as unpaid and corrupt teachers, who have lost all motivation and whose lessons lack substance, forcing students to pay for remedial classes if they wish to succeed. Conversely, teachers and students from Turkish high schools benefit from good working conditions and teaching based on an efficient learning of Turkish, English and science subjects providing an excellent springboard for future professional careers. For these reasons the achievements of the Gülen-affiliated schools have gained an aura of prestige.

In such circumstances, the Gülen movement has attained its overall objective, which appears to be the renewed Islamization of a post-Soviet society. Indeed, against a background of economic crisis and painful transition to a market economy, the traditional views of Gülen, striving to reconcile Islam and liberalism, are welcomed. The Gülen message finds an echo among those looking to the West for the first time and acknowledging Azerbaijan's European links (entry to the Council of Europe, etc). The Azerbaijani people are concerned with the potential loss of their traditions, especially family traditions (respect for the elders, family stability, etc.), in the face of the dazzling advent of post-modernity. And this is precisely what the Gülen movement satisfies, with its worldwide renown for commitment to traditional values.

Furthermore, the *cemaat* method is able to answer people's spiritual needs. Though Turkish and Sunni, the *fethullahci* has proved to be extremely flexible, offering outstanding compatibility in its form of Islam with the popular and very different Islam prevailing in Azerbaijan. To a great extent, "de-islamised" Azerbaijan is now ready to rediscover its own religion, which is considered one of the most significant components of its national identity (Balci 2004). Many fears strengthen this position: fear of alienation; fear of the dissolution of Azerbaijani Shiism into Iranian Shiism; fear of ethnic and religious pressure between Sunni and Shia; and fear of the nourishment and strengthening of fundamentalist groups threatening to discourage US assistance to the country (particularly since 9/11). Therefore, all organisations claiming a religious identity are heavily and closely watched by the government, and more specifically by the State Committee for Cooperation with Religious Organisations, initially led by well known scholar and orientalist, Rafiq Aliev, later by Hidayet Orujov, and since May 2012 by the Western-educated Elshad Iskandarov.

However, the historical resonance of Sufi Islam remains untouched, despite the negative influence of the Soviet regime, and has become revived as a popular cult. This popular Islam, a third way between traditional Islam and Sufism, is a system of beliefs and practices that are often quintessential to shamanism. This cult takes root in holy places, distinguished by a *mâzar* (tomb), such as a rock, cave or mountain, and designated as a *pîr*. They are believed to have holy, highly beneficial and curative virtues and attract many pilgrims. Due to the interrupted passing on of religious knowledge to the younger generation, pilgrims often do not know the *pîr*'s origin and even the identity of the Sufi sheikh buried in the *mâzar*.

This quirk explains why the most recent *pîrs* of contemporary people whose lives are well known are more popular and visited more than the ancient *pîrs*. For example, one of these *pîrs* was created only a few years ago in the city of Shüvelen. It houses the tomb of Mir Mövsum Et Agha. Although he was a *seyit* (a descendant of Ali), the man had no religious education. Suffering from a disease affecting his bones, he was left severely disabled and later became famous for his clairvoyant skills. It is believed that his miracles had prevented his persecution and saved him from political censure under the Soviet regime. The new buildings around his tomb were erected by Hadji Nizam who, as an ambitious Azerbaijani businessman, has turned the place into a huge complex of reception facilities increasing its appeal for thousands of pilgrims throughout the year.

In this particular religious state of mind, Hadji Nizam found an echo in the *nurcu* phenomenon. The idealised biography of Sait Nursi conferred great intellectual and quasi-supernatural skills on him. Like Mir Mövsum Et Agha, Hadji Nizam used modern methods to resist persecution and has defied the authorities by entering into a high-level religious dialogue with *ulemas* and European scientists. Persecuted but dignified by his exemplary behaviour, his legend is close to that of Mir Mövsum, and

has touched a chord in popular faith. Similarly, the published biography (also available online) of Fethullah Gülen, is also idealised.

Furthermore, the *nurcu* movement possesses what Azerbaijani *pîrs* lack: their own holy text. Nursi's *Risale-i-Nur* is available in many bookshops around Baku, its spiritual imagery merging with popular superstitions; its explanatory system of the universe provides spiritual answers to many questions related to religious revival in post-modernity. The religious content of the message is not shocking as the Azerbaijani population now asserts its religiosity and its own form of Islam, distinguished from models imported from abroad.

The Azerbaijani government, suspicious of any kind of proselytism, has proved to be neutral towards the *nurcu* and the followers of Fethullah Gülen. While other groups (associations, religious foundations or political parties), be they Azerbaijani, Iranian, Arab or Turkish, have been strictly controlled (especially by the end of the 1990s and after 9/11), the *fethullahci* has had complete freedom, the only limits being those its followers have imposed on themselves. Their regulatory authority is the Ministry of Education, which already controls their schools and which commends their work and commitment.

On the other hand, what makes Gülen's movement different in Azerbaijan lies in the fact that his representatives always show loyalty to the regime and respect national laws helping to guarantee continuity in the long term. Thus, all Gülen schools, like any other national school, encourage pupils to revere national symbols – the national hymn, the flag and most of all, the President, who is ever-present in classes and corridors in the form of posters, portraits and quotations.

Followers of Fethullah Gülen have had few difficulties overall in being accepted and appreciated in Azerbaijan, thanks to their successful educational services and to their rejection of overt religious proselytism. This does not mean, however, that the movement's initiatives and activities are not beyond suspicion. This suspicion has stepped up since the mid-2000s, on account of developments relating to the movement in Turkey. The good relations, even honeymoon, between the movement and ruling Justice and Welfare Party (AKP) has, for many reasons, generated concerns in Azerbaijan. Some in Azerbaijan have come to suspect that AKP-Gülen affinities in Turkey may suggest that the movement is not so indifferent to politics as it claims. For some staunch secular elites in Baku, the Turkish experience should caution Azerbaijan in its dealings with the Gülen movement, in order to preempt any development of political Islam in the country (Aliiev 2012).

### **The reaction of Turkish diplomacy towards the Fethullah Gülen movement and its activities in Azerbaijan**

Official Turkish attitudes towards the activity and influence of the Gülen movement in Central Asia and the Caucasus since 1991 are complex. This is not least because there is an enduring ambivalence surrounding the movement in Turkish official circles. Traditionally Kemalist structures, such as the Turkish military, have always been suspicious towards the movement. Yet the progressive weakening of Kemalism in Turkey, and more importantly the pragmatism evident in Turkish diplomacy towards the countries where the Gülen movement is active has created openings for the movement to operate freely. For pragmatic reasons, in its Caucasian and Central Asian policy, Turkish diplomacy quietly observes and tolerates the actions and achievements of these uninvited and unofficial players, according to long established mechanics, while keeping them at arm's length.

This is all the more true in the case of Gülen's missionaries and businessmen. The dynamism initiated by the community of Gülen in Central Asia and the Caucasus has forced a certain alignment of Turkish diplomacy with Gülen's representatives, where the former tries to avoid totally losing touch with the latter's strategy and tactics. There has been a certain convergence between Turkish officialdom and the movement's disciples, at least in former Soviet contexts. In Azerbaijan, as elsewhere, the Turkish state's support to this movement's activities is essentially moral and symbolic. Turkish diplomats in Azerbaijan may attend, for example, the graduation ceremonies organised by high school administrations, a symbolic gesture contributing to a kind of implied protection of the high school's activities.

The primary point of convergence is the promotion of Turkish Islam. This is not to imply concrete cooperation, but an affinity of interests. The official religious policy of Turkey is managed by the *Diyânet* (Board of Religious Affairs) and by its representatives based in embassies and in charge of cooperation with local and national religious authorities (Gözaydin 2008). The *Diyânet*'s programmes, amongst other things, consist of inviting Turkish imams during Ramadan, sponsoring Azerbaijani students in Turkey and building or renovating mosques. In Azerbaijan, the *Diyânet* has built four large

mosques (two in Baku, one in Nakhichevan and the last one in Gusar, in the north). Furthermore, a theology department has been established at Baku State University. The most visible action of the *Diyanet* towards the entire former socialist bloc – Soviet Union and Balkans included – is the annual meeting of the *Avrasya İslam Şurasi* (Eurasian Islamic Council), which aims at improving cooperation and harmonisation of all Muslim countries, under the leadership of Turkey, in order to engender a unique Islam from the Adriatic to China (Zarcone 1997). The underlying objective of these meetings is to promote and distinguish Turkish Islam from other and potentially more attractive Islams (Iranian Shiism, wahhabism, etc.) or more popular religions (*bahai* religion, protestant evangelic sects, etc.). In predominantly Shiite Azerbaijan, the *Diyanet*'s policy was introduced with caution so as not to arouse Shiite hostility. However, the more neutral lines of the Gülen followers, set apart by its policy of tolerance (*hoşgörü*), *diyalog* (dialogue) and openness to modernity, which are Fethullah Gülen's leitmotifs, has been more welcome. The school network, for example, challenges Protestant sects in their traditional field. Gülen schools are scattered all over the country and do not favour one region over another. In Shiite regions, like Lenkoran or Nakhchivan, even more caution is shown because Gülen disciples, like Turkish officials, do not want to alarm and upset the local population.

Educating new elites and promoting the Turkish language are a second point of convergence between Turkish officials and the Gülen establishments. Indeed, a large part of Turkey's foreign policy towards the former Soviet states is dedicated to the education and training of new national elites. Thanks to the "10,000 Students" programme, hundreds of Caucasian and Central Asian students have been given the chance to study in Turkish universities in the post-Soviet era. Three high schools and a theology department in the university were opened in Azerbaijan by Turkey's Ministry of Education. The *Çağ* schools managed by Gülen movement's followers have significantly contributed to Turkey's foreign policy in terms of cultural influence in Azerbaijan, but also in other countries in Central Asia and the Balkans.

Such success abroad had also contributed to a rise in the popularity of the movement in Turkey by the mid-1990s. Even a politician as attached to republican and secular values as Bülent Ecevit (who was Prime Minister when the nature of Gülen's views was debated in Turkey), paid tribute to the pioneering role in developing a nursery for future elites: "Now, wherever you go in Asia, your road comes across a Turkish school. Recalling American missionaries establishing Robert College in Istanbul at the end of the last century, they had probably guessed that one day some of their students like Ecevit or Ciller would become Prime Minister. One does not have to be clairvoyant to foresee that in a couple of decades, the leaders of Central Asia will be graduates of Fethullah Gülen's schools, educated in the Western way, fluent in both Turkish and English" (*Zaman* 2006).

In June 2000 Turkish ambassadors in Central Asia and the Caucasus, under the initiative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, held a consultation meeting and noted in their final report the positive role played by Gülen schools in raising the prestige of Turkey among significant sectors of local populations. Finally, as their loyalty and proven legalism in these countries has not hampered Turkish diplomacy, the presence and activity of the movement's followers in Azerbaijan has gone a long way in contributing to the visibility of Turkey as a bridge between East and West.

## Conclusion

Rapidly established during times of crisis following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Fethullah Gülen's followers have succeeded in creating good conditions to develop their activities and making in Azerbaijan an attractive showcase of both Turkey and their own movement. This somewhat idyllic picture stands in sharp contrast to the troubles of Fethullah Gülen in Turkey, even as his movement was active in Azerbaijan. This shows once again the dichotomy between Turkish internal and foreign policies as far as the role and place of Islam are concerned.

Relative religious freedom in Azerbaijan has encouraged the Gülen movement to settle and take root. Indeed, while in Central Asia the movement remains a Turkish phenomenon (most of the teachers, tutors and administrators come from Turkey), in Azerbaijan the movement now recruits from among its own national community and has succeeded in strengthening its teams with local converts. If, at the outset, the movement's intentions were religious in the sense that its followers sought to diffuse an Islamic discourse and behaviour through the *temsil* method, over time the movement has progressively abandoned in Azerbaijan, as elsewhere, its religious ambitions for more secular and exclusively educational activities. Its ambition has evolved to embrace the formation of new elites: influential, probably conservative yet not necessarily religious, and providing a living bridge between

Azerbaijan and Turkey.

The future of the movement in Azerbaijan seems promising as not only do the authorities support these schools, but educated elites are on the verge of emerging from them, and will have significant opportunities to access high positions in the state administration in the near future. But the evolution of the movement will also depend much on the identity of the successor to the aging Fethullah Gülen, whose health is deteriorating.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> On the signification of Risale-i Nur and its historical place in Turkish Islam, see Yavuz and Esposito (2003).

<sup>2</sup> For more details about the biography and religious profile of Fetullah Gülen, see Yavuz (2013).

<sup>3</sup> These interviews were published in a book and contributed to the media success of Gülen and his movement (Can 1996).

<sup>4</sup> For a more complete list of Fethullah Gülen movements educational network in the world, see <http://turkishinvitations.weekly.com/every-continent-but-antarctica.html>

<sup>5</sup> See the website of the newspaper: <http://www.zaman.az/az/mainAction.action>

<sup>6</sup> See the website of the company for a complete list of the schools and other educational establishments: <http://www.cag.edu.az/>

<sup>7</sup> Author's field notes, Azerbaijan, 2012.

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