Review Essay

What's in a Movement? Competing Narratives on Transnational Islam

Books Reviewed: M. Hakan Yavuz, *Toward an Islamic Enlightenment: The Gülen Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Joshua D. Hendrick, *Gülen: The Ambiguous Politics of Market Islam in Turkey and the World* (New York: New York University Press, 2013); Sophia Pandya and Nancy Gallagher, eds., *The Gülen Hizmet Movement and Its Transnational Activities: Case Studies of Altruistic Activism in Contemporary Islam* (Boca Raton, FL: BrownWalker Press, 2012).

What makes the ideas of an Islamic scholar from the heartland of eastern Anatolia relevant to more than 150 countries across the world? To some, it is the authenticity, dedication, activism, sincerity, and solidarity of the participants in what Fethullah Gülen, the inspiring figure behind the movement, has called the "volunteers movement" or simply *hizmet* (service). This global movement provides opportunities for education, promotes intercultural dialogue, supports democratization and human rights, and connects businesses and activists for community partnership. To others, there is something sinister, something more than meets the eye, and hence it is a "project" with ulterior motives ranging from creating an Islamic state to serving the interests of Israel, the United States, and the Vatican. When there is such disagreement, a social theory perspective becomes critical to sorting out all of these competing and conflicting explanations. The three books under review provide various kaleidoscopes to make sense of such convoluted interpretations and raise interesting questions for future work in the burgeoning literature.[1]

The movement began as one of the many Islamic communities in Turkey's diverse informal religious sector, which has traditionally offered a private alternative to the official Islam represented by the Diyanet (Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs). By the mid-1990s, however, it had distinguished itself from most of the rest through its words and deeds. This is the story of an enigmatic "preacher" who led a core group of seminary disciples

to form a movement of transformative education, interfaith dialogue, and socio-economic activism that would one day go global. The broader public first became aware of the movement via several high-profile meetings with faith leaders, bureaucrats, politicians, businesspeople, and civil society actors. Many analyses, speculations, and vigorous debates have taken place as to whether the movement is reactionary or progressive, a grave threat to secularism or a unique opportunity for democratization, an agent of Turkish nationalism or a "Trojan Horse" for the West, or even a sinister political movement or a truly civil society actor.

After two decades and remarkable growth in terms of its network and activities, a number of pundits and journalists are still proudly referring to their early inquisitive analysis and questions about the movement as well as its intentions and impact. This underscores the challenge of studying a contemporary movement and the importance of simultaneously accounting for continuity and change. Using structural, contextual, and agent-based explanations, the three books under review attempt to offer a social scientific reading of its meaning and significance.

Yavuz's *Toward an Islamic Enlightenment: The Gülen Movement* offers a contextualized narrative of the movement in relation to the post-Ottoman Turkish modernization project. The author argues that the movement's activities amount to a contemporary form of Muslim enlightenment in terms of its synthesis of tradition and modernity. Joshua Hendrick's *Gülen: An Ambiguous Politics of Market Islam in Turkey and the World* situates the movement within the broader context of global neoliberal forces and the transformation of Islamic actors in the global market. This transformation includes the rationalization of Islamic sensibilities, goals, and objectives in accordance with the requirements of the competitive market of goods, services, ideas, and spirituality. He contends that the movement has adopted "strategic ambiguity" as a result of the rationalization and marketization of its core spiritual capital: Islam. In his opinion, the movement is an agent of the "passive revolution" that overthrew the Kemalist order[2]; however, one gets the impression that the new order is only Islamic in name and that it helps to reproduce neoliberalism in the Turkish periphery.

Both Yavuz and Hendrick examine the movement's interaction with modernity. Drawing parallels with the Western European experience, Yavuz posits a promising example of Muslim enlightenment in the contemporary era based on its ability to "vernacularize" modernity or, in other words, to create a "Muslim modernity." According to this analysis, the movement is both a by-product of the Turkish modernization process and a force that shapes its

future. The uniqueness of the movement stems from its ability to turn the long-standing and largely elitist Islamic enlightenment idea into a viable social project supported by a popular grassroots mobilization.

Yavuz's "thick description" provides a rich contextual analysis of the historical, economic, and socio-cultural factors that gave rise to the movement and made its growth and success possible. The book is organized around key debates about Islam's relationship with secularism, capitalism, democracy, pluralism, and science and successfully demonstrates how Muslims contribute to these debates through their words and actions. The main insight of this work is that a person can remain Muslim while living a modern life and that Gülen and his movement show how this works in practice. The author maintains that the movement draws a middle-of-the-road profile between two extreme attitudes toward modernity in the Muslim world: positivist Jacobean secularism and literalist Salafi rejectionism. Unlike these Islamic groups, the Gülen movement engages with modernity and tradition in novel ways: It tries to preserve the historical religious institutions and yet wants to reform and adapt them. I call this a form of "conservative modernism."

Yavuz correctly situates the Hizmet movement within its historical and cultural milieu through his analysis of the Ottoman-Turkish Islamic tradition and history. He offers an analytic frame based on globalization and modernization, and treats the movement as an actor that is both shaped by its own values and history and responds to the novelties and challenges of its particular time. In general, *Toward an Islamic Enlightenment* reads as a measured and often cautious praise of the movement and its broader impact. Yavuz posits that Hizmet is more than just another religious movement that has managed to create a framework for Muslim modernity. In fact, its participants use Islamic idioms, identity, institutions, ideas, and practices to contextualize Islam and create a prosperous, powerful, and harmonious civilization. The book is directed toward both the highly informed observers of Turkish politics and the less informed general audience, as the author often uses Christian and western references and frameworks, such as the Enlightenment, Calvinism, and Puritanism to explicate his analysis.

Toward an Islamic Enlightenment's most important contribution is delineating the Gülen movement's place and function within Turkish politics. Yavuz argues that the movement has four general socio-political goals: engagement, social justice and welfare, sociopolitical integration, and empowerment (p. 202) and that it employs "informal network politics" to influence public policies. This form of "lobbying" or pressure group politics, however, irritates the country's bureaucrats and politicians. Many bureaucrats subscribe

to a technocratic mindset that enables them, as they claim, to know what is best for the country. This bureaucratic culture treats many questions as being above and beyond the reach of mundane politics. The debates between the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the movement supporters that surfaced in 2013 underscored the politicians' discomfort with the movement's strong mobilization tactics for or against legislation and public information campaigns on social media. Many of the pro-AKP publications and statements demonstrated a procedural, majoritarian, and delegative understanding of democracy, arguing that those who want to be involved in politics should form political parties and run for office. According to this view, once the people have demonstrated the "national will" at the ballot box the public should be quiet and wait until the next election cycle.[3]

The significant presence of movement supporters and sympathizers in the civil service was a widespread truism among analysts of Turkish politics until the widespread purges started in 2014. According to some, particularly the ruling AKP, this presence amounted to a "parallel state" within the state; others, however, consider this the result of a sociological reality. Thanks to its close-knit network, upward mobility, high levels of dedication, and planned actions, the movement's ability to influence the economic, cultural, intellectual, and political arenas brings praise, cynicism, and skepticism all at the same time. And all of this generates very strong opinions. Yavuz's account is best when he puts these seemingly contradictory and outright confusing attitudes into perspective for outsiders: "[T]he movement is too Islamist and conservative for some social democrats and secularist military, too liberal and pro-American for Islamists, too Turkish nationalist for the Kurdish nationalists, too Sunni-Hanefi for the Alevis, and too worldly for some Sufi-oriented Muslims" (p. 241).

Toward an Islamic Enlightenment reveals the author's deep knowledge of the country.[4] However, at times the very richness of its empirical content seems to have come at the expense of parsimony and coherent arguments. There is no clear methodology or sampling. The author often makes claims based on his personal experiences and interviews, but provides no relevant data on how many were involved or how they were sampled.[5] Although his descriptions are quite rich and dynamic, at times they become repetitive and incoherent.[6]

Unlike Yavuz's contextualist approach, Joshua Hendrick utilizes a form of structuralism to situate the movement in relation to mainstream political Islam's broad transformation from its anti-systemic leftist accent into a conservative market orientation (i.e., co-optation by neoliberalism). His account

portrays the struggle in Turkey since the 1980s not as a true cultural or ideological conflict, but rather as a struggle between two different neoliberal elites for their share of the market, the state, the media, and civil society. His depiction of this competition as a "post-political" struggle largely reduces cultural and ideological factors to brand identities with only one goal in mind: to grow and increase their market share. Calling this "rationalization" of Islamic politics, authority, and even spirituality, Hendrick treats social collectivities largely along the lines of malleable masses directed and often manipulated by the elites, who struggle to "produce" various types of "goods," "sell" them in various forms of economic and social "markets," and dominate them. In other words, these elites are primarily responding to the dominant structural forces, such as globalization and neoliberalism.

As Yavuz is interested in showing the movement's spiritually embedded modernity, Hendrick provides a more "materialist" reading of its discourse and abilities: The Gülen movement is "Turkey's most influential nonpartisan, nonmilitary social force" (p. 8), "non-partisan social and economic network" (p. 18), and a movement second to none in terms of its organizational capacity to invest in material and social capital (p. 18). He argues that even though its discourse is religious and otherworldly, the Gülen movement is, in essence, "this worldly" due to the very strong pressure of its concern for the "Muslim share" in the social, economic, and religious "market," or, in his own words, a "collective voice of neo-liberal social conservatism—free markets, pious nationalism, pluralist democracy, and civil dialogue" (p. 241).

In place of Yavuz's view of a unique model of modernization in the Muslim world, Hendrick contends that the Gülen movement is simply another co-opted social organization dominated by the forces of neoliberal globalization. He utilizes Gramscian concepts such as "passive revolution," "organic intellectuals," and "manufacturing consent" to demonstrate how it benefits from the existing neoliberal system and, in turn, contributes toward its legitimacy, survival, expansion, and, ultimately, its hegemonic control. Hendrick is quite successful in "deconstructing" the movement as well as its activities and broader relations with the prevalent political structure. He argues that Hizmet cannot be understood as a social movement because its claims are not directed toward the state; rather, it is directed toward society and is pro-systemic. Nor can it be described as Sufi (not even neo-Sufi), because it focuses on this world and does not have the typical master-disciple relationship. He applies Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink's notion of "transnational advocacy networks" (TAN)[7] as the best way to understand the movement. Unfortunately, his actual account of the movement falls quite short of demonstrating the utility of this particular approach.

The transnational advocacy network is indeed a very promising concept to capture this movement's worldwide organization, practice, and activism. At the beginning, Hendrick describes the movement as a "transnational advocacy network that uses 'non-politicism' as an alternative strategy to influence reform" (p. 18). However, his narrative of privatized, self-interested, and market-oriented Islam hardly matches the concept's original meaning, that of the increasing presence of activist networks in the international system to promote principled ideas and values by non-state actors. In other words, they are motivated mainly by values as opposed to material concerns or professional norms. Keck and Sikkink describe TAN as principled and strategic, which is understood more in terms of strategically defining issues to influence policy and promote a deeper paradigm shift. They often involve individuals who "promote policy changes that cannot be easily linked to their interest."[8]

In his account of Turkish politics, Hendrick treats the movement somewhere between a lobby and an interest group. He adopts a rather limited definition of social movements when he rejects this designation for the Hizmet movement on the grounds that it is "pro-systemic" in terms of national identity, EU integration, and neoliberal structural adjustments. Thus it is not directly confrontational, for it acts within the system and does not have a critical stance vis-à-vis the hegemonic neoliberal global discourse. He defines the movement as "post-political" because Islam is no longer an oppositional identity, but rather a way to create consent among the masses by its compromising middle-of-the-way approach. He also describes its activities in the public sphere as being mostly about self-promotion instead of being for the public good. Signature activities of the movement, like the Abant Platforms, are seen as no more than cynical attempts to secure legitimacy for the movement and to promote the leader: Fethullah Gülen. Such interest-based explanations may easily disregard the significant impact of such initiatives in terms of social capital formation and democratic deliberation.[9] Ostensibly the movement has preferences and strategies of its own, but the material explanations come at the expense of an understanding of cultural framing that takes place in many "new social movements," which may be understood in "metapolitical" terms.[10]

Hendrick contends that those who try to understand the movement from a Sufi or a neo-Sufi framework are making a serious mistake because "Gülen picks and chooses from a variety of Sufi-Oriented categories to orient his community's objectives—objectives that he very clearly stipulates are not spiritual, not focused on 'the other world'" (p. 99). The implication here is that anyone involved with this world cannot be a Sufi. This overlooks the far more complex world of mystical Islamic movements that are simultaneously "this

worldly" and "otherworldly." For example the Senegal-based Mouride Sufis, who treat the sanctity of work as a core belief and are known for their entrepreneurial skills, are a great counter-example to this arbitrary demarcation. Elizabeth Özdalga, in one of the earliest sociological accounts of the Gülen movement, argued that it exemplifies what Max Weber called "wordly ascetism," rather than an outright rejection of this world or the other.[11]

The movement treats social service projects as religiously inspired work that does not negate one's spiritual commitment. In fact, some Sufis reject withdrawal and opt for being present for others in society, colloquially known as "being with God among the people" (*halk içinde Hak'la beraber*). One of Gülen's main objectives may be to cultivate action-oriented people of service who dedicate their lives to building a better future. However, Hendrick's interpretation that expanding the movement is the primary, if not the only, objective misses the unique form of piety that drives its public engagement. In terms of the Islamic lexicon, Gülen's framing of piety and sincerity is based on the importance of intentions over actions in this world and how they will be treated in the hereafter and received by God.[12]

Hendrick's use of political ethnography is a great contribution, given that there are only a few ethnographic works on the Gülen movement. As Charles Tilly observes, political ethnography has "great advantages over most other conventional social scientific methods as a way of getting at cause-effect relations."[13] At times, however, he seems to read too much into arbitrary and mundane acts to support his thesis that the movement acts deliberately in an ambivalent way in terms of its public relations strategy. For instance, the book reports that the author was excluded from a planned visit to a Nur movement elder by his informants. Using this, Hendrick concludes that the movement wants to emphasize Gülen's unique quality vis-à-vis its predecessor's inspiration. This is not very convincing, since Gülen himself refers to Said Nursi (1877-1960) in most of his sermons with respect and, most of the time, as a key legitimizing reference.

Another example of creating too much or a wrong meaning from participant observation, or lack thereof, is the speculation over Gülen's age. According to Hendrick's interpretation, the movement must be using his two birthdays – 1938 and 1941 – strategically. The reader remains perplexed in terms of the supposedly deep strategy behind presenting someone as either sixty-eight or seventy-one years old. There seems to be a simple explanation: Gülen was born in 1938 and officially registered in 1941. After all, such discrepancies between actual and official birthdays were quite common during the first decades of the Turkish Republic. Hendrick offers no explanation of

what the big strategy may be about Gülen's age or how it may be related to the movement's public relations.

Although Hendrick's work is an important contribution to the literature on Hizmet, his treatment of the literature on the movement, when he categorizes as "affiliated" and "non-affiliated," needs a pause. Just as an academic's personal sympathy for labor, human rights, or the environment does not make one an affiliated scholar when studying movements in such areas, neither should one's personal opinions or background determine the credibility of one's work. Instead of discussing the academic merits and contents, this approach unfairly discredits academic work based on an arbitrary intuitive categorization of who does and does not belong to the movement. Moreover, movement participants may bring a valuable reading of the movement from the "inside" and a deeper understanding of its discourse and symbols that a more limited short-term participant observation would fail to provide.

The third book under review, *The Gülen Hizmet Movement and Its Transnational Activities: Case Studies of Altruistic Activism in Contemporary Islam*, primarily focuses on the movement's international activities. The contributors of this edited volume offer insights on the nature of movement activities and its participants' motivations. Sophia Pandya starts off by describing Hizmet as one of the most successful examples of a contemporary Muslim transnational "outreach" movement (p. 1). Michael and Karen Fontenot argue that the movement's "altruistic activities" have earned it a reputation as an example of moderate Islam. They investigate critical perspectives on the movement and present a comprehensive account of the criticism it has received since its early years. This part is quite succinct and complements Yavuz's discussion on the same question. Moreover, the authors assert that the "union of opposites" found in the movement in fact becomes a reason for its intellectual appeal.

Pandya and Gallagher's volume also contains rich case studies on women, education, and cultural activities of the movement. The contributing authors particularly provide in-depth empirical examples of the lives of movement volunteers. This is a great contribution, as most works have focused on the ideas and institutions rather than the private individuals who take part in its activities, the bulk of which take place in the periphery. For example, the chapters on women and gender by Margaret Rausch and April Najjaj offer fresh insightful perspectives on veiling, visibility, and gender roles. They take an everyday approach to understanding how women practice their volunteerism in relation to their faith, profession, and personal and family lives. Their studies demonstrate that many of the women active in the movement are highly educated, career-oriented, and passionate about their social roles. Although

Pandya and Gallagher's book is very rich in empirical contents, some chapters remain quite descriptive and lack the vigorous theoretical perspectives found in the other two volumes.

All in all, these three books are welcome additions to the growing interdisciplinary literature on the Gülen movement. Not only do they provide explanations and factual analyses of this important Islamic movement, but they also raise interesting questions about religion, modernity, globalization, democracy, and capitalism.

Endnotes

1. Some recent noteworthy works include Helen Rose Ebaugh, *The Gülen Movement: A Sociological Analysis of a Civic Movement Rooted in Moderate Islam* (Dordrecht and London: Springer, 2009); James C. Harrington, *Wrestling with Free Speech, Religious Freedom, and Democracy in Turkey: The Political Trials and Times of Fethullah Gülen* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2011); Dogu Ergil, *Fethullah Gülen and the Gülen Movement in 100 Questions* (Clifton, NJ: Blue Dome Press, 2013); Dogan Koc, *Strategic Defamation of Fethullah Gülen: English vs. Turkish* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2012); Tamer Balci and Christopher L. Miller, *The Gülen Hizmet Movement: Circumspect Activism in Faith-Based Reform* (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012); John L. Esposito and Ihsan Yilmaz, eds., *Islam and Peace Building: Gülen Movement Initiatives* (Clifton, NJ: Blue Dome Press, 2013); Paul Weller and Ihsan Yilmaz, eds, *European Muslims, Civility and Public Life: Perspectives on and from the Gülen Movement* (London and New York: Continuum, 2012); Greg Barton, Paul Weller, and Ihsan Yilmaz, *The Muslim World and Politics in Transition: Creative Contributions of the Gülen Movement* (London and New York: Continuum, 2013).
2. For this account, see Cihan Tugal, *Passive Revolution: Absorbing the Islamic Challenge to Capitalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).
3. For a good example of this understanding of democracy, see Hatem Ete, "Decision Time for the Gülen Movement," http://setav.org/en/decision-time-for-the-Gülen-movement/opinion/14244.
4. Some of his earlier works include *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey* (Oxford, UK, and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003) and *Secularism and Muslim Democracy in Turkey* (Cambridge, UK, and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
5. For instance, on p. 219 the author cites a conversation with Gülen without providing any reference in terms of when and where. The book also makes unsubstantiated claims, among them that a significant minority of movement supporters are neither very spiritual nor other-wordly (p. 84) or that the core members around Gülen have degrees in predominantly technical subjects (p. 86).

6. For example in chapter 3 where the author talks about the movement's structure, the reader suddenly finds an unrelated paragraph that pops up and talks about public weeping and the changing nature of Turkish culture on this matter (p. 89).
7. Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).
8. Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, "Transnational Advocacy Networks in International and Regional Politics," *International Social Science Journal* (*ISSJ*) 51, no. 159 (1999).
9. For a detailed examination of the Abant Platforms, see Etga Ugur, "Organizing Civil Society: Abant Platform of the Gülen Movement," in *The Muslim World and Politics in Transition: Creative Contributions of the Gülen Movement*, ed. Greg Barton, Paul Weller, and Ihsan Yilmaz (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013).
10. Karl-Werner Brandt, "New Social Movements as a Metapolitical Challenge: The Social and Political Impact of a New Historical Type of Protest," *Thesis Eleven* 15, pp. 60-68; Alberto Melucci, *Nomads of the Present: Social Movements and Individual Needs in Contemporary Society*, ed. John Keane and Paul Mier (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989).
11. Elizabeth Ozdalga, "Wordly Ascetism in Islamic Casting: Fethullah Gülen's Inspired Piety and Activism," *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 10 (fall 2000).
12. Muslims commonly cite a shortened version of a hadith of the Prophet, "Actions are by intentions." For the full narration, see Yahya al-Nawawi, *Al-Nawawi: Forty Hadiths and Commentary* (New York: Create Space Independent Publishing Platform, 2010), 7.
13. Charles Tilly, "Afterward: Political Ethnography as Art and Science," *Qualitative Sociology* 29 (2006): 410.

Etga Ugur
Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science
The University of Washington-Tacoma, Tacoma, WA