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Black sheep in a far-right zoo? Fethullah Gülen's strategy of 'non-violence'



This is the 20. article in our series *Trouble on the Far-Right*. For more information on the series, please click [here](#).

by Laura Lotte Laloire

Just a few days ago **during a parliamentary session**, a Kurdish deputy was violently attacked and injured by members of the governing *Justice and Development Party* (AKP). As if to support Charles Tilly's statement that 'political violence occurs when actors have few opportunities, yet enough resources to mobilize for violence'¹, many groups in Turkey are currently involved in a battle against Kurdish, Alevi or left Turkish citizens. The Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in a political stalemate, uses military and police, but also the *Nationalist Movement Party's* (MHP) youth organization *Grey Wolves* as well as Islamist militias like *Esedullah Timleri* (Arabic for: Lions of Allah) have increasingly resorted to violence as tool of action.

Political violence has been a central characteristic of the Turkish far right, which largely resembles street-based mobilization in Western Europe. Despite the common ultra-nationalist ideology, the *Gülen Movement* (GM) stands out. AKP's former "**soft-power instrument**" now appears to be the only reasonable and non-violent player among all of these self-named animal groups. Since the power struggle escalated between Erdoğan and Fethullah Gülen in 2013, the GM has been seen as a victim of Erdoğan's **repressive measures**, instead of making itself conspicuous by using violence. How can we explain this exception?

One litter: Nationalism and Islamism

The GM was founded in 1968 in Turkey by the Sufi-inspired preacher

movement corresponds to the image its **official statements** intend to convey. But it should be noted that nationalism is inextricably linked with Fethullah Gülen's conservative interpretation of Islam. Having grown up in a political climate dominated by nationalism, he frequently claimed a "**superiority of the Turkish culture**". A quote of Gülen from 1997 illustrates his ultra-nationalist dreams quite clearly:

“

*Turkey [...] today encompasses 60 million. Together with the Turks in Central Asia it is 120-130 million. If it manages to break down the Chinese wall and to unite with the Turks there, it will be 300 million.*²

These visions, often called Pan-Turkism, pave the ideological way to use

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violence for expansionist aims. Likewise, Gülen's announced "struggle against communism, atheism, and evolutionary theory" and his hate directed "against Kurds, Jews, women, and dissident thinkers" can be regarded as "scapegoating," "vilification and demonization", considered important processes on the path to violence³. Another element of the ideology used to be the rejection of "**Westernization and all connected social norms or lifestyles [...] dooming all westernizers in the country**". Insofar the movement's ideologically defined goals have a lot in common with the ones of the above-mentioned violent and ultranationalist Grey Wolves which were founded in the same era (1961). Both movements combine nationalism with an Islamic identity. What may seem contradictory in a so-called secular state, however, has been a central ingredient of Turkish politics since the founding of the Republic in 1923. With the "**Turkish-Islamic synthesis**" in the 1970s at the very latest, the conjunction has become a central paradigm and strategy of the Turkish right. Slight shifts in emphasis either towards Islam or the nation usually depend on the target audience (urban/rural, educated/uneducated, young/old etc.).

Non-violent black sheep? Gülen's herding strategy

In this context, Gülen's recipe for success has been to mobilize the masses by preaching, despite occasional government repression. What started as a kind of one-man-show, strongly based on Fethullah Gülen's charisma, lead to a bottom-up dynamic. Gülen managed to politically mobilize listeners of a very receptive, pious society fed up with the so-called secular elites and which was hungry for a share of Turkey's wealth. This civil society-oriented approach – partly born out of the structural constraint of banned Islamist political parties, partly just a smart strategic choice by Gülen – can be considered the first pivotal step unleashing a path-dependent development.

In the following years, he achieved to breed a social hegemony⁴: In fact, his members have formed the biggest group of non-state organized Islam and are for some the reason that a civil society exists in the country at all⁵. He reproduces a specific moral consensus, e.g. through education institutes which have a high social and cultural impact in Turkey where private tuition is indispensable for university admission. In so-called "light houses", **hierarchically organized student houses**, obedience to God is merged with strong respect for the worldly shepherd, Fethullah Gülen.

As he has been networking very patiently, he gradually established closer economic ties with and among Turkey's conservative Muslim entrepreneurs. Thereby, he has accumulated an enormous amount of capital (ranging from Gülen-owned newspapers like *Zaman*, *Today's Zaman* or *Aksiyon*, to TV stations like *Samanyolu*, the *World Media Group*, and even entire trade associations such as *TUSKON*). This logically created direct and indirect dependencies on the network or 'sect'. Another indication of his patience was asking adherents to slowly infiltrate Turkish state authorities (police, justice, etc.). In secret quotes he tells them to wait for the right moment and "to reach the switching points of power without attracting attention"⁶. As a side note, this supports my assessment that the movement depends so strongly on their leader's decisions that for the time being, a focus on his person is not completely abridging.

A look at GM's past reveals, however, that violence was part of its repertoire. **In 1963, Gülen co-founded a "club for the combat of communism"** together with far-right militants. Still in 1991, he donated 3,5 billion Turkish Lira to the Grey Wolves, thus financing their violence. Some critics have collected proof for Gülen's involvement in the **murder of the Armenian journalist Hrant Dink** via the fascist party Büyük Birlik Partisi (BBP). But due to Gülen's carefully orchestrated indirect and clandestine violence, there is no ample proof of it yet – perhaps Erdoğan will reveal some soon in the course

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of the rat race between the former party comrades. Apart from this instrumental dimension of violence, Gülen also identifies himself with the violent Grey Wolves, for example when expressing his condolences for the late Member of Parliament, Muhsin Yazıcıoğlu, a former member of this group⁷. In an aesthetic dimension, his language contains countless allusions to violence: He addresses his followers as “soldiers” or “recruits”, and emphasizes “**our Jihad is education**”.

Gülen busted but escapes from the Turkish cage

The movement's contradictions, e.g. between tradition and modernity, hierarchy and network or Islam and secularism, have become even more obvious during a strategic turn in the 1990s. I would call Gülen's new approach “strategic opening”, inspired by Kemal Bozay's observation of the movement's ‘opening’ or ‘modernization’ process. As part of a typical far-right tool of “double speak”⁸, since then especially one side of the coin has been stressed: ‘Open-mindedness’, ‘modernity’ and ‘tolerance’. **In official documents of the movement** Gülenists today explicitly distance themselves from violence and ape the language of liberal democracy (unlike the Grey Wolves incidentally). There are three ways to put the strategic change into perspective:

Firstly, due to the military coup of 1980 and the global demise of communism, the Turkish left was largely demobilized and exhausted. The state had done most of the repression itself and Gülen's openly violent troops such as of the *Club for the combat of communism* were left without much to fight against. At least there is no evidence of the activity of this group from the 1990s on. Secondly, since the military coup Gülenists were ‘busted’ too, meaning they were more widely persecuted by the Turkish state than before. Facing the threat of becoming isolated and due to the realization that globalization/Westernization cannot be stopped, Gülen, unlike other Islamists, decided to embrace the development “as a chance”⁹. From a cultural viewpoint, Bozay argues that Gülen assumed the movement could only maintain its Islamic identity by opening up. Thirdly and from a more materialist view, Brauns claims the changed mid-term goals of Gülen's class base are the reason for the ‘opening’ process. What used to be the project of a rather excluded Anatolian middle class had by then become (at least an important part of) the ruling elite of the country. The accumulated capital needs to expand further to be invested but this cannot be easily achieved with an old-school ideology confined to the ethnical and geographical borders of Turkey. Therefore, the new strategy has meant casting GM's net for international economic contacts, dialogue and exchange beyond the adored own nation state. Fethullah Gülen, who himself has since lived in the USA, and his movement broke out of the poky Turkish cage.

In what scholars call “**strategic deradicalization**”, GM's attempt at normalization strongly resembles currently flourishing European far-right actors (e.g. **the German AfD**, **Austrian FPÖ**, etc.). The GM has been successful largely owing to its non-violent action repertoire and rhetoric. This has led to quasi-hegemony in Turkish civil society and approximately five million worldwide followers. Yet, Fethullah Gülen's achievement should be evaluated against the backdrop of a division of labour between his mass movement and smaller but militant organizations such as the Grey Wolves who created an atmosphere for Gülen's politics to resonate. The ideology and the function these groups fulfil for the state and economic elite are similar, only the strategic paths differ. When comparing earlier with later statements, official with internal propaganda, and when analysing particular expressions in Fethullah Gülen's language, the “double speak” becomes obvious, too.

A modern king of the jungle

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To fully grasp the movement's relationship to violence, structural constraints (historical, economical, ideological) have to be taken into account while acknowledging the relative agency of the leader. His achievement to officially disassociate the movement from violence (strategic deradicalization) but to keep relying on indirect channels and clandestine connections went hand in hand with a 'strategic opening' to 'modernity'. The effort to maintain its identity despite state repression, ironically led to a 'modernizing' of Gülen's entire movement – owing to processes of diffusion, for example through intensified interactions and experiences with 'the West'. It should be further investigated in how far this strategic decision – that guaranteed organizational survival – over the years has transformed Gülen's ideology to the core.

Critical observers are convinced that a leopard can't change its spots and Gülen's ideology has remained 'anti-Western' and 'anti-modern' because he still advocates a conservative Islam and even compliance with Sharia regulations. However, also the Islamist elements are inherently modern. The fact that they have remained central while other initial anti-Western slogans have disappeared, indicates ideological adjustment. Eventually, some may regard the movement as harmless because it is not as 'anti-Western' as other Islamist groups. Based on the analysis above, it is reasonable to conceive the GM as a threat to a pluralistic society, not only in Turkey. For once, the self-portrayal of the Janus-faced movement is not whitewashing: It is a modern movement. And as is typical of modern projects, it officially condemns violence while relying on it in the background.



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1. cp. Charles Tilly: From Mobilization to Revolution. New York 1978. [↗](#)
2. Fethullah Gülen 1997, according to Kemal Bozay & Fikret Aslan 2012: Graue Wölfe heulen wieder: Türkische Faschisten und ihre Vernetzung in Deutschland, 3rd edition, Unrast Verlag, Münster, p. 211. (from now on: Bozay & Aslan 2012); translation by the author [↗](#)
3. Chip Berlet 2014: Heroes Know which Villains to Kill: How Coded Rhetoric Incites Scripted Violence, in: Feldman, Matthew & Paul Jackson (eds.) 2014: Doublespeak: The Rhetoric of the Far Right since 1945, Ibidem-Verlag, Stuttgart. p. 314, 316. [↗](#)
4. see: Hendrick, Joshua D. 2009: Globalization, Islamic Activism, and Passive
3, p. 343-368. [↗](#)
5.
Oxford University Press, New York. [↗](#)
6. Bozay & Aslan 2012: 214, according to: Kozmopolit 2003: German-Turkish online magazine, no. 9, June 2003. [↗](#)
7. Bozay & Aslan 2012, p. 215. [↗](#)
8. see: Matthew Feldmann & Paul Jackson (eds.) 2014: Doublespeak: The Rhetoric of the Far Right since 1945, Ibidem-Verlag, Stuttgart. [↗](#)

9. Bozay & Aslan 2012: 216. 

 Tags: AKP, Erdogan, Fethullah Gülen, Grey Wolves, Gülen Movement, Kurden, Pan-Turkism, Turkey, violence

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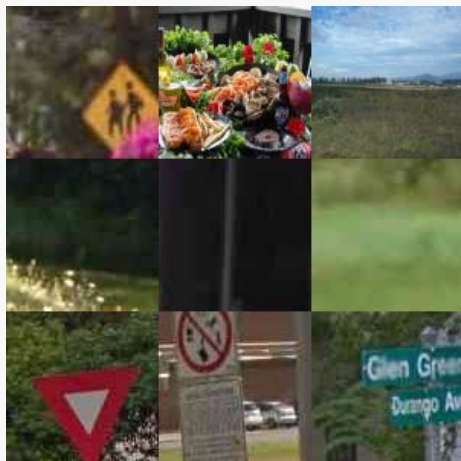
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