

# Turkey's Religious Outreach in Central Asia and the Caucasus

*By Bayram Balci*

**T**HE GREATER “TURKIC WORLD”—THAT IS, TURKEY AND THE MAJORITY of the Caucasus and Central Asia—has had deep connections to the wider Islamic world ever since the Arab conquests nearly 1300 years ago. Despite the region's twentieth century history of Russian and Soviet imperial domination, the diverse peoples of Central Asia and the Caucasus region (CAC) have remained thoroughly invested in their Islamic identity.<sup>1</sup> During the Soviet era, Islamic education persisted underground in the predominately Turkic republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan.<sup>2</sup> Despite state-enforced atheism, religious teachers substituted formal Islamic institutions with privately run and very often illegal educational organizations.<sup>3</sup>

The USSR's sudden collapse in 1991 caused a fundamental rupture in the lives of all nations in Central Asia and the Caucasus, particularly in their relationship with Islam.<sup>4</sup> For the first time in generations, Muslims who had lived inside the communist empire were free to form relationships with their co-religionists in other countries, and thereby experience new religious and ideological trends.

The Soviet-educated elites who dominated the newly independent republics

of the CAC were initially open to the idea of deepening their country's links with Muslim countries outside the region. However, despite the efforts of the CAC governments to continue to stifle all politically troublesome religious organizations and practices, the populations in these countries became increasingly exposed to international Islamic and Islamist movements. Over the past two decades, new contacts and mutual influences between CAC Muslims and Muslims from elsewhere have proliferated. Various religious educational networks with roots in the Middle East and South Asia have made inroads into the former Soviet Empire. Such connections, combined with the greater numbers of CAC Muslims who have been making pilgrimages to Mecca, has increasingly mixed their Islamic faith with ideas from the Arab, Turkish, Persian and South Asian worlds.<sup>5</sup>

The collapse of the USSR has resulted in a broad-based Islamic Revival in post-Soviet countries as well as a growing competition between different Islamic movements for influence in the CAC. Since many of these movements enjoy state support, including from Iran and Saudi Arabia, the religious competition has also been deeply cultural and political. Turkish groups have been among the most successful in the predominately Turkic countries of the CAC. This analysis looks at the two most important Turkish trends in the CAC: the Diyanet and the Hizmet movement, that is, the representatives of the Turkish State and the followers of the very famous Turkish thinker and spiritual leader, Fethullah Gülen. Turkey's greatest influence among the Turkic populations of the post-Soviet world derives not from their common ethno-linguistic roots, but from the success of Turkey's religious outreach.

## The Post-Soviet Islamic Revival

THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN THE MUSLIM POPULATIONS OF TURKEY, CENTRAL Asia and the Caucasus have been highly ambiguous since the early years of post-Soviet independence. Two drivers have resulted in their realization. First and foremost, the Turkish government sought to build strong relations with the new Turkic republics as a result of Ankara's ambition to form a greater Turkic political union with the CAC rooted in a common ethno-linguistic heritage.<sup>6</sup> Turkey's geopolitical goals and subsequent outreach facilitated the establishment of new commercial relations between Anatolia and the CAC, thus encouraging greater exchanges between civil and religious groups among the various Turkic countries. Secondly, Turkish religious outreach in the CAC was secular and therefore did not

challenge the West in its growing ideological competition with Islamism. Western countries, including the United States, feared the spread of Islamic radicalism in post-Soviet space, and thus encouraged Turkish groups to take an active role in Central Asia to block the spread of Iranian and Saudi influence.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, Central Asian and Caucasian elites initially welcomed the growing Turkish influence<sup>8</sup> as Western officials actively encouraged CAC governments to adopt the Turkish model of secularism, democracy and market-oriented economic policies. Consequently, the new CAC republics were generally welcoming of Turkish Islamic groups and their schools.

After the USSR collapsed, the public expression and exercise of Islam was no longer prohibited in the former Soviet Republics. Not only did the majority of people in the CAC practice traditional Islam, but the Islamic faith suddenly enjoyed the strong backing of a variety of prominent institutions in the region.<sup>9</sup> As a result, the new governments sought to integrate faith into their new national identities as they strove to co-opt the Islamic identity of their citizens. The peoples of the CAC generally adhered in the past to the classical teachings of Sufism, and they came to see their traditions as a bulwark against extremism and radicalism.<sup>10</sup> In Uzbekistan, the government renovated and publicly opened the mausoleum of the great mystic, Bahauddin Nakshibend in Bukhara, founder of *nakshibendiyya*. Meanwhile, in Turkmenistan, the new government renovated and transformed the mausoleum of Najmeddin Kubra into a place of pilgrimage. In Kazakhstan, the authorities publicly worshipped Ahmed Yassavi: the founder of the *yasaviyya*.<sup>11</sup> In Azerbaijan, the new regime restored the holy places of Shia and Sunni Islam.<sup>12</sup> Since the opening of Soviet borders in 1991, domestic political considerations also compelled many Central Asian leaders to make the pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina.

At the same time, the new CAC regimes retained many Soviet-era governing practices with respect to religion. Therefore, they closely monitored religious intellectuals and organizations for real and potential challenges to their political power.<sup>13</sup> As the Islamic Revival in CAC began to take off, regional governments began intensifying their efforts to control religious practice and expression. The religious revival, coupled with state repression, manifested itself in destructive ways.<sup>14</sup> Such is evident in the founding of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) in 1993. The emergence of the IMU marked the start of a new era in radical Islam in the CAC. The IMU began as a fringe movement with little influence in wider Uzbek society. After experiencing brutal repression at the hands of the Uzbek government, the IMU established a base of operations in neighboring Tajikistan from where it staged a string of attacks against its home country.<sup>15</sup>

In the late 1990s, the resulting diffusion of radical Islamism into Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, coupled with the insidious influence of the Taliban in Afghanistan, prompted regional governments to adopt increasingly repressive religious policies. The fear of collusion between grassroots CAC radical Islamist movements and the Taliban proved justified, as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan began coordinating their operations in the late 1990s.<sup>16</sup> In response to this new jihadist threat, Central Asian regimes have generally adopted more authoritarian policies toward religion. In addition to the real threat of jihadism, the prevailing assumption of ruling elites across the CAC has been that any Islamic phenomenon is potentially radical. In practice, both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have generally been more liberal in their domestic policies toward Islam than the other CAC polities. In Azerbaijan, for instance, the new state has progressively reinforced its control of Islamic practice and expression, fearing that an absence of control would pave the way for the development of a strong Iranian Shia influence in the country.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, in Uzbekistan authorities have adopted notoriously aggressive and intrusive policies towards Islam to prevent any Islamist movement from taking root in the country. In the 1990s, when Jama'at al Tabligh representatives came to Uzbekistan from South Asia, they were immediately expelled from the country.

Throughout the CAC, the state exerts control over religion through two institutions: the Directorate of Spiritual and Religious Affairs and the State Committee for Religious Affairs. The state's official Islamic scholar, the Mufti of the republic, leads the Directorate of Spiritual and Religious Affairs. He in turn, manages the state's guidelines for Islamic practice, appoints imams, oversees the restoration of mosques, schedules prayers, and so forth.<sup>18</sup> Upon obtaining independence, each CAC country also established a State Committee for Religious Affairs. The role of these committees, which are run by state-appointed technocrats who often have little to no religious training, is to monitor religious organizations and ensure they comply with state law and standards of political correctness. Together, these two governmental bodies are responsible for monitoring and shaping the evolution of Islam in the CAC. They set the standards for acceptable literature, religious discourse and leadership training from abroad. They alone have the power to validate (or reject) the activities of religious organizations, and they have the ultimate power to decide which organizations and which countries are allowed to operate in the CAC. Of all the foreign countries and movements that are conducting religious outreach in the region, Turkey is the one that is most preferred by CAC governments.

# Turkish Outreach in the CAC

THE DIRECTORATE OF RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS, *DIYANET ISLARI BASKANLIGI* (more commonly known as Diyanet), is a testament to the complexity and ambiguity of the relations between the state and religion in Turkey.<sup>19</sup> The Diyanet is a distinctive creature of the Turkish republican system. It was established to manage the relationship between the Kemalist state and Islam, and it thus oversees the operation of mosques and religious education in Turkey. As a religious organization, the Diyanet's compatibility with secularism, the founding ideology of the modern Kemalist state, has been the subject of intense controversy in the past.<sup>20</sup> While it has been very active in Turkish domestic politics, the Diyanet has also been involved in foreign countries since well before the Soviet collapse. Throughout the 1980s, the Diyanet sent imams and provided other religious services to Turkish expatriates across Europe.

In Turkish embassies and consulates abroad, Diyanet officers served as religious affairs attachés who assisted and also monitored Turkish expatriates.<sup>21</sup> In the past, the Diyanet rarely cooperated with other Sunni Islamic states, namely Saudi Arabia and Egypt, except on very specific issues such as facilitating Turkish citizens' pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina or their occasional enrollment at Cairo's prestigious al-Azhar University. After the fall of the Eastern bloc, however, the Diyanet became directly involved in the formerly Ottoman regions of the Balkans and in the wider Turkic world of the Caucasus and Central Asia. Consequently, the Diyanet suddenly became a core instrument of Turkish political influence throughout the former Soviet Union, and especially in the ethnically and culturally Turkic republics.

All this begs the question: why has the Diyanet—an institution originally established to manage the thorny relations between Islam and the Kemalist state inside Turkey—become so integral to Turkey's foreign policy in the post-Soviet CAC? The answer is simple: geopolitics. In the early 1990s, Turkish elites felt strongly that the Turkic areas of the former Soviet Union should not fall under the influence of regional competitors such as Iran or Saudi Arabia. Indeed, many Turks feared that the new republics would look elsewhere for authoritative sources of Muslim identity. For fear of losing influence in the CAC, Turkey's capacity for religious outreach became a strategic asset. Prime Minister Turgut Ozal was the first modern Turkish leader to recognize the potential strategic significance of Turkish Islam in the CAC. In recent years, the AK Party (AKP) and its leaders

Recep Erdoğan and Ahmet Davutoğlu have redoubled Turkey's international religious outreach to the wider Turkish world.

The Turkish government's religious outreach into the CAC formally began in 1994 with the founding of the Eurasian Islamic Council, *Avrasya İslam Şurası*. The organization answers directly to the Diyanet and has brought 32 Spiritual Affairs Boards from the CAC, the Balkans, and the autonomous republics inside Russia together.<sup>22</sup> The council's purpose is to facilitate dialogue about the proper relationship between Islam and the state and the role of Islam in society. Over the course of eight summits held since 1995, the council has had some success in reaching agreements among participants on a range of issues, including the dates of major Muslim holidays, the structure and curriculum of Islamic education, and the promotion of the unique Islamic heritage, spiritual leaders, and ideas of the greater Turkish world. Thus it has allowed Turkey to convey its unique vision of Islam to countries where it seeks to have political influence.<sup>23</sup> This organization has facilitated the expansion of Turkish influence, including in the Balkans and the predominately Shiite though ethnically Turkish country of Azerbaijan. While the Diyanet has generally made great gains in Central Asia, it has not been successful everywhere—especially in Uzbekistan, where the government has become increasingly resistant to religious cooperation with all foreign countries.

Since the collapse of the USSR, the Turkish government has had a palpable influence in reviving Turkish Islam in the Post-Soviet republics. Through the Diyanet, Turkey has been able to build or restore mosques in all of these countries. Indeed, the Diyanet has built the largest mosques that attract the most fervent believers to Friday prayer in Baku and Ashkhabad. In all the Turkic-speaking countries except Uzbekistan, the Turkish Diyanet has aimed to educate new Islamic elites by establishing theology departments modeled on the prestigious faculty of theology at the University of Marmara. Central Asian and Caucasian students that the Diyanet admits into various theology schools are trained to serve their countries upon their return. Turkish imams are sent to these countries, albeit in small numbers and often only in the month of Ramadan, to preach in mosques in Central Asia and the Caucasus in cooperation with local religious leaders. Finally, extensive Islamic-based literature on the Prophet's life, the essence of Islamic ethics and the history of Islam is printed in Turkey in all the pertinent languages and distributed for free throughout Central Asia and the Caucasus.

While the Turkish government has been especially influential, private organizations not affiliated with Ankara have also been successful in spreading Turkish religious teachings in the former Soviet Union. The primary movements are those of the religious leaders Osman Nuri Topbaş,<sup>24</sup> Suleyman Tunahan,<sup>25</sup> Sait Nursi

and Fethullah Gülen. Of these, the two who belong to the *nakshibendiyya* brotherhood, Osman Nuri Topbaş and Suleyman Tunahan, are the most plain spoken and adamant about the religious nature of their activities in Central Asia. The two most influential movements, however, are the ones founded by the Sufi revivalist Sait Nursi and the contemporary spiritual leader Fethullah Gülen.

Sait Nursi was born in 1876 near Erzurum in Eastern Turkey. He first gained notoriety through his military service on the Eastern Front against Russia during World War I. An Islamist mystic, he subsequently became an influential religious authority in his home province.<sup>26</sup> When Mustafa Kemal Atatürk created the Republic of Turkey out of the ruins of the Ottoman Empire, he founded the new country on the basis of a secular ideology that respected Islam but aimed to limit its political influence. Nursi, however, rejected Atatürk's secular agenda, then renounced politics altogether after he realized an Islamic state wouldn't be possible in the new republic. It was then that Nursi created what became known as the *Nurcu* movement: a pietistic mystical campaign aimed at revitalizing people's religious faith. As with many other modern revivalists, Nursi sought to remedy what he saw as the "crisis of modernity" by showing that Islam and science were compatible. He believed firmly that Islam needed to be taught in modern schools and also that religious seminaries needed to open themselves up to the study of the secular sciences. The movement organized reading circles devoted to the study of Nursi's core work, *Risale i Nur* (Letter of Light): an exegesis of the Quran that explores Islamic spirituality. Through these study groups, Nursi's teachings spread and his movement grew rapidly underground.<sup>27</sup> The movement's influence in Turkey undoubtedly had political implications; however Nursi remained focused strictly on Islamic spiritualism and explaining the Quran and other basic Islamic texts.

When Sait Nursi died in 1960 he left behind an active and growing movement in the country. His disciples divided the movement into several branches, each dedicated to a particular task. These included the dissemination of his masterpiece, *Risale i Nur*, the promotion of his ideas in academic circles, and the revival of Islamic education. Nursi's most notable disciples are Mehmet Kutlular, Mehmet Kirkinci, Mustafa Sungur, and the most influential of all, Fethullah Gülen.

In the 1990s, Nurcu groups greatly enlarged their activities in the post-Soviet Turkic republics. This new wave of Turkish religious outreach was the result of unstructured private initiatives, not Ankara's direction, and were devoted to spreading the teachings of the *Risale i Nur*. While the book was originally written in pre-Republican Turkish, it has since been translated into almost all of Central Asia's languages, including Russian. With the exception of Uzbekistan, the Nurcu

movement is now active throughout all the Turkic former Soviet Republics. Their presence in the CAC, however, is barely visible. They do not operate through official educational institutions, but through private and informal networks. For example, Nurcu reading circles are often organized by the many small and medium-sized businesses led by Turkish expatriates in the CAC. Importantly, the participants in these study groups do not even consider themselves to be part of a coherent or recognizable religious movement. Such is evident in the fact that they have never asked for official recognition as a religious community from the appropriate authorities in the countries where they operate. Today, their principal goals in the CAC are to convey the Islamic ideas of Sait Nursi through study. It is precisely on this issue that Fethullah Gülen's movement, the most influential in Central Asia, has distinguished itself from other Turkish movements.

## The Fethullah Gülen Community

ALTHOUGH HE NEVER MET SAIT NURSI, FETHULLAH GÜLEN IS HIS MOST INFLUENTIAL DISCIPLE. Gülen has distanced himself and the movement he created from classical Nursi teachings, however. Born in 1938 to a conservative family in Eastern Turkey, Gülen followed Sait Nursi and devoted himself to educational reform. While his ideas are rooted in Sufi mysticism, Gülen's teachings have gradually come to focus on reforming civil society through Islamic spiritualism. The religious movement that he founded has sought to train a new "gold" generation (*Altın Nesil*) that is both faithful to Islamic Turkish traditions and modern in its political and economic outlook. Fethullah Gülen formed his first group of disciples in the 1960s when he worked as an imam for the State in Izmir.<sup>28</sup> By the following decade, the movement's ideas had spread to other regions in Turkey. When Turkey adopted a series of market-oriented reforms in 1980, a newly affluent middle class emerged that began to financially support the Hizmet movement's activities. Turkey's economic growth, coupled with the deep Islamic faith of its people, enhanced the popular appeal of the market-oriented religious movement.<sup>29</sup> The subsequent opening of the Balkans, the Caucasus, and Central Asia in 1989 allowed Gülen's followers to globalize their organization's economic and religious activities.

In Turkey and in the other countries, Gülen's followers have become especially influential in four areas of society. First the movement created an educational network that now includes thousands of private institutions. The movement's second priority has been on media outlets. The *Daily Zaman* (and its English version,



*Today's Zaman*) is one of the most reputable journals in Turkey and has an international audience.<sup>30</sup> STV and several other television channels affiliated with Hizmet also disseminate Fethullah Gülen's ideas. The third priority area of the Gülen movement is the intelligentsia. Its followers have sought to create forums dedicated to inter-religious dialogue both in Turkey and abroad. Finally, the movement has been particularly active in trade and business. Consequently, the movement is well financed and thus able to sustain its educational, media, and inter-faith activities. The businessmen who sympathize with Fethullah Gülen and donate their time and money to Hizmet operate hundreds of large companies and thousands of small- or medium-sized companies throughout Central Asia and the Caucasus

Initially, the Fethullahci defined themselves simply as a *cemaat* (community) of believers. Now they call themselves a *hareket*, or a more formally organized movement. In recent years, many Fethullahci have begun to call the movement *Hizmet* i.e. "the Service" as their activities have become more international. The movement's stated goal is to promote the ideals of dialogue, social peace and Civil Islam on a global scale. To support this claim, the Hizmet movement highlights the interreligious meetings it organizes regularly in all the countries where it operates. It also supports initiatives in non-Muslim sectors with Christians, Jews and people of other faiths.<sup>31</sup>

For the Islamist rivals of the Hizmet movement, Fethullah Gülen's initiatives are corrupt, if not evil. They have an apolitical agenda, they promote civil society, and they cooperate with secular Muslims and the West. Stated bluntly, they believe the movement enables the "enemies of Islam." They believe Gülen's moderate movement saps Islam of its fighting spirit and thus perpetuates the submission of the Muslim world to the West. The fundamentalist Turkish movement of Cemallettin Kaplan, for example, deems the Gülen movement insufficiently Islamic.

In Turkey, some secularist and Kemalist elements (including Army leaders, and the Republican People's Party—CHP), as well as some Western analysts,<sup>32</sup> are convinced that Gülen and his followers actually have a hidden agenda to foster the emergence of a new Islamic political order. Such assertions are not entirely inaccurate. The Hizmet movement undoubtedly spreads a humanistic and civic-minded spirit that, unlike Islamists, hasn't demonstrated overt hostility to modern secular democracy *per se*. Some of the claims by secularists that the Fethullahci have a political agenda are still valid, however. The Hizmet movement is, in fact, much more than a strictly religious phenomenon insofar as it shows how Islam, engagement in international markets and secular civic life are compatible. Therefore, the movement's growing influence in the CAC poses a political challenge to

the current regional political order which is still deeply influenced by the Soviet legacy of authoritarianism and statist economics.

The Hizmet movement and the manner in which it functions has interesting parallels with the Jesuit congregation. Indeed, the structure and dispensation of the movement owes some of its inspiration to the Western missionary schools established in the latter days of the Ottoman Empire. Gülen ingeniously adopted the Jesuit practice of active proselytization for the purposes of educating a new generation of modern Turkish and other Muslims.<sup>33</sup> Much like the Jesuits before them, the Fethullahci have developed a program of “total” education, which included not just classroom study but also provided dormitory housing and weekend activities for many of its students.<sup>34</sup>

Today, the Hizmet movement is active in 150 countries. Much like in Turkey, the movement’s educational and civil society initiatives in foreign countries are aimed at educating a new Muslim middle class that is faithful to Islam and modern in its economic-political outlook. The greater post-Soviet Turkish world had been the testing grounds for the movement’s initial international forays. Now, through its extensive networks in the CAC, the movement provides a secular education that is of an unmatched quality in all post-Soviet societies. From Azerbaijan to Kazakhstan, Hizmet has established schools and universities that provide a modern and secular education that appeals directly to the real needs and aspirations of entire populations. Given the poverty, social confusion and political chaos of the CAC following the Soviet Union’s collapse, it is not surprising that the people in the region initially responded very favorably to the Hizmet movement’s outreach. Undoubtedly, the good reputation of Hizmet schools has legitimized and facilitated its growing influence in these countries.

When they first began to establish themselves in the greater Turkish world, Hizmet representatives did not explicitly identify themselves or their schools as religious or, for that matter, as affiliated with Fethullah Gülen. The first Hizmet representatives to arrive in Central Asia in the 1990s were businessmen and entrepreneurs. The schools they built appeared to be a part of Turkey’s larger efforts to re-establish civil connections with the new Turkish republics of the CAC. At the time, Turkey’s Kemalist elites were suspicious of the Hizmet movement; however, the most powerful figure in Turkish politics, President Turgut Ozal, was a strong supporter of Fethullah Gülen. Moreover, the fledgling Central Asian and Caucasian governments were also very open to and supportive of Hizmet’s growing involvements in their own countries. These governments did not see the movement as religiously motivated, but simply as an outgrowth of the Pan Turkish movement. As a result, many populations were generally grateful for Hizmet’s

growing presence since they considered it to be assistance from Turkey, which they regard as the “Big Brother.”

The educational institutions that Hizmet founded in the CAC were mainly high schools and universities.<sup>35</sup> In Azerbaijan, there is still one Hizmet-affiliated university, Kafkas University, at least 12 high schools, and dozens of small tutoring centers that offer modern and secular education under the auspices of the Ministry of Education. In Kazakhstan, a country of 17 million, there are 28 high schools and one university: the University of Süleyman Demirel. A private company established and owned by members of the Hizmet movement, Katev, manages all of these educational institutions. Private Turkish businessmen and educators who follow Fethullah Gülen have also established fifteen high schools and one university, Ala Tao, in Kyrgyzstan and six schools in Tajikistan.

In 2000, there were more than fifteen movement-affiliated high schools in Uzbekistan. In 2001, however, Uzbek authorities shut them all down because diplomatic relations between Tashkent and Ankara had deteriorated. Even in Uzbekistan, however, many in the government and in the general population had very positive attitudes towards the Hizmet schools when they had first arrived. Tashkent shut down all the schools because of its ongoing political feud with Turkey, not because Tashkent was suspicious about the *cemaat*'s activities.<sup>36</sup> In fact, the Uzbek government shut down public schools that had been sponsored by the Turkish state much earlier than the privately run Hizmet affiliated schools.

The September 11, 2001 attacks on the U.S. and subsequent NATO invasion of Afghanistan led the CAC governments to tighten their grip over religious affairs in their countries. Consequently, the reach of Islamist movements has contracted throughout the region.<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, the good reputation of the Hizmet schools has largely remained intact. This is partly because Hizmet schools and businesses are still not widely regarded as religious in nature, but as “Turkish schools” simply. Moreover, in the post-9/11 era, the Hizmet movement has also adopted a new public relations strategy: it has emphasized interfaith dialogue and has become expressly anti-Islamist. Since 2001, Fethullah Gülen's followers have begun to openly display their commitment to their spiritual leader, but they have presented him more as an intellectual and civic leader than as a religious authority. Gülen's publications, which had largely been unseen before 2001, now appear in the movement's schools all over Central Asia. These publications highlight Gülen's assorted efforts to promote peace, to support dialogue between religions, and to foster tolerance and moderate religious beliefs among Muslims. Fethullah Gülen himself published a considerable number of books and articles after 9/11 that denounced all forms of violence perpetrated in the name of Islam.<sup>38</sup>

His moderate speech and the movement's efforts to promote dialogue distinguished Hizmet from other Islamic movements in Central Asia. At the same time, the movement's schools in the greater Turkic world have all continued to downplay their religious underpinnings. In fact, as anti-religious sentiment among elites has visibly grown in the CAC region, and government control over religious affairs has often grown more repressive, the Hizmet movement has taken significant steps to make itself more transparent and to publically re-affirm its secular orientation. Indeed, the priority of the movement's schools continues to be the provision of a modern and secular education that satisfies not just the desires and aspirations of the region's populations, but also the demands of governmental authorities.

## Growing Suspicions

THE HIZMET COMMUNITY HAS NEVER ADMITTED TO RELIGIOUS PROSELYTIZATION in Central Asian and Caucasian societies. Members of the movement in Central Asia did, however, spread Gülen's unique Islamic teachings through religious instruction and discipleship outside of their schools between 1990 and 1995. These missionary efforts were clearly aimed at enlarging the Gülen-inspired religious society, the *cemaat*, into the greater Turkic world. But they did not last for long, however, because Gülen's disciples realized early on that such religious out-reach would fuel the mistrust of local authorities and potentially jeopardize their educational and civic programs. The Hizmet representatives understood that the people of the post-Soviet Turkic world appreciated their pragmatic, secular orientation more than their spiritual teachings. In time, movement representatives adopted a new strategy. Rather than spread their religious ideas through *dawa* or *tabligh* (the conventional methods of preaching and spreading Islam), they sought to spread their teachings by *temsil*, that is, by their personal example. In practice, this method requires that the religious messenger lives Islam fully by becoming morally upright, honest, and well-educated, and by behaving toward others in a benevolent and virtuous way. The practice rests on the assumption that people will be spontaneously drawn toward religious faith through the superior moral and civic example of the *cemaat*, rather than through the forceful imposition of religion.

In this way, *temsil* works as a kind of soft power. As a strategy for religious proselytization, it has arguably been quite successful, as is evident in the rapid growth of the Hizmet movement's influence in the CAC region immediately after the

USSR's collapse. Fethullah Gülen's followers, however, have since largely abandoned this strategy of subtle proselytizing "by example." Across the post-Turkish world, the *cemaat* has largely avoided speaking about religion. Indeed, they only speak of their service to civil society, *hizmet*, and their commitments to education. Even if the followers of Gülen in Central Asia and the Caucasus have a conservative, Muslim way of life, their outreach is not publically regarded as religiously motivated. Indeed, there seems to be nothing in common between the Hizmet movement's civic activities and the expressly religious activities of the classical Nurcu missionary groups, Suleyman Tunahan or the *nakshibendis* of Osman Nuri Topbaş. While these latter groups devote their efforts to the construction of mosques, madrasas and the dissemination of Islamic literature, members of the Hizmet movement prefer to keep their Islamic faith discreet.

Despite the movement's non religious reputation and the good standing of its schools, growing fears over Islamism in the CAC region since 2001 have cast greater suspicion on the movement and generated concerns that it has a hidden Islamist agenda. Anti-Gülen incidents first took place in Tatarstan and Bashkortostan, the predominately ethnically Turkish regions of Russia in the Caucasus. Russian authorities banned Hizmet schools claiming that they broadcast Islamism and pan-Turkism.<sup>39</sup> Moscow's actions have a tendency to reverberate throughout the post-Soviet world. As a result, most Central Asian countries have dramatically increased their surveillance of the movement's activities in recent years. This sudden rise in anti-Gülen sentiment begs the question: why are Eurasian leaders becoming skeptical now?

The rising anti-Hizmet sentiment in the CAC region appears to have less to do with the movement's activities in the region than they do with souring diplomatic relations between CAC countries and Turkey. In Uzbekistan, Hizmet schools have been banished since 2001 because of the ongoing political crisis between Tashkent and Ankara. In Turkmenistan, the government has only recently, in July of 2011, decided to close some Hizmet schools. In Azerbaijan, where the image of Turkey and the modern secularist "Turkish model" has been excellent for almost twenty years, the government has significantly strengthened its control over Hizmet activities and its schools over the past two years.<sup>40</sup>

This sudden distrust of the Gülen movement in some CAC countries (this is less pronounced in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan) has resulted from developments in Turkey, and principally, the rise to power of the Islam-oriented AK Party. The ruling elites in the CAC region are still deeply secularist in their orientation, and Soviet in their mindset. The political ascent of the AKP in 2002 shattered their image of the secular Turkish model, and they interpreted this as a sign that the

seemingly innocuous “Turkish schools” run by Gülen’s followers could surreptitiously be used to foster subversive Islamist ideas and political movements in the CAC region. It is excessive to describe the AKP as a strictly Islamist party; rather, it is more of a coalition that is comprised of Islamist elements and other religiously conservative groups, including a great number of the followers of Gülen. However, the post-Soviet political elites in the Turkish world deemed the AKP’s religious conservatism “too Muslim.” As such, critics in CAC countries have seen the rise of the AKP as a sign of the Hizmet movement’s gradual politicization in Turkey, and cited this as evidence that the movement’s foreign outreach is not devoid of political and ideological ambitions. Moreover, the Ergenekon scandal of 2007, in which the AKP government arrested hundreds of military officers and others on allegations of plotting to overthrow the government, was seen by many in the CAC region as a sign that the Islamist government, Gülen’s followers included, was settling accounts with the Kemalist “deep state” which had once bullied them.<sup>41</sup> Many, in fact, regard the AKP-led crackdown as politically motivated, and as recent events have made clear, many innocent people have been punished on the basis of unsubstantiated accusations.

Despite the growing suspicions of the Hizmet movement because of its ties to the AKP in Turkey, it has continued to subtly exert Turkish influence in many parts of the CAC region. In important ways, this influence surpasses anything that the official outreach of the Turkish government has managed to achieve. Three things must be noted about the Hizmet movement’s regional influence. First, Gülen schools have allowed the Turkish language to be broadcast throughout Eurasia. In the Turkmen capital of Ashgabat, for example, Turkish has become the default language for many ethnic groups to communicate with one another. Indeed, it is almost as prevalent as Russian and more common than English. Second, in the economic sphere, entrepreneurs affiliated with the movement have created strong ties between Turkey and the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus. Perhaps most importantly, these business involvements have begun to contribute to the emergence of a new, market-oriented and entrepreneurial culture in post-Soviet societies. Third, as the Gülen movement has become transnational, it has allowed its members from Central Asia and the Caucasus to travel around the world and participate in school competitions and international business forums with people from other regions. This has exposed the CAC region to new economic and political ideas, and helped to deepen its connections to the wider world. The political fallout between the CAC and Turkey notwithstanding, the activities of the Gülen *cemaat* in the CAC region have contributed significantly to the opening of the region to the wider world after the collapse of the USSR.

# Turkish Islam and the CAC's Future

TODAY, TURKEY'S INFLUENCE ACROSS THE GREATER TURKIC WORLD IS FAR LESS than what the proponents of pan-Turkism had once hoped for following the Soviet Union's collapse. Over the last two decades, Ankara's efforts to create a greater Turkic political union have generally faced resistance across the CAC region, and sometimes quite fiercely (as is the case with Uzbekistan.) But while Turkey hasn't gained much political influence, the country's religious and cultural influence in the CAC has grown significantly. The spread and appeal in the CAC of the pre-AKP era secular and modernizing "Turkish model" has been undeniable. Although we lack concrete indicators to measure the extent of this influence,<sup>42</sup> Turkey's official religious outreach through the Diyanet has facilitated the shift in attitudes. Even in countries where these activities were stopped, such as Uzbekistan, Turkish secular republican ideas are today stronger in the CAC than they perhaps are in the AKP's Turkey.

Turkey's greatest influence in the CAC has come not from its official efforts, but through nongovernmental religious actors. The Hizmet movement's impact on the future of Central Asian society is not easy to define. For one thing, the movement's followers represent only a small portion of the population. Their educational networks, however, are extensive. Furthermore, their students largely come from the elite strata of society. Therefore, the Hizmet movement's impact on Central Asian society, and particularly on the rising generation of elites, is nonetheless noteworthy. For these reasons, the influence of the movement in the CAC region is likely to continue to grow in the future.

Islam as promoted by Gülen is a synthesis of mystical Islam, Turkish nationalism, modern humanism, and civic service. But it is not clear whether the movement's influence can even be characterized as "religious," or for that matter, as Islamist. Gülen schools have likely trained thousands of students in the CAC region. Some of these graduates have begun to occupy important positions in government, academia and the private sector. The first signs of their impact on the younger generation do not demonstrate a fundamentally Islamic influence. All of this begs the question: what kind of influence is the Hizmet movement having on the future of Central Asia? Such a question is especially difficult to answer because we do not yet have a sociological profile of a representative sample of

Hizmet graduates. Research into these subjects has only just begun; however, some tentative answers are worth considering.

First, the vast majority of Hizmet school graduates go to the best universities in their country and abroad. At the end of their studies they often get prestigious jobs in various fields of government, academia and the private sector. They are found in varying degrees of administration, and as diplomatic representatives of their countries abroad. Second, many graduates of these schools are distinguished by their secular outlooks. In most cases, they are socially conservative, but religion is not fundamental to their everyday concerns and does not affect their professional lives. In other words, students who graduated from these programs can be religiously conservative but also very secular and modern in their outlooks.

Through discussions with dozens of graduates of Gülen schools in Central Asia, Europe, the United States, Japan and India, I have observed that they have tended to demonstrate a uniform set of characteristics. As a group, these people are well-educated and well-integrated in their society; they have good jobs and they are generally cosmopolitan in their outlook. Their religious attitudes and practices, however, are considerably diverse. Some of them pray regularly, while others never pray. Some of them drink alcohol. In this way, the movement's resemblance to the Jesuit movement really is striking. In both cases, a network of educational institutions has been put in place by a religious order; however, the future of the educational system does not depend on the religiosity of its graduates.<sup>43</sup> Both movements strive to be holistic and to create a new religious community that emphasizes fellowship without destroying the individuality of its participants.

Outside of education, the Hizmet movement has also had a substantial economic impact in the post-Soviet CAC region. The many Hizmet-affiliated small- and medium-sized Turkish companies in the CAC are both a driver and a product of Turkish capitalism. Today, Turkey's economic influence in the region is greater than its political influence, and the regional spread of Hizmet schools and enterprises has actually contributed to the ongoing reform of the post-Soviet economic order. In the future, these civic and business associations will likely continue to counteract statist economic policies, not least because the Hizmet movement depends on the survival of these private enterprises. Over the longer term, therefore, it is possible that the movement's activities in business, media, education and various other civic initiatives could contribute to the development of civil society in the CAC. Religious movements played an indispensable role in the evolution of civil society and, by extension, to secular democracy in the West: Islamic movements like Hizmet could plausibly do the same in the CAC.



Despite the prestige of Hizmet schools in the CAC, the movement has also aroused suspicion in the region that they are harboring a political agenda. In recent years, distrust of the movement has grown substantially, and these perceptions are likely fueled by the persistence of an anti-Islamic “Soviet mentality.” More importantly, regional suspicions of Turkish religious outreach have probably had less to do with the Hizmet movement’s actual activities than with political developments in Turkey and what many regard as the country’s steady turn toward Islamism. The rise to power of the Islamist-oriented AKP since 2002 would not have been possible without the Hizmet movement. Consequently, many in the CAC have begun to worry that the movement is pursuing an Islamist agenda in their own countries.

The eruption at the end of 2013 of a still ongoing political feud inside the AKP between elements aligned with Erdoğan and others aligned with Gülen has reinforced suspicions in the Caucasus and Central Asia that the movement does, in fact, have a political agenda. It is likely, moreover, that this “open war” inside the AKP will continue; Erdoğan’s faction does not want to share its power, and Gülen knows that if Erdoğan succeeds in establishing the state’s control over his movement’s private schools in Turkey that his movement will face an existential threat. Insofar as the struggle inside Turkey persists, it will likely not remain confined to Turkey. The rise of the AKP marked the start of a “Golden Age” for the spread of the Hizmet movement internationally, and the movement had benefited from the support of the friendly government in Ankara. But it now appears that the movement and Erdoğan are on different trajectories. As divisions within the AKP worsen, Erdoğan may also seek to punish the Hizmet movement in other countries. If, however, the Hizmet movement continues to emerge as allies of Turkey’s secular and democratic political opposition to Erdoğan, then governments in the CAC will likely become less fearful that the movement has an Islamist agenda.

When Turkish leaders decided in 1991 to utilize religion in their outreach to the greater Turkish world, their core intentions were to expand their geopolitical influence. After twenty years of multi-leveled cooperation between Turkey and the Central Asian and Caucasian republics, Turkish outreach has been most successful in the religious and cultural sphere. The new middle classes of the CAC that have been educated by the Diyanet and especially through Hizmet schools “à la Turque” represent a clear success in the implementation of Turkish soft power. These new middle classes have already played an important role in facilitating greater connections between Turkey and the CAC in the realms of business, language, and civil society. It is safe to assume these connections formed by this religious outreach will be critical to the future development of the concept of

a greater “Turkish world.” It is, moreover, ironic when we consider that Turkey’s religious outreach has helped to promote a more open economic order and cosmopolitan outlook in the CAC, all while Turkey under the AKP government has become more internationally isolated because of its own ideological agendas.

## NOTES

1. John Glenn, *The Soviet legacy in Central Asia*, London (UK: Macmillan, 1999), p. 224.
2. Ibid.
3. Michael Kemper, Raoul Motika, Stefan Reichmuth, *Islamic Education in the Soviet Union and Its Successor States* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2009), p. 384.
4. Eric McGlinchey, *Chaos, Violence, Dynasty: Politics and Islam in Central Asia* (Pittsburg, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011), p. 202.
5. Alexandre Papas, Thomas Welsford, Thierry Zarcone (ed.), *Central Asian Pilgrims: Hajj Routes and Pious Visits between Central Asia and the Hijaz* (Berlin, Germany: Klaus Schwarz-IFEAC, 2011), p. 331.
6. Mustafa Aydin, “Turkey and central Asia: Challenges of change,” *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (1996), pp. 157-177.
7. Heinz Kramer, “Will Central Asia become Turkey’s Sphere of Influence?” (Ankara, *Stratejik Arastirma Merkezi*, March-May 1996), <http://sam.gov.tr/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/8.-WILL-CENTRAL-ASIA-BECOME-TURKEYS-SPHERE-OF-INFLUENCE.pdf>.
8. Idris Bal, “Turkish Model and the Turkic Republics,” *Perceptions, Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (September-November 1998), pp. 1-17, <http://sam.gov.tr/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/IdrisBal.pdf>.
9. International Crisis Group, “Central Asia: Islam and the State,” July 10, 2003, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/-/media/Files/asia/centralasia/059%20Central%20Asia%20Islam%20and%20the%20State.pdf>.
10. Martha Brill, Olcott Brill, “Sufism in Central Asia: A Force for Moderation or a Cause of Politicization?” *Carnegie Paper*, (June 6, 2007), [http://carnegieendowment.org/files/cp84\\_olcott\\_final2.pdf](http://carnegieendowment.org/files/cp84_olcott_final2.pdf).
11. Maria Elisabeth Louw, *Everyday Islam in Central Asia* (New York-London: Routledge, 2007), p. 208.
12. Bayram Balci, “Le Chiisme en Azerbaïdjan post-sovietique: entre influences iraniennes et dynamiques internes,” in Sabrina Mervin (ed.), *Les mondes chiïtes et l’Iran* (Paris-Beyrouth: Karthala-IFPO, 2007), pp. 61-183.

13. Henrik Ohlsson, "Islam and Secular State in Uzbekistan: State Control of Religion and its Implications for the Understanding of Secularity," *Cahiers d'Asie centrale*, (2011), p.19-20, <http://asiacentrale.revues.org/index1527.html>.
14. Chris Hann & Mathijs Pelkmans, "Realigning Religion and Power in Central Asia: Islam, Nation-State and Post-Socialism," *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 61, No. 9 (November 2009), pp. 1515-1541.
15. Ahmed Rahsid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 274.
16. Didier Chaudet, "Islamist Terrorism in Greater Central Asia: The "Al-Qaedaization" of Uzbek Jihadism," (Paris: IFRI, December 2008), p. 29, [http://www.ifri.org/files/Russie/ifri\\_uzbek\\_jihadism\\_chaudet\\_ENG\\_december2008.pdf](http://www.ifri.org/files/Russie/ifri_uzbek_jihadism_chaudet_ENG_december2008.pdf).
17. International Crisis Group, *Europe Report No. 191*, (March 25, 2008), "Azerbaijan: Independent islam and the State," [http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/europe/191\\_azerbaijan\\_independent\\_islam\\_and\\_the\\_state.pdf](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/europe/191_azerbaijan_independent_islam_and_the_state.pdf).
18. International Crisis Group, "Central Asia: Islam and the State," op.cit.
19. Istar Gozaydin, "Diyamet and Politics," *The Muslim World*, Vol. 98, Issue 2/3 (2008), pp. 159-176.
20. Ufuk Ulutas, "Religion and Secularism in Turkey: The Dilemma of the Directorate of Religious Affairs," *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 46, Issue 3 (2010), pp. 389-399
21. Zana Citak, "Between 'Turkish Islam' and 'French Islam': The Role of the Diyanet in the Conseil Francais du Culte Musulman," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, (2009), pp. 1-16, <http://iiss.berkeley.edu/politics-of-religious-freedom/files/2011/06/Between-Turkish-Islam-and-French-Islam-The-Role-of-the-Diyanet-in-the-Conseil-Franc%CC%A7ais-du-Culte-Musulman.pdf>.
22. See the list of these countries: <http://www.avrasya-is.org/katilimcilar.php>.
23. Senol Korkut, "The Diyanet of Turkey and its activities in Eurasia after the Cold War," *Acta Slavica Iaponica*, Vol. 28, pp.117-139.
24. On Osman Nuri Topbaş and its activities in Turkey and abroad, see his group's website: <http://www.osmannuritopbas.com/osman-nuri-topbas-hocaefendi-nin-hayati.html>.
25. On Suleyman Hilmi Tunahan's movement, see Mustafa Aydin, "Suleymancilik," in Tanil Bora, Murat Gultekingil (eds.), *Modern Turkiyede Siyasi Dusunce: Islamcilik* (Istanbul: Ilestisim Yayinlari, 2004), pp. 308-322.
26. There is abundant literature in English and Turkish concerning Sait Nursi and his movement. For instance, see Serif Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey: The Case of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi* (New York: SUNY, 1989), p. 278.
27. Serif Mardin, op.cit.
28. Joshua Hendrick, *Gülen: The Ambiguous Politics of Market Islam in Turkey and the World* (New York: NYU Press, August 2013).

29. Hakan Yavuz and John Esposito (eds.), *Turkish Islam and the Secular State: The Gülen Movement* (Syracuse University Press, 2003), p. 280.
30. Bayram Balci, *Missionnaires de l'islam en Asie centrale, les écoles turques de Fethullah Gülen* (Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose et Institut français d'études anatoliennes, 2003), p. 300.
31. Claire Berlinksi, "Who Is Fethullah Gülen?" *City*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (August 2012), [http://www.city-journal.org/2012/22\\_4\\_fethullah-gulen.html](http://www.city-journal.org/2012/22_4_fethullah-gulen.html).
32. Rachel Sharon Crespín, "Fethullah Gülen's Grand Ambition, Turkey's Islamist Danger," *Middle East Quarterly*, (Winter 2009), pp. 55–66, <http://www.meforum.org/2045/fethullah-gulens-grand-ambition>.
33. Bayram Balci, "Les écoles neo-nurcu de Fethullah Gülen en Asie centrale: implantation, fonctionnement et nature du message véhiculé par le biais de la coopération éducative," *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée* (July 2003), 101–102, <http://remmm.revues.org/54>.
34. Michael McMahon, "The Jesuit Model of Education," *EDOCERE, A Resource for Catholic Education*, [http://www.edocere.org/articles/jesuit\\_model\\_education.htm](http://www.edocere.org/articles/jesuit_model_education.htm).
35. For the list of Fethullah Gülen movement schools in the world, see <http://turkishinvitations.weebly.com/every-continent-but-antarctica.html>.
36. On Turkish-Uzbek relations and their evolution since Uzbekistan's independence, see Nadir Devlet, "Taking Stock: Turkey and the Turkic World 20 Years Later," *The German Marshall Fund of United States*, (November 10, 2011), [http://www.gmfus.org/wpcontent/blogs.dir/1/files/mf/1321555956\\_magicfields\\_attachment\\_1\\_1.pdf](http://www.gmfus.org/wpcontent/blogs.dir/1/files/mf/1321555956_magicfields_attachment_1_1.pdf).
37. Elizabeth Van Wie Davis, Rouben Azizian, *Islam, Oil, and Geopolitics: Central Asia after September 11* (Washington, DC: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007), p. 303.
38. "Fethullah Gülen Condemns 9/11 Terrorist Attacks," *Gülen in the News*, (September 1, 2001), <http://guleninthenews.blogspot.com/2011/09/fethullah-gulen-condemns-9-11-terrorist.html>.
39. "Russia takes over Gülen school for alleged ties with Islamist sect" *Worldwide Religious News* from "New Anatolian," (August 23, 2007), <http://wwrn.org/articles/26012/?&place=russia-cis&section=islam>.
40. Victoria Clement, "Central Asia's Hizmet Schools," *The Muslim World and Politics in Transition*, edited by Greg Barton, Paul Weller and Ihsan Yilmaz, (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013), pp. 154–167
41. Ergenekon is a mythical name for a region of Siberia from which the Turks originated. The Ergenekon case, uncovered in 2007, was a failed plot involving hundreds of military figures and civilians who sought to cause instability through various means (murder, agitation, and attacks). They sought to overthrow the Islamic-conservative civilian government, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Their failed alleged coups d'état has resulted in landmark trials including that of September 2012, which saw hundreds of generals sentenced—some to lengthy prison

terms. Perceived as evidence of democratic progress by some and as 'just getting even' by others, the trial marked the end of the omnipotence of the military. It was alleged that the Gülen movement helped these trials through its networks of judicial influence. They settled their accounts with the military and Kemalist circles where they had long been bullied.

42. David Abramson, "Foreign Religious Education and the Central Asian Islamic Revival: Impact and Prospects for Stability," *Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, Silk Road Papers*, (March 2010), p. 52, <http://www.silkroadstudies.org/new/docs/silkroadpapers/1003Abramson.pdf>.
43. Mario Soavi, "Caracteristiques de l'éducation jesuite—Temoignage," *Jesuite Alumni*, (October 11, 2009), <http://jesuitalumni.org/blog/2009/10/11/caracteristiques-de-l%E2%80%99education-jesuite-temoignage/>.