

SINGING TURKISH, PERFORMING TURKISHNESS:
MESSAGE AND AUDIENCE IN THE SONG COMPETITION OF THE
INTERNATIONAL TURKISH OLYMPIAD

by

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the
SCHOOL OF MIDDLE EASTERN AND NORTH AFRICAN STUDIES
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS
In the Graduate College
THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

2015

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would first like to thank my thesis committee for their unfailing support and encouragement: Amy Newhall, Anne Betteridge, and Janet Sturman. With her tireless patience, Amy Newhall in particular made it possible for me to complete this project.

Many thanks to the Center for Middle Eastern Studies and the School of Middle Eastern and North African Studies for making my studies possible. I'm also grateful to my language teachers, Ahmet Okal, Greg Key, Parvaneh Hossaini, and Pouye Khoshkhoosani, as well as to the staff in the School of Middle Eastern and North African Studies for their miraculous ability to make things run smoothly. I especially appreciate the personal support offered by Leila Hudson and Scott Lucas.

Among the many scholars who have influenced and encouraged me over the years, I would like to thank Can Açıksöz, Philip V. Bohlman, Linda Darling, T. J. Ferguson, Gabriela Ilnitchi, Zeynep Korkman, Ellen Koskoff, Eve McPherson, Holly Schissler, Sonia Tamar Seeman, and Gretchen Wheelock. Erol Koymen made it possible for me to present my work at the University of Texas-Austin and gain extremely helpful feedback from the ethnomusicology graduate students there. I also have a wonderful group of friends in the U.S., Turkey, and beyond who have been an endless source of personal and professional inspiration, particularly Courtney Dorroll, Keri Miller, and Tatyana Rabinovich. Ana Ghoreishian and Miriam Mayer have been wonderful examples of how to balance academia and family life. Finally, Bekah Coşkun, Ufuk Coşkun, Casey Sankey, and Megan Young have done so much to make Tucson feel like home.

My parents and brother have seen me through several changes of career and location and inspired me much more than they know. I'm also incredibly lucky to have my "second set of parents," Susan Andrews and Randy Rickard, as well as their children Dorsey, David, and Katie. And finally, thanks to my husband Yücel for his love and support and to my son Kuzey for being the best possible distraction.

DEDICATION

In memory of my grandparents, Herbert and Muriel Vetter and Paul and Blanche
Wulfsberg

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ABSTRACT

Turkey's most controversial religious figure is the Muslim cleric and author Fethullah Gülen, whose followers have established around one thousand schools in 135 countries. Since 2003, the Gülen-affiliated educational non-profit TÜRKÇEDER has organized the International Turkish Olympiad, a competition for children enrolled in the Gülen schools. The showpiece of this event is its song contest, in which students perform well-known Turkish songs before live audiences of thousands in cities all over Turkey and reach millions more via television broadcasts and the Internet. While the contest resembles American Idol in its focus on individual singers and Eurovision in its nationalistic overtones, the fact that the singers are performing songs associated with a nationality not their own raises intriguing questions about the intended message of the competition as well as about its publics. To answer these questions, I analyzed YouTube videos of the competition and examined YouTube comments, popular websites, and newspaper opinion columns. I conclude that the performers themselves are meant to feel an affinity with Turkish culture and values, while Turkish audiences receive a demonstration that Gülen's brand of Islam is compatible with Turkish nationalism. Moreover, the competition reaches a multiplicity of publics both within and beyond Turkey. While some of these can be characterized as essentially oppositional counterpublics, I find that, in the case of the Turkish Olympiad, the dichotomy between rational public and emotional or irrational counterpublic established collectively by such theorists of publics as Jürgen Habermas and Michael Warner begins to break down.

INTRODUCTION

As the song competition of the Tenth International Turkish Olympiad begins, a group of about twenty children from all over the world, colorfully clad in the costumes of their respective nationalities, gather on a brightly lit stage before an audience of thousands. The backdrop sets the mood, displaying such words as “compassion,” “affection,” and “respect.” Once the music starts, the performers, who are in their early to mid-teens, begin clapping and singing in Turkish:

I wish everyone could taste the feeling of falling in love, I wish the world would
turn into a rose.

If all of humanity were hand in hand, that would be a festival.

We got to know each other through Yunus Emre, we found love with Fuzuli,

We spoke the same language – that would be a festival.

Come, let’s have smiling faces, let’s start a new world.

Roses flower in our souls – that would be a festival.

Come, let’s speak Turkish, lovingly, like brothers and sisters.

If all of humanity were hand in hand, that would be a festival.¹

Visually through the folkloric outfits, and sonically through the choral unity, this opening number brings to life an imagined universe that is diverse yet essentially harmonious. For the rest of the contest, the singers, still wearing their national clothes, return to the stage one at a time for solo renderings of well-known Turkish songs, with a panel of celebrity judges ranking their performances.

The scene may seem reminiscent of Disney’s “It’s a Small World” ride, but many of the critics are anything but enchanted. Writing on the website *Bir Gün*, Onur Caymaz

¹ Uluslararası Dil ve Kültür Festivali, “10. Türkçe Olimpiyatları Şarkı Finali (TAMAMI) (HD Kalitesiyle) (1080p),” YouTube video, 3:19:28, uploaded June 11, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4AuapN6eEtw&list=PLur1JYItA6eqDZoSVomepsWbM4LkqItrw&index=3>. Translation by the author.

derides the International Turkish Olympiad as a “competition of small out-of-tune children,” describing the entrant from Pakistan as “the owner of our century’s most frightful singing voice.”² In the online newspaper *Haberiniz*, Ahmet Zaimoğlu calls the competition “a huge fraud,” while the headline of Süleyman Özışık’s article on *İnternetHaber* blares, “The Traitors Who Participate in the Turkish Olympiad!”³

A Brief Introduction to Fethullah Gülen

Why these vituperative criticisms of such an innocuous-seeming event? Most of the controversy surrounding the Turkish Olympiad is in response to the man behind (although not directly responsible for) the competition, the Turkish Muslim cleric and author Fethullah Gülen. Named to TIME magazine’s list of the world’s one hundred most influential people, the reclusive Gülen is usually described as a moderate Islamist. Although he currently lives in self-imposed exile in the tiny hamlet of Saylorsburg, Pennsylvania, he inspires a worldwide network of supporters known as *Hizmet*, or “Service,” by its members and as the *Cemaat* (“congregation” or “sect”) by most other Turks. Many of these supporters in turn operate businesses or other organizations, which include vast media conglomerates, other companies in sectors ranging from food to

² Onur Caymaz, “Detone Küçük Çocuklar Yarışması: Türkçe Olimpiyatları” [A Contest of Small Out-of-Tune Children: The Turkish Olympiad], *Bir Gün*, June 15, 2012, http://www.birgun.net/actuels_index.php?news_code=1339750599&year=2012&month=06&day=15.

³ Ahmet Zaimoğlu, “Gelin ‘Türkçe Olimpiyatları’ Rezaletiyle Tanış Olalım” [Come, Let’s Get to Know the Infamous “Turkish Olympiad”], *Haberiniz*, June 17, 2011, http://www.haberiniz.com.tr/yazilar/koseyazisi33953-Gelin_Turkce_Olimpiyatlari_Rezaletiyle_Tanis_Olalism.html; Süleyman Özışık, “Türkçe Olimpiyatları’na Katılan Hainler!” [The Traitors Who Participate in the Turkish Olympiad!], *İnternet Haber*, June 6, 2012, <http://www.internethaber.com/turkce-olimpiyatlarina-katilan-hainler-12672y.htm>.

construction, charitable organizations, Turkish cultural centers, and schools in Turkey and all over the world.

What is the Turkish Olympiad?

The international schools affiliated with the Gülen network belong to an umbrella association based in Istanbul, the educational non-profit TÜRKÇEDER (an acronym for Uluslararası Türkçe Derneği, or International Turkish Language Foundation).

TÜRKÇEDER in turn organizes an exhibition and competition in which students from the schools abroad are brought to Turkey to display their knowledge of Turkish language and culture through such events as a song competition, a poetry-recitation contest, and a folk-dance competition.

Among these components, the song competition poses a particularly interesting case. It resembles American Idol in its focus on individual singers and Eurovision in its nationalistic overtones, yet it diverges sharply from both of these in that the singers are performing songs associated with a nationality to which they themselves do not belong. Is this incongruity meant to be overlooked in the furtherance of a nationalist agenda, or does the competition challenge the very idea of nationality? The answer seems to depend on two further questions. One, who are the intended audiences of the Turkish Olympiad: people living in Turkey, Turkish expatriates, the students/performers themselves, or a combination of these? Two, what message or messages is the contest intended to convey?

Methodology

To answer the latter question, I looked at performance style and, especially, song selection in the 2012 song competition. Performers normally do not choose their own repertoire, and the “message” of the competition can be studied as a function of TÜRKÇEDER’s own preferences. To determine what those preferences might be, I examined YouTube videos of the 2012 song competition.

I then sought to examine reception of the TÜRKÇEDER message by interviewing six Turkish students at the University of Arizona. Through the interviews, I learned about their reactions to performances that I found especially interesting and their perceptions of the song competition in general. Recognizing that this limited group is not very representative of the people who participate in and/or watch the Turkish Olympiad, I also spoke with an alumna of the Sonoran Science Academy, a Gülenist school in Tucson. YouTube comments provided a further source of general responses to the Olympiad and its musical components, as did the popular satiric website eksisozluk.com. Finally, I read opinion columns regarding the competition in newspapers from across the political spectrum.

Literature Review

Gülen’s ideas and his followers’ involvement in politics have received a fair amount of attention among political scientists. Perhaps the best-known scholar working on Gülen is M. Hakan Yavuz, who, along with John L. Esposito, edited a volume that takes a sociopolitical approach to the Gülen movement, focusing particularly on the

movement's relationship to Turkish secularism (*Turkish Islam and the Secular State*, 2003). Berna Turam has also edited a compilation that focuses on the uneasy relationship between secularism and Islam in Turkey (*Secular State and Religious Society*, 2012). Another recent contribution, focusing more narrowly on *Hizmet's* activities outside of Turkey, is *The Gülen Hizmet Movement and Its Transnational Activities* (2012), edited by Sophia Pandya and Nancy Gallagher. All of these works include sections on the Gülenist schools, but the schools have not been the subject of any book-length studies. Furthermore, with the exception of a paper presented at the Middle East Studies Association by Senem Aslan, to which I have not yet had access, I was unable to find a single scholarly book or article so much as mentioning the Turkish Olympiad. At the same time, almost every Turk with whom I spoke knew about the competition and had at least seen excerpts of it.

Here it is important to note that the Gülen movement is actively involved in publishing academic works regarding its own activities through such Gülen-owned presses as Blue Dome and The Light (which also publishes in Turkey as Işık Yayınları). David Tittensor makes the excellent point that most literature on Gülen is produced by one of two groups. One of these is comprised of Gülen sympathizers who focus on Gülen's ideas rather than the actual operation of the various Gülen-affiliated organizations, while the other consists of those who are suspicious of Gülen but usually lack hard data to support their accusations. Crucially, as Tittensor notes, "the very group that detractors often argue are being contested—namely the students attending the Movement's schools that are allegedly being indoctrinated—are routinely absent from the

discussions.”⁴

Chapter Organization

The first two chapters of this thesis provide an overview of Fethullah Gülen’s life and ideas, as well as the activities of those associated with his movement. I place these in a broader context by outlining certain important political and sociological developments in Turkey, including the world of late-Ottoman Sufism in which the Gülen movement is rooted, the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, and the founding of the secular Turkish republic. The rise of Islamism in general and the Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (Justice and Development Party, or AKP) in particular is another recent moment vital to an understanding of the Gülen movement, as is the concomitant embrace of a neo-Ottoman worldview.

Moving to the Turkish Olympiad itself, the third chapter examines the music and performances as a text with a particular message to be decoded by its audiences, in particular the Turkish audiences with the necessary cultural knowledge and understanding of the songs but also international audiences familiar with performance conventions upon which the competition draws.

The fourth chapter turns the interpretive lens directly upon those audiences, reinterpreting them as publics and placing the Turkish Olympiad at the center of the publics/counterpublics debate begun by Jürgen Habermas and continued by Nancy Fraser, Michael Warner, and Lauren Berlant, among others.

⁴ David Tittensor, *The House of Service: The Gülen Movement and Islam’s Third Way* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 3.

CHAPTER ONE: FETHULLAH GÜLEN IN HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

After a brief biography of Gülen and an outline of his stances on various political and social issues, I will attempt to place the emergence of his movement in historical and political context. I will then outline his stances on various political and social issues before moving on to the structure and membership of his network as well as its areas of concentration: business, media, and education.

Who is Fethullah Gülen?

Fethullah Gülen was born in Turkey's eastern province of Erzurum in 1941. His father, an imam, sent Gülen to a secular school, but because there were no nearby secondary schools, Gülen was forced to educate himself once he finished primary school. He became a *hafiz* (one who has memorized the entire Qur'an) by the age of twelve and studied in a small reading group influenced by the views of Turkish Muslim thinker Said Nursi (1877-1960), also known as Bediüzzaman.⁵ At the same time, he undertook to read Rousseau and Balzac in the original French, surely a rare accomplishment for village children in mid-century Erzurum.⁶

Despite Gülen's lack of formal education, he successfully completed the state

⁵ İsmail Acar, "A Classical Scholar with a Modern Outlook: Fethullah Gülen and His Legal Thought," in *Mastering Knowledge in Modern Times: Fethullah Gülen as an Islamic Scholar*, ed. İsmail Albayrak (New York: Blue Dome Press, 2011), 66.

⁶ Ibid.

exam required to become an imam in 1959.⁷ His first posting was to Edirne, on the Greek and Bulgarian borders, where he served four years at the well-known Üç Şerefeli Camii (Mosque with Three Minarets). He then spent another year in the nearby town of Kırklareli. Transferring in 1966 to the more prestigious mosque of Kestanepazarı in the Aegean coastal city of Izmir (known by Turks as “infidel Izmir” for its laidback attitude toward Islam), Gülen not only gained renown as an imam but began preaching throughout the region and founding educational summer camps for high school students. He began giving lectures and sermons that attracted audiences of thousands. In addition, they circulated on cassette all over Turkey.⁸

When Turkey’s government was overthrown by a military coup in 1980, however, Gülen’s career hit a road bump. He was thrown into prison for 60 days, and upon his release, he resigned his position as imam (although he continued as an itinerant preacher). Eventually, his declining health led him to the U.S., where he receives medical treatment. In November 2007, he was denied permanent residency in the U.S. on the grounds that he was not an “extraordinarily talented academic,” as his petition for residency had claimed. After a legal battle, however, the decision was overturned, and he was awarded the “green card” in October 2008.⁹ Since arriving in the United States, Gülen has refused all invitations, even those issued by the prime minister, to return to Turkey.

⁷ Helen Rose Ebaugh, *The Gülen Movement: A Sociological Analysis of a Civic Movement Rooted in Moderate Islam* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2010), 26.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

Gülenist Principles

Most of Gülen's beliefs are not particularly controversial in the Turkish context. They stem largely from the ideas of Said Nursi, who sought to help people deepen their Islamic faith without coming into conflict with modernity.¹⁰ Furthermore, Gülen has been characterized as a “strikingly non-contentious” public speaker “[whose] speeches and sermons are usually cautious so as not to be offensive to certain groups. His statements can be made subject to different interpretations by different audiences.”¹¹

Gülen is usually described as a moderate Islamist. “Islamist” is perhaps not an entirely accurate label, however, since he does not state that Islam should be used to create state laws. Gülen also rejects the modifier “moderate,” believing that Islam as a religion is moderate to begin with.¹² As Tuğrul Keşkin puts it, Gülen's ideology is the only one in Turkey that “manages to embrace Islam while, at the same time, not openly stating that the role of religion is to regulate society. The Gülen movement does not openly or publicly condone the state applying Islamic law, or sharia.”¹³ (The words “openly or publicly” indicate the suspicion with which many secular Turks view Gülen, about which more later.) Berna Turam states that Gülen is not at odds with the principle of secularism: “The apparent goal of the Islamic Gülen movement is to reconcile the

¹⁰ M. Hakan Yavuz and John L. Esposito, “Introduction: Islam in Turkey: Retreat from the Secular Path?,” in *Turkish Islam and the Secular State: The Gülen Movement*, ed. M. Hakan Yavuz and John L. Esposito (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2003), xiv.

¹¹ Mucahit Bilici, “The Fethullah Gülen Movement and Its Politics of Representation in Turkey,” *The Muslim World* 96 (2006): 8.

¹² Ebaugh, *Gülen Movement*, 2.

¹³ Tuğrul Keşkin, “Market Oriented Post-Islamism in Turkey,” in *Secular State and Religious Society: Two Forces in Play in Turkey*, ed. Berna Turam (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 123.

Islamic faith and way of life with secular institutions....The key to understanding this new Turkish Islam is its attitudes to and interaction with the secular states (Turam 2004).”¹⁴

This is not to say that Gülen rejects Shari’a altogether. Rather, as Bulent Aras and Omer Caha explain, “[Gülen] does not favor the state’s applying Islamic law....He points out that most Islamic regulations concern people’s private lives and that only a small portion of them concern the state and government. These latter provisions need not be enforced because religion is a private matter, and its requirements should not be imposed on anyone.”¹⁵ Thus, the state can remain secular, and people can simultaneously choose to consider Shari’a in making personal decisions.

Not surprisingly, Gülen is also able to reconcile democracy and Islam, arguing (based on Said Nursi) that “the idea of republicanism is very much in accord with the idea of ‘consultation’ discussed in Islamic sources. Moreover, he fears that an authoritarian regime would impose strict control on differing ideas. At the same time, though, Gülen views the state’s role as important in ‘protecting stability.’”¹⁶ His opposition to authoritarianism leads him to look with suspicion on the governments of Iran and Saudi Arabia.¹⁷

¹⁴ Berna Turam, “What Does the Secular State Have to Do with Revivalist Islam? The Turkish Case and the Gülen Movement,” in *The Role of the State in West Asia: Papers Read at a Conference Held at the Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul, 14-16 November 2002*, ed. Annika Rabo and Bo Utas (Istanbul: Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul, 2002), 54.

¹⁵ Bulent Aras and Omer Caha, “Fethullah Gülen and His Liberal ‘Turkish Islam’ Movement,” in *Revolutionaries and Reformers: Contemporary Islamist Movements in the Middle East*, ed. Barry Rubin (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 143.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

In fact, Hasan Kösebalaban contrasts Gülen's attitude toward Iran with his view of the West, arguing that while both the West and Iran are "Others," the West is a "Lockean Other, where the Self perceives the Other as a peaceful rival." In other words, Gülen "does not view [the West] as a security threat to Turkey or Islam." Iran, on the other hand, poses a menace. As Kösebalaban puts it, Gülen

views Turkey's relations with Iran in terms of a Hobbesian culture of anarchy in which not only the distinction between Self and Other is clear, but also the Self perceives the Other as an imminent security threat. On the issue of relations with Iran, he probably shares a similar culture of insecurity with many Turkish secularists, but not with political Islamists.¹⁸

It is worth noting that there are to date no Gülen schools in Iran.

Not surprisingly, given the perception of the West outlined above, Gülen avoids using the polarizing concepts of *dar al-harb* (abode of war, usually equated with the West) and *dar al-Islam* (abode of Islam or peace).¹⁹ According to John L. Esposito and İhsan Yılmaz, "Gülen stresses that wherever a Muslim is, even outside a Muslim polity, he or she must obey the law of the land, respect others' rights, and behave justly."²⁰ Furthermore, Muslims are not obliged to establish Muslim-majority states. Democracy enables them to live as Muslims even when they are in the minority.²¹

In keeping with this idea, Gülen tells his followers that Islamic beliefs and practices can be reconciled with many of the elements of "modern" or "Western" life.

¹⁸ Hasan Kösebalaban, "The Making of Enemy and Friend: Fethullah Gülen's National-Security Identity," in *Turkish Islam and the Secular State: The Gülen Movement*, ed. M. Hakan Yavuz and John L. Esposito (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2003), 172-3.

¹⁹ John L. Esposito and İhsan Yılmaz, "Gülen's Ideas on Freedom of Thought, Pluralism, Secularism, State, Politics, Civil Society and Democracy," in *Islam and Peacebuilding: Gülen Movement Initiatives*, ed. John L. Esposito and İhsan Yılmaz (New York: Blue Dome Press, 2010), 26.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid, 35-6.

Regarding Gülen's views on science, İsmail Albayrak observes,

[I]n comparison to some of his contemporaries, Gülen displays a moderate attitude towards scientific explanation. According to Gülen, the Qur'an is not a book of science and as a result, he does not see the discussion of scientific details as the primary part of exegesis; instead, he considers it a secondary hermeneutical device that supports the essential meaning of the verses. He states precisely that the Qur'an neither rejects scientific interpretation completely, nor gives it sacred status.²²

As we shall see, this stance enables Gülenists to open schools that emphasize education in the sciences while also claiming to foster an Islamic ethos.

Another important tenet of Gülen's philosophy is the acceptance of the free-market economy. Gülen does not see Islam as conflicting with a capitalistic organization of the world economic system. In Keşkin's words, "religious doctrine can be practiced within the private lives of Turkish citizens while they publicly engage in modern economic activity."²³ This stance may be partly motivated by pragmatism on Gülen's part, because much of his financial support comes from various businesses run by his followers. He also cultivates ties with foreign businesspeople, presumably because encouraging them to have positive feelings toward Turkey and Islam will benefit his followers.

Perhaps partly for the same reason, Gülen emphasizes the importance of interfaith dialogue. Within Turkey, he has met with several leaders of the country's dwindling Greek Orthodox minority. Elsewhere, he frequently works with Jewish and Christian

²² İsmail Albayrak, "Fethullah Gülen's Approach to Qur'anic Exegesis," in *Mastering Knowledge in Modern Times: Fethullah Gülen as an Islamic Scholar*, ed. İsmail Albayrak (New York: Blue Dome Press, 2011), 31-2.

²³ Keşkin, "Market Oriented Post-Islamism in Turkey," 122.

leaders, even holding a meeting with Pope John Paul II in 1998.²⁴ A typical quote, taken from his website, shows this emphasis on understanding: “Be so tolerant that your heart becomes wide like the ocean. Become inspired with faith and love for others.”²⁵ While Turkey’s Sufi orders were banned in 1925, this language clearly draws upon a tradition of Islamic mysticism.

Moreover, Gülen takes very few hard-and-fast stances on the controversial issues regarding Islam and society that are debated in Turkey today. Until 2011, for example, women were not allowed to wear headscarves on university campuses. Gülen avoided coming out against the state’s prohibition by stating that women should not feel compelled to wear the headscarf or sacrifice their educations in order to do so. Gülen discussed the headscarf in a 1995 interview:

This issue is not as important as the essentials of faith and the pillars of Islam. It is a matter of secondary importance (*furu’*) in *fiqh*. Faith in God was revealed to our Prophet in Mecca, and then came the daily prescribed prayers. Such command [*sic*] as giving alms, fasting, and pilgrimage came in Medina. In the sixteenth or seventeenth year of Muhammad’s Prophethood (peace be upon him), Muslim women’s heads were still not covered (in the prescribed way). It was not included in the pillars of Islam or the essentials of faith. Those issues to which Islam gives priority should, out of our own devotion, be given priority while becoming a Muslim and communicating Islam to others.²⁶

As can be seen by his own clean-shaven appearance, Gülen sees the wearing of the beard as equally trivial, saying, “Muslims should not drown in detail. Today many Muslims may be doing this. Choosing not to wear a turban, robe, or loose trousers should not be

²⁴ M. Hakan Yavuz, “The Gülen Movement,” in *Turkish Islam and the Secular State: The Gülen Movement*, ed. M. Hakan Yavuz and John L. Esposito (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2003), 30.

²⁵ “Values,” *The Gülen Movement*, accessed on May 13, 2014, <http://thegulenmovement.info/values/>.

²⁶ Özkök 1995, quoted in Acar, “A Classical Scholar with a Modern Outlook,” 78.

construed as weakening Muslim Turkish identity. From imams in mosques to members of Parliament, from governors to district officials, no one should be categorized as a sinner because of such things.”²⁷

Finally, Gülen states that violence is abhorrent to Islam: “Islam abhors and absolutely condemns terrorism and any terrorist activity. I have repeatedly declared that it is impossible for a true Muslim to be a terrorist, nor can a terrorist be regarded as a true Muslim. Terrorism is one of the cardinal sins that the Qur’an threatens with hellfire.”²⁸

Gülen and the Sufi Milieu

While Gülen was born eighteen years after the Ottoman Empire was dissolved and the Turkish Republic established, in some ways we must return to the last years of the Ottoman Empire in order to understand the environment in which he was shaped. Gülen grew up reading his father’s books, written in Ottoman Turkish.²⁹ Furthermore, his spiritual role model Said Nursi was forced to confront the transition between the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic. This intellectual shift makes itself felt in Nursi’s best-known work, the *Risale-i Nur* (Letters of Light), and through its influence in Gülen’s writings as well.

One of the most pervasive influences on Ottoman society was its multitude of Sufi (Islamic mystical) orders, or *tarikats*. These ranged from the Mevlevis, popularly

²⁷ Acar, “A Classical Scholar with a Modern Outlook,” 82.

²⁸ Interview with *Foreign Policy* magazine, quoted in Acar, “A Classical Scholar with a Modern Outlook,” 83.

²⁹ Halim Çalış, “Fethullah Gülen’s Thought on Hadith,” in *Mastering Knowledge in Modern Times: Fethullah Gülen as an Islamic Scholar*, ed. Ismail Albayrak (New York: Blue Dome Press, 2011), 43.

known as the “whirling dervishes,” to the *Nakşibendis*, a more austere order that made a resurgence in the nineteenth century. As a teenager, Gülen studied with a *Nakşibendi* master, Muhammed Lütfi Efendi, also known as Alvarlı Efe (d. 1954).³⁰ Gülen acknowledges that he is influenced by Sufi beliefs but does not claim to be a Sufi master himself. Nor is his movement ordered in the way that *tarikats* traditionally were. Nevertheless, as we shall see, elements of Sufi organization and institutional goals, particularly those expounded by Said Nursi, have made their mark on the Gülen movement.

Said Nursi led a religious movement that held sway over a large segment of Turkish society in the late Ottoman and early Republican era. Alarmed by the encroachment of Western materialism upon Turkish society, Nursi at first worked to shore up the influence of Islam upon the state. By the 1950s, however, Nursi’s emphasis had “evolved from his original goal of trying to Islamize the state to the ‘Islamization of the spirit and the reinforcement of faith by education.’”³¹ In the words of David Tittensor, “Nursi believed that conscious individuals who lived according to Islamic principles and were able to engage in public discussion would lead to a transformation of society from within.”³²

Using a structuralist approach, Turkish sociologist Şerif Mardin authored a conceptually rich treatment of Said Nursi’s ideas and the ways in which they addressed social failings of late Ottoman and, particularly, early Republican society. As Mardin

³⁰ Acar, “A Classical Scholar with a Modern Outlook,” 66.

³¹ Tittensor, *House of Service*, 36.

³² *Ibid.*

notes, “The *Nur* movement...found some of its strength in Republican failures.

Outstanding among these was the inability of secular Republican ideology to replace Islam as a world view. This failure paralleled what Western civilization was beginning to perceive as a drawback, namely the absence of strong bonds of belief and the ‘anomie’ prevalent in industrial society.”³³

More specifically, Mardin sees Islamic culture (a generalization which includes late Ottoman society) as based on interpersonal rather than institutional relationships:

child to father, subject to sultan, *pir* (mentor) to *mürşid* (disciple).³⁴ He elaborates,

If this ‘personalistic’ component of traditional Ottoman culture did, in fact, constitute part of the mental ‘repertoire’ of the Sultan’s ‘ordinary’ subjects, then a number of consequences follow. One has to do with the impact on Ottoman culture – of the European culture of the Enlightenment. This culture was built on a view of stellar bodies in movement (Galileo-Newton) which together operated as a system. The projection onto the understanding of the state of this particular conception of a system is that the state is also a system of interrelated parts which operate mechanically: the state is a machine.”³⁵

Thus, one of Nursi’s primary goals is to maintain a system of personal relations based on Islam rather than to dismantle it in favor of this mechanistic society.³⁶

Despite his belief that Islam should remain as the foundation of state and society in Turkey, Nursi was no anti-Western radical. Nursi’s most famous work, the *Risale-i Nur* (Letters of Light), argues against the concept of a clash between East and West.

Furthermore, he says religion and science are entirely compatible and encourages the use

³³ Şerif Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey: The Case of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 25.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 11-12.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

of reason in resolving religious dilemmas.³⁷ Another important section in the *Risale-i Nur* is Nursi's nine principles of tolerance, among which are "act[ing] positively, that is out of love for one's own outlook, avoiding enmity for other outlooks" as well as "adopt[ing] the just rule of conduct that the follower of any right outlook has the right to say, 'My outlook is true, or the best,' but not 'My outlook alone is true,' or 'My outlook alone is good,' thus implying the falsity or repugnance of all other outlooks."³⁸ This emphasis on tolerance is also one of the most notable aspects of Gülen's teaching.

Many of Mardin's insights regarding Nursi are applicable to Gülen as well. Gülen serves as a father figure for his adherents, one who "smooth[es] access to the ultimate father."³⁹ Furthermore, in Mardin's view, the Nur order was

a paradigm for the solution of the every-day problems of life. The Turkish Republic was not interested in elaborating a map of every-day relations. In a society where persons defined their own stand in life and their power against the State through a religious idiom which served as such a map, this was a grave oversight. Said Nursi, by reviving the religious idiom, was revitalizing a total language for social life.⁴⁰

Much the same can be said for Gülen and his movement today.

The movement founded by Nursi had no formal structure of *pirs* and *mürşids* and no initiation process; instead, it was open to anyone interested in discussing and spreading the word about the Qur'an.⁴¹ Gülen's movement too retains Sufism's focus on

³⁷ Aras and Caha, "Fethullah Gulen and His Liberal 'Turkish Islam' Movement," 142.

³⁸ Irina Vainovski-Mihai, "The Limits of Otherness in Fethullah Gülen's Dialogic Methodology for Interfaith Encounters," in *Islam and Peacebuilding: Gülen Movement Initiatives*, ed. John L. Esposito and İhsan Yılmaz (New York: Blue Dome Press, 2010), 93-4.

³⁹ Mardin, *Religion and Social Change*, 21.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 227.

⁴¹ Mardin, *Religion and Social Change*, 25-6.

individual spiritual growth while avoiding the traditional structure of a Sufi *tarikat*. As Mehmet Yavuz Şeker emphasizes, Gülen “has neither seen himself as, nor approved of others characterizing him as a *shaykh*, Sufi or *darwish*.”⁴² Şeker elaborates:

For example, he could have allowed people to kiss his hand, and by giving those around him specified daily recitations and supplications within the framework of a specific code, he could have readily engendered a *shaykh-murid*, or master-disciple relationship. However, he has not done this....He extols the virtues of spiritual life, but does not institutionalize this. In the position that he holds, he has always preferred to remain inspirer to a movement and guide to a community in the role of dedicated teacher and mentor.⁴³

Despite the difference in the formal structure of the movement, however, Gülen seems to retain the aura of a father figure and is commonly referred to by his followers as “Hocaefendi” (a respectful and affectionate honorific for a teacher).

A further similarity between Said Nursi and Gülen can be seen in the primacy of text (whether printed or, in Gülen’s case, printed and recorded) in the dissemination of their messages. For Nursi, his *Risale-i Nur* carried on his legacy, in place of the “traditional pattern of a charismatic leader selecting another charismatic leader to succeed him. Since the *Risale-i Nur* was to carry this charisma, his followers and their successors, using his book as a guide, were to work for themselves instead of concentrating on the Master. In other words, they were thrown upon their own resources.”⁴⁴ The same is true for Gülen’s followers, although the Internet vastly increases the ease of their access to Gülen’s writings and lectures.

⁴² Mehmet Yavuz Şeker, “Sufism and Fethullah Gülen,” in *Mastering Knowledge in Modern Times: Fethullah Gülen as an Islamic Scholar*, ed. İsmail Albayrak (New York: Blue Dome Press, 2011), 114.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Mardin, *Religion and Social Change*, 181-2.

The Secular Turkish Republic

Although Gülen's intellectual roots are in Ottoman Sufism, his immediate childhood environment was profoundly different. After World I, the defeated Ottoman Empire was slated for dismemberment by the Allied countries who had won the war, with the acquiescence of Sultan Mehmed VI Vahideddin. It was only through military action by rebel Turkish troops led by Mustafa Kemal (later to be known as Atatürk) that a sizeable chunk of Ottoman territory was able to preserve its independence, in the form of the Republic of Turkey (founded in 1923). Given this history, it is perhaps not surprising that the armed forces retained a leading political role in the state that emerged.

In its own eyes as well as those of many Turkish citizens, the key role of the army has been to protect the principle of secularism enshrined by Atatürk, the first president of the Republic. In the words of Alev Çınar,

The Atatürkist innovation was to bring Islamic authority under the full and absolute control of the secular state. Rather than following the common pattern where all religious affairs are separated from formal political affairs, the institutionalization of secularism involved bringing all religious activity under the direct control and monopoly of the secular state.⁴⁵

In practice, this meant that a Directorate of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet İşleri Bakanlığı*) was established in 1924 to appoint imams, oversee mosques, produce the sermons delivered in the mosques, and regulate religious education throughout the country. No Islamic institutions were allowed to exist outside of this state-governed structure. This radical transformation even included banning the caliphate, to which the Ottoman Empire

⁴⁵ Alev Çınar, *Modernity, Islam, and Secularism in Turkey: Bodies, Places, and Time* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 16-17.

had been home since the sixteenth century. The new constitution formalized the new relationship between religion and state by removing the line describing the Turkish state as “Islamic” and declaring that religion could not be used for political purposes.⁴⁶

As part and parcel of these changes, all Sufi orders were abolished in 1925. Atatürk felt that traditional Sufi orders, most of which employed a master-disciple structure and held relatively closed ceremonies in their lodges (*tekke*), could potentially nourish discontent and harbor anti-state dissidence. The lodges were closed and many of the religious objects housed therein were displayed in museums, further reinforcing the idea of Sufism as belonging to the past.

The banning of Sufism, however, created social as well as spiritual upheaval, as Sufi orders had provided essential public services such as education and health care. Jenny White points out that the Turkish state was financially in no position to fill the gap, meaning that ordinary Turks “continued to rely for their basic needs on family, clan, community, and religious orders that henceforth operated clandestinely.”⁴⁷ As we shall see, Gülen’s network also sees itself as obligated to serve society in these ways.

Joshua Hendrick compares Turkish *laiklik* (secularism), modeled upon that established in France, to the American version, describing the former as

a particularly rigid variation of secularism that sought less to ‘separate church from state’ than it did to bring religion under the control of the state. Unlike U.S.-style secularism, which sought to liberalize the movement of religious communities to ensure their free mobilization without oversight or regulation, Turkish *laiklik* permitted the CHP regime to inhibit religion in the public sphere,

⁴⁶ Ibid., 17.

⁴⁷ Jenny White, *Muslim Nationalism and the New Turks* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013), 25.

to suppress the traditional authority of religious brotherhoods, and to cultivate a national society that promoted ethno-linguistic identity above all other subject positions (e.g., confession, class).⁴⁸

M. Hakan Yavuz expands upon the connection between secularism and an ethnically-based nationalism: “Kemalism became the ideology and practice of eliminating class, ethnic, and religious sources of conflict by seeking to create a classless, national (unified as Turkish), and secular...homogenized society. Thus, fear of differences became the guiding principle of the Kemalist state.”⁴⁹ In theory, the principle of ethnic homogeneity was reinforced by the population exchange between Greece and Turkey in 1923, in which Greece sent its Turks to Turkey and Turkey sent its Greeks to Greece. Ironically, many of the “Turks” involved were Muslims of non-Turkish descent; likewise, the “Greeks” were often Turkish-speaking Christians. Nevertheless, the exchange reinforced the idea that Turkey would henceforth be an ethnically unified nation-state rather than a multi-ethnic empire.

In some regards, Gülen is a product of the secular Turkish republic. He claims to have no problem with the idea of Muslims living in secular states. In place of the Turkish/French model of secularism, in which the state exercises total control over religion, however, Gülen prefers the American model, termed “passive secularism” by John L. Esposito and İhsan Yılmaz. In Gülen’s view, “within the boundaries of this type

⁴⁸ Joshua D. Hendrick, *Gülen: The Ambiguous Politics of Market Islam in Turkey and the World* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2013), 37.

⁴⁹ Yavuz and Esposito, “Introduction: Islam in Turkey,” xxi.

of secularism, Islam and secularity of the state could be compatible.”⁵⁰ Gülen also accepts the leading political role played by the Turkish army. As Bulent Aras and Omer Caha put it, “Gülen takes particular care not to antagonize the army. In fact, he tries hard to persuade the military leadership that his activities do not challenge the status quo and should not be regarded as reactionary (a code word for Islamist). For example, he says that, if need be, he would turn over his community’s schools to the state.”⁵¹

Despite such conciliatory signals, however, the secular establishment has long been suspicious of Gülen and his followers. A speech given by Gülen in 1999 is frequently cited as evidence of his hidden extremism, although Gülen’s supporters have disputed the authenticity of the recording.⁵²

You must move in the arteries of the system without anyone noticing your existence until you reach all the power centers. . . . You must wait until such time as you have gotten all the state power, until you have brought to your side all the power of the constitutional institutions in Turkey Now, I have expressed my feelings and thoughts to you all – in confidence . . . trusting your loyalty and secrecy. I know that when you leave here, [just] as you discard your empty juice boxes, you must discard the thoughts and the feelings that I expressed here.⁵³

This call to co-opt the state from within, a move described by Mucahit Bilici as a “Gramscian ‘participatory resistance,’”⁵⁴ led to Gülen’s prosecution in 2000. The case

⁵⁰ John L. Esposito and İhsan Yılmaz, “Introduction: Islam and Peacebuilding: Gülen Movement Initiatives,” in *Islam and Peacebuilding: Gülen Movement Initiatives*, ed. John L. Esposito and İhsan Yılmaz (New York: Blue Dome Press, 2010), 11-12.

⁵¹ Aras and Caha, “Fethullah Gülen and His Liberal ‘Turkish Islam’ Movement,” 147.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Quoted in Claire Berlinski, “Who is Fethullah Gülen?” *City Journal* 22 (Autumn 2012), http://www.city-journal.org/2012/22_4_fethullah-gulen.html.

⁵⁴ Mucahit Bilici, “Forgetting Gramsci and Remembering Said Nursi: Parallel Theories of Gramsci and Said Nursi in the Space of Eurocentrism,” in *Islam at the Crossroads: On the Life and Thought of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*, ed. Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 169.

was dismissed in 2008, yet Turkish people who support the secular state continue to worry about Gülen's plans.

The “Turkish-Islamic Synthesis”

Until 1950, the political party founded by Atatürk, the Republican People's Party, or CHP, held power and did its best to maintain the Kemalist legacy. In 1950, however, the CHP lost the general elections to the Democrat Party (Demokrat Partisi), which, like every successful opposition party in Turkey since that time, was more amenable to loosening certain restrictions on Islam. The army, however, has maintained its self-appointed role as guardian of Atatürk's legacy, especially as regards secularism. Over the last fifty-five years, conflicts between the various elected governments and the army has led to military coups in 1960, 1971, and 1980, as well as “virtual” coups in 1997 and 2007, in which the army pushed for the removal of the government but did not take military action.

Along with loosening restrictions on Islam, the various center-right parties opposing the CHP brought economic liberalization, meaning a loosening of the Atatürkist principle of statism. Gradually, this brought to the forefront a new generation of Turkish businessmen who were not part of the traditional urban elite but rather originated in the Anatolian heartland, in such towns as Konya and Kayseri. As Nilufer Narli describes,

the new business elite desired to assert its provincial identity and preserve its values and traditions. Consequently, its members – dubbed ‘Anatolian Lions’ (*Anadolu Aslanlari*) – differentiate themselves from the more urban, Westernized business elite represented by TUSIAD (The Turkish Businessmen's and Industrialists' Association, founded in 1971), whose members are the chief executives of Turkey's 300 biggest corporations. In contrast, the Anatolian Lions

follow the leadership of the pro-Islamist MUSIAD (the Association of Independent Industrialists and Businessmen)....⁵⁵

The “M” in MUSIAD “is commonly perceived as standing for *Muslim* rather than for *mustakil* (independent). The founders of MUSIAD aimed to create an ‘Islamic economic system’ as an alternative to the existing ‘capitalist system’ in Turkey.”⁵⁶ This alternative, however, differed little from capitalism in its principles; instead, the Anatolian lions merely wanted their share of the pie. As Jenny White puts it, “This probusiness approach continues to characterize mainstream pious Muslim discourse today in both business and politics.”⁵⁷

An important turning point in the visibility of Islam in the public sphere was the 1980 coup, a response to ongoing violence between Turkish communists and militant nationalists (primarily the Grey Wolves). Having overthrown the unstable coalition government headed by Süleyman Demirel, military authorities sought to bridge the gap between left and right and combat the dangers of Communism by promoting a concept known as the “Turkish-Islamic synthesis.” This model, which entailed the “expansion of Islamic institutions and liberalization of Islamic discourse,” was also crucial for the first post-coup civilian government, that of the Motherland Party (Anavatan Partisi) and prime minister Turgut Özal.⁵⁸ The architects of the idea of “Turkish Islam” envisioned it as “more peaceful, more mystical (i.e., “Sufi”), more conducive to dialogue, and more apt to

⁵⁵ Nilufer Narli, “The Rise of the Islamist Movement in Turkey,” in *Revolutionaries and Reformers: Contemporary Islamist Movements in the Middle East*, ed. Barry Rubin (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 128.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ White, *Muslim Nationalism*, 39.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 35.

lead Turkey (and the entire Muslim world) into the twenty-first century.”⁵⁹ They soon found, however, that they could not entirely control the forms that Islam took once the secularist leash was loosened.

The AKP-Gülen Synthesis?

Founded in 2001 and gaining power just a year later, the current ruling party, the Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (Justice and Development Party), also known as the AK Party, meaning “white party,” or simply as the AKP, is to date the most politically successful fusion between politics and Islam in modern Turkey. Its leader, the former prime minister and current president of Turkey (since 2014), Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, espouses conservative social values, economic liberalization and globalization, and the weakening of army control over the Turkish state.

In White’s words, the AKP’s accomplishments are a function of “its ability to symbolically link its roots in Islam (which is reframed as roots in ‘moral values’) with neo-liberal aspirations (i.e., economic restructuring, privatization, and EU integration).”⁶⁰ These elements appeal to the emerging Anatolian business class. Simultaneously, the AKP balances the demands of neo-liberals with those of the poor, linking “social populism and wealth redistribution with tradition and moral obligation by supporting and

⁵⁹ Hendrick, *Gülen: The Ambiguous Politics of Market Islam*, 23.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 53-4.

promoting the effectiveness of private Islamic foundations [*vakıf*] over state-administered welfare institutions.”⁶¹

Like the AKP, the Gülen movement appeals to those who are successful in business even as it fulfills charitable obligations placed upon it by Islam. Indeed, for a long time, the AKP and the Gülen movement appeared as one and the same thing, with Gülen-affiliated newspapers consistently voicing AKP positions and Gülen supporters winning an increasing number of government jobs. Gülen sympathizers were until very recently believed to be especially predominant in the police force and judiciary.⁶²

Expanding upon Bilici’s Gramscian interpretation of Gülen, Hendrick describes the AKP and Gülen as working jointly to effect a passive revolution, in which a subaltern group, led by organic intellectuals, gradually carries out “the slow reform of a society’s dominant social paradigm, a shift in the discursive structure of norms, values, and beliefs in the realm of education, the arts, and media that gradually leads to a reform of a society’s political and economic social structures without open rebellion.”⁶³ Hendrick further follows Gramsci in dividing passive revolutions into two phases: first, the subaltern group’s gradual integration into a society’s centers of cultural production, and, second, the group’s “march through the institutions of coercive political power (the military, the local and national police forces, and the local and national state bureaucracies).” Thus, according to Hendrick, the two phases are split between the AKP

⁶¹ Ibid., 53.

⁶² Holly Yeager and Lyndsey Layton, “Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s turmoil may stem from a former ally,” *Washington Post*, December 28, 2013, http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/turkish-leaders-turmoil-may-stem-from-a-former-ally/2013/12/28/f867e806-6f02-11e3-a523-fe73f0ff6b8d_story.html.

⁶³ Hendrick, *Gülen: The Ambiguous Politics of Market Islam*, 25-6.

and the Gülen Movement: “the AKP leads the ‘political march’ through Parliament, the presidency, and the state apparatus, while the GM carries out the ‘civilian march’ through education, business, media, and public relations.”⁶⁴ Hendrick’s interpretation accords with the view shared by most observers of Turkey until the end of 2013: that the Gülen movement and the AKP were essentially two sides of the same coin.

Neo-Ottomanism

Another factor uniting the AKP and the Gülen movement is their shared nostalgia for the Ottoman Empire. This neo-Ottoman orientation can take on a political dimension, as the words of former foreign minister (now prime minister) Ahmet Davutoğlu demonstrate.

Davutoğlu...denies that Turkey wishes to re-create the Ottoman Empire, an idea that would not sit well with other regional nations, but he is clearly inspired by this history. ‘Reintegration is the most important issue for us,’ he said, referring to Turkey’s policies in the Middle East. ‘The foundation for it is in our history and geography.’ He wishes ‘to bring back the golden era, which produced many important civilizations.’⁶⁵

In such narratives, the Ottoman Empire represents the glory days of Turkey as the center of the Muslim world and seat of the caliphate.

Neo-Ottomanism can also be shared by social classes and political groups in Turkey that otherwise have almost nothing in common with the AKP or the Gülen movement. Cosmopolitan Istanbulites with a secular outlook express nostalgia for the days when Istanbul seemed more “cultured,” “European,” or “tolerant,” thanks to its

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ White, *Muslim Nationalism*, 12.

minority (particularly Christian) populations. Likewise, both Gülen and the AKP portray the Ottoman Empire as a model of multi-ethnic coexistence, but White argues that this portrayal glosses over the unequal treatment accorded to the Empire's non-Muslim minorities. "It is apparent that the Ottoman Empire is used as a model for contemporary affairs uncritically, with no acknowledgment of inequalities between the Turkish center and non-Turkish peripheries and between Muslim and non-Muslim populations in Ottoman or present-day Turkey."⁶⁶

Whatever the political orientation, varieties of neo-Ottomanism are expressed in media as diverse as tuğra-emblazoned t-shirts reading (in English), "The Empire Strikes Back," and sculpture parks featuring busts of the Ottoman sultans. Neo-Ottoman architecture is the preferred medium for the neo-liberal urban renewal projects of AKP governments across the country, as Courtney Dorroll has discussed in her dissertation (in progress). Many of these seem to express the triumphalist side of neo-Ottomanism, as do the "reproductions of the moment of conquest of Christian Byzantium by the Turks [that] are everywhere to be seen, reenacted in festivals, emblazoned upon subway station walls, 'relived' in museums, fostered by the same Ottoman nostalgia that one finds in Davutoğlu's foreign policy."⁶⁷

In contrast to the AKP, Gülen seems to dwell far less upon such representations of Muslim domination over non-Muslims and more on the idealistic vision of Ottoman multi-ethnic and multi-confessional coexistence. Furthermore, his network endeavors to

⁶⁶ Ibid., 96.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 96.

turn his vision into reality through its Turkish and, particularly, international undertakings.

CHAPTER TWO: THE GÜLEN NETWORK

The Gülen movement seeks to address the problems that Gülen sees as plaguing “not only Muslims, but also humanity as a whole: ignorance, poverty and disunity.”⁶⁸

Furthermore, Gülen teaches that these must be addressed through concrete action as opposed to abstract contemplation. In Tittensor’s view, this conceptualization is

centered on Nursi’s notion of *sâ-y-ı insanı* (human exertion). [Gülen] had become disenchanted with both conventional textual Islam, which he felt was too legalistic, and Sufism, as it neglected worldly affairs with its focus on inner spirituality. He wanted to find a third way, a middle ground between the two that allowed for people to be spiritual, but at the same be engaged with the world around them. Gülen found his answer in a slightly revised version of *sâ-y-ı insanı*, which he rebadged as *aksiyon insanı* (man of action). Nursi, in a speech regarding the three main enemies of the Ottoman Empire—poverty, ignorance, and anarchy—advised that one of the keys to success was human exertion. In a similar vein, Gülen advocated that serving God should not be confined to mosques and to one’s own spiritual quest, but should be taken out to the community through everyday actions that serve society.⁶⁹

For this reason, Gülen’s movement is known by its sympathizers as *Hizmet*, or “service.”

Helen Rose Ebaugh, a Houston-based sociologist who interviewed Gülen sympathizers in Turkey and Texas, estimates that Hizmet has between eight and ten million followers around the world, “located in over 100 countries on five continents.”⁷⁰

Based on her ethnographic research on national identities in Turkey, White states that Gülenists are generally middle class and tend to “overlap with the Anatolian Tigers and the rising Islamic bourgeoisie, flush with money and power, although it is impossible to

⁶⁸ Esposito and Yilmaz, “Introduction: Islam and Peacebuilding,” 12-13.

⁶⁹ Tittensor, *House of Service*, 71-2.

⁷⁰ Ebaugh, *Gülen Movement*, 4.

tell to what extent.” Likewise, “[s]ome AKP members are Gülenists; others are not.” It is likely, however, that AKP supporters are more widely distributed among the working classes than are Gülenists. White says,

Among working-class Sunni Muslims of my acquaintance...Gülenists are relatively unknown and often considered an undesirable cult. This may be due to the middle-class quality of the movement that to my knowledge is not well represented among the working poor and unemployed, who thus remain ignorant of its goals and organization. It may also be due to competition between traditional Muslim brotherhoods like the *Nakşibendi*, who are active in working-class neighborhoods, and the upstart and nontraditional Gülenists who are not organized in any recognizably Islamic manner.

This is not to say that the movement is unstructured, however. Aras and Caha summarize its organization as “hierarchical and somewhat undemocratic”:

[Gülen] is the sole leader of the movement and the hierarchical order extends from the top to the bottom through an increasing number of *abiler* (elder brothers). The ranking is very strict, and each rank’s *abi* (elder brother) obtains only a certain amount of knowledge of the activities occurring or under discussion while agreeing to refrain from asking questions or seeking more knowledge about the higher ranks....Although this sort of structure may be helpful if the members of the community were to face persecution by the government, it does raise serious problems for the development of democracy within the group and creates the likelihood that many followers are left out of the decision-making process.⁷¹

The same structure governs the Movement even beyond Turkey, carried both by members “deliberately migrat[ing] to establish Gülen-inspired institutions in other countries” as well as others who “migrate for educational and/or business reasons and stay involved in the movement and its service projects once they settle in a new country.”⁷² All members, even students on restricted budgets, contribute generously to the movement. According to Ebaugh’s research among Gülenists in the United States,

⁷¹ Aras and Caha, “Fethullah Gulen and His Liberal ‘Turkish Islam’ Movement,” 150.

⁷² Ebaugh, *Gülen Movement*, 44.

“donations vary between 5% and 20% with 10% of yearly income as an average and a small group of individuals who make contributions above 20%.”⁷³

Gülenist Endeavors

The Gülen network is concentrated in several spheres of activity: business, media, charity, and education (including the dissemination of Turkish culture). The extent of the Gülen movement’s presence in the media can be seen in Gülen’s surprise 2008 selection by readers of *Foreign Policy* magazine as the world’s top public intellectual. The Turkish newspaper with the widest circulation, *Zaman*, is affiliated with the movement and publicized the *Foreign Policy* poll when votes were being cast.⁷⁴ Among the numerous other Gülen-affiliated media in Turkey are the television station Samanyolu; an important news agency, Cihan Haber Ajansı; and the publishing houses mentioned in the introduction, Blue Dome Press and The Light, Inc.⁷⁵ For the first few years after its founding in 1993, Samanyolu operated via donations from Gülenist businessmen, but it began to turn a profit in 2004, according to Ebaugh.⁷⁶ Other Gülenist businesses seem to have started in analogous fashion.

Of course, Gülenist media not only generate profits but also spread Gülen’s message to publics in Turkey and abroad. Even more efficient than the publishing houses mentioned above is the Gülen website, www.fgulen.com, which makes Gülen’s books,

⁷³ Ibid., 54.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 3.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 31.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 86.

recorded sermons, and interviews available in more than thirty languages. The website reproduces the full texts of most writings but also links to sites where the books and e-books can be purchased. Furthermore, the website shows how many people have read (or at least clicked on) each chapter through the website, a tool which presumably helps visitors to the website feel that they are members of a larger virtual community.

Gülenist charitable activities are spread across the globe and differ significantly from other Muslim charities, as David Tittensor points out:

Typically, Muslim movements and charities are rooted in their home country or immediate neighboring Muslim countries, helping with nationalist struggles, providing disaster relief and the funding of mosques rather than the development of modern schools and the provision of scholarships. Further, when there is funding for study, it is generally purely for the religious sciences and the propagation of cheap booklets to educate the masses in Salafi Islam.⁷⁷

Gülenist organizations are unusual in that they provide secular education and other aid to both Muslims and non-Muslims.

Regarding the non-Muslim perception of Muslim charitable work in general, Tittensor makes the important observation that many Muslim charities operate as part of organizations such as Hezbollah or Hamas that non-Muslim observers view as solely political parties or even terrorist organizations.⁷⁸ More visible Muslim charitable organizations, including those affiliated with Gülen, tend to be suspected of proselytizing. Historically, however, NGOs emerged as a primarily Christian phenomenon and often engaged in attempts at religious conversion.⁷⁹ The Gülen movement has also come under

⁷⁷ Tittensor, *House of Service*, 1-2.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 138.

suspicion for its sheer size; at an estimated worth of \$25 billion, it comes within half a billion dollars of equaling the worth of all Western faith-based organizations combined.⁸⁰

Outreach and Education

Education is the practical means by which Gülen hopes to achieve the goals of eradicating not only ignorance but also disunity and poverty. In an interview with *Foreign Policy*, he said, “We must acknowledge that we are all human beings. It is not our choice to belong to a particular race or family. We should be freed from fear of the other and enjoy diversity within democracy. I believe that dialogue and education are the most effective means to surpass our differences.”⁸¹ Traditionally, Muslims saw building a mosque as the most virtuous possible charitable endeavor. For Gülen and like-minded businesspeople, however, schools trump mosques, as “mosques only serve Muslims, while schools serve all human beings, which is an important aspect of Gülen’s theology of social responsibility to serve humanity.”⁸²

Before examining the Gülenist schools in detail, however, I wish to turn to another important function of the Gülen organization: the international dissemination of Turkish culture. Understandably, this goal has also been near and dear to the ruling party’s heart, although Gülen has often accomplished it with greater *savoir-faire*. One

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 149.

⁸¹ Harun Akyol, “The Role of Turkish Schools in Building Trusting Cross-ethnic Relationships in Northern Iraq,” in *Islam and Peacebuilding: Gülen Movement Initiatives*, ed. John L. Esposito and İhsan Yılmaz (New York: Blue Dome Press, 2010), 328.

⁸² Zeki Sarıtoprak, “Fethullah Gülen and His Theology of Social Responsibility,” in *Mastering Knowledge in Modern Times: Fethullah Gülen as an Islamic Scholar*, ed. İsmail Albayrak (New York: Blue Dome Press, 2011), 95-6.

recent example of an AKP outreach project was the unveiling of a rather unimpressive and widely mocked new logo and motto, “Turkey: Discover the Potential.” Gülen-affiliated organizations, on the other hand, most often establish Turkish cultural centers and fund trips to Turkey for foreigners.

Like the Gülenist schools, the Turkish cultural centers are spread across the globe. In the U.S. at least, these cultural centers offer a combination of adult education classes in such subjects as Turkish language and traditional arts such as paper marbling, talks and panel discussions on subjects such as dialogue between Islam and other religions or Turkey’s place in the world, and celebrations of Turkish holidays. Unlike the first two groups of activities, which are designed to reach American as well as Turkish audiences, the celebrations of holidays are meant mostly for members of local Turkish communities, although my experience has been that Americans are welcome as well. In describing Gülenist activities in Indonesia, however, Mohamed Nawab bin Mohamed Osman emphasizes that the local cultural center

invites non-Muslim community leaders such as leaders of various churches, Buddhist monasteries and Hindu temples to these events so as to bring about interreligious harmony between the different religious communities (İslamoğlu 2007). For many of these non-Muslim leaders, it is the first time in their lives that they have attended such a function, and it is important in enhancing their understanding of Islam.⁸³

Another key function of the events organized by Turkish cultural centers is to attract influential people in the host country. Sometimes these figures are very prominent indeed; among the prominent international figures who have gone to Gülenist events are

⁸³ Mohamed Nawab bin Mohamed Osman, “Towards a Middle Way: Islam in Southeast Asia and the Contributions of the Gülen Movement,” in *Islam and Peacebuilding: Gülen Movement Initiatives*, ed. John L. Esposito and İhsan Yılmaz (New York: Blue Dome Press, 2010), 306.

Madeleine Albright and Kofi Annan.⁸⁴ In September 2008, Bill Clinton even appeared via video at an *iftar* dinner at the Turkish Cultural Center in New York City, “prais[ing] the Gülen movement for the outstanding efforts of its members to promote peace throughout the world.”⁸⁵

Building upon the efforts of the cultural centers, for the last decade or so, the Gülen movement frequently sponsored all-expenses-paid trips to Turkey. Gülen’s network of wealthy supporters give him access to important politicians in various countries, connections which are furthered by such activities as all-expenses-paid trips to Turkey. In America at least, invitations for these trips are issued to prominent businesspeople, academics, religious figures from various faiths, and politicians at all levels. These trips are generally not one-note encomia on the glories of Gülen but rather a broader paean to Turkey and Turkish culture, seemingly intended to increase political, cultural, and business ties between the target country and Turkey. Up until the split between Gülen and the AKP in late 2013, these trips served more or less the function that AIPAC trips serve for the Israeli government. Now, however, it is difficult to say whether the trips will even continue, let alone whether they will continue to propagate government-friendly viewpoints.

Gülen and the “Turkish” Schools

Aside from such outreach, Gülen’s followers are especially active in the field of

⁸⁴ Dan Bilefsky and Sebnem Arsu, “Turkey Feels Sway of Reclusive Cleric in the U.S.,” *The New York Times*, April 24, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/25/world/middleeast/turkey-feels-sway-of-fethullah-gulen-a-reclusive-cleric.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.

⁸⁵ Ebaugh, *Gülen Movement*, 126.

education. In Turkey, they run around two hundred private preparatory schools, although a law has been passed that will force these schools to close by September of 2015.⁸⁶ There is also an extensive worldwide network of Gülen-influenced schools.⁸⁷ An exact count is difficult to come by, since many schools do not make public their association with the movement, but TÜRKÇEDER claims to have member schools in 140 countries and “hundreds of thousands” of students.⁸⁸ Estimates from other sources on the number of schools range from 1000 to more than 2000.⁸⁹ As of 2014, a blog tracking the Gülen charter schools in the US claims that there are 146.⁹⁰

Although the schools belong to TÜRKÇEDER, this organization is not actively involved in overseeing or funding individual schools. According to Ebaugh, one of the only scholars to investigate the financing of the schools,

each school is begun by a group of businessmen and other participants in the Gülen movement who see the need for such a school in a local area and initiate the fundraising and plans to make it happen....[F]inancial support comes initially from local sponsors until the time when tuition and fees from students can make the schools self supportive.⁹¹

Less sympathetic observers than Ebaugh have questioned the financial practices of the

⁸⁶ “Turkey to Close Down ‘Gülen’ Preparatory Schools,” *BBC.com*, last modified on March 1, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-26397755>.

⁸⁷ The schools are commonly called “Gülen schools,” but since Gülen supporters assert that Gülen does not exert any control over the schools, I refer to the schools as “Gülen-influenced” or “Gülen-inspired” instead.

⁸⁸ “Hakkında” [About us], *TÜRKÇEDER*, accessed on May 13, 2014, <http://www.turkceder.com/hakkinda/>.

⁸⁹ “Gülen Inspired Schools and Peace Education,” *Gülen Movement*, accessed on May 13, 2014, <http://www.gulenmovement.com/news/175-gulen-inspired-schools-and-peace-education>; Fehim Taştekin, “Turkish Schools Abroad Victims of AKP-Gülen Conflict,” *Al-Monitor*, April 11, 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/04/international-schools-abroad-suffer-gulen-conflict.html>.

⁹⁰ Stephanie Saul, “Charter Schools Tied to Turkey Grow in Texas,” *The New York Times*, June 6, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/07/education/07charter.html?_r=0&pagewanted=print.

⁹¹ Ebaugh, *Gülen Movement*, 97.

Gülenist schools. In the case of the Gülenist schools in Utah, the Utah State Charter School Board discovered that

despite the fact that the school was in US\$337,000 of debt, it was outlaying US\$53,000 to recruit teachers from Turkey and Central Asia, an amount that was in part subsidized by personal loans from members of the California-based Accord Institute of Education Research, a not-for-profit organization that founded charter schools in California and Arizona. Behind the scenes it seemed as if substantial amounts of money flowed across networks that operated outside of official channels.⁹²

Tittensor notes that this “lack of transparency and the internal bailout/support practices...are standard practices within the Movement – especially in the formative stages of its business ventures....”⁹³ This model may not fit American expectations for how a charter school should operate, but it is perfectly in line with the tradition of a Turkish *vakıf*, or foundation, which historically included charitable activities, such as soup kitchens or free lodgings, as well as profitable endeavors such as rental properties.

In fact, Tittensor argues, the Gülen Movement in general blurs the lines between for-profit and not-for-profit organizations, making it an early example of what Nobel Prize Laureate Muhammad Yunus has theorized as a “social business, [having] as its goal a social or environmental issue, rather than the pursuit of an ever-expanding bottom line. Despite having this objective in mind, the business still strives for profit, or at least cost recovery, in order to be self-sustaining. Moreover, its ultimate measure of success remains its impact toward its cause....”⁹⁴

⁹² Tittensor, *House of Service*, 150-1.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 157-8.

In practice, for the “Turkish” schools, this definition of success means that they begin as charities offering free education.

Once the schools have established themselves in the educational marketplace as both successful and desirable, they look to shift from being charitable organizations to self-sustaining businesses through the introduction of fee structures. This is a gradual process that involves maintaining some degree of charity. In Kyrgyzstan, for instance, a student explained that the school when it first opened was free, but later introduced a rolling fee structure with wealthier students required to pay more, while others, like him, were partially or fully subsidized through needs-based scholarships; a finding which is consistent with Ebaugh’s account that the schools provide assistance to between 20 to 40 percent of the student body through needs-based scholarships to help families from lower socio-economic brackets keep their children at the schools.⁹⁵

After beginning in Turkey, the Gülen school network initially expanded into the Turkic-speaking former Soviet republics in Central Asia. According to a Gülenist teacher interviewed by Tittensor, “the move into Central Asia was a natural fit for the first venture precisely because the people in the region were close linguistically and culturally, and Central Asia functioned as an experimental staging ground that gave the Movement confidence to continue to expand.”⁹⁶ Soon after the collapse of the Soviet Union, businesspeople and teachers influenced by Gülen started schools in Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan.⁹⁷

From Central Asia, the Movement began to focus on non-Muslim-majority countries. These included but were by no means limited to countries that were once part of the Ottoman Empire, such as the Balkan states. Tittensor argues that because Balkan countries were not the only non-Muslim-majority nations targeted by the Movement, the

⁹⁵ Ibid., 165-6.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 4.

⁹⁷ Ebaugh, *Gülen Movement*, 43.

motivation cannot have been solely neo-Ottomanism.⁹⁸ This is doubtlessly a valid point, but neo-Ottomanism is not necessarily geographically circumscribed. Instead, it can be seen as an attitude toward religious diversity that explains why the Movement wishes to expand its activities in non-Muslim-majority countries in general.

While many teachers in international Gülenist schools have no affiliation with or even knowledge of Gülen,⁹⁹ many others “have been educated in Gülen schools and many of them have stayed in student residences [affiliated with the movement]...In addition to being competent in his or her particular subject, therefore, teachers are familiar with and committed to the ideals of the Gülen movement.”¹⁰⁰ Such teachers see moving from Turkey in order to teach abroad as an important form of service; in fact, Tittensor states that competition for positions abroad is so fierce that the jobs are often distributed by lottery.¹⁰¹

International Gülenist schools offer instruction in English or the language of the host country, but Turkish is always part of the curriculum, at least as an elective. Classes on Islam, on the other hand, are not taught in most countries.¹⁰² As the movement expanded into non-Muslim-majority countries, Tittensor says, “direct references to Islam and the need for the religious sciences...were replaced by talk of ‘*evrensel değerler*’

⁹⁸ Tittensor, *House of Service*, 5.

⁹⁹ Ebaugh, *Gülen Movement*, 30.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 98.

¹⁰¹ Tittensor, *House of Service*, 103.

¹⁰² Bekim Agai, “Islam and Education in Secular Turkey: State Policies and the Emergence of the Fethullah Gülen Group,” in *Schooling Islam: The Culture and Politics of Modern Muslim Education*, ed. Robert W. Hefner and Muhammad Qasim Zaman (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007), 160-1.

(universal values) and ‘*ahlak*’ (morals).”¹⁰³ In fact, open proselytizing is, according to Gülen, both unnecessary and discouraged:

Gülen asks his teachers to follow and not deviate from the principle of *temsil* (representation), which he sees as the best form of preaching. Indeed, in Gülen’s view, *temsil* when conducted properly renders *tebliğ* (preaching) unnecessary. The practice of *temsil* means living according to Islam wherever you are and representing it through your daily actions, but never mentioning the word Islam. According to Gülen ‘those who lead the way must set a good example for their followers. Just as they are imitated in their virtues and good morals, so do their bad and improper actions and attitudes leave indelible marks upon those who follow them,’ and the most important carriers of this message are teachers.¹⁰⁴

Conclusion

The International Turkish Olympiad could in itself be said to serve as a form of *temsil*, or representation. In the next chapter, we will explore how the Turkish Olympiad contributes to the construction of the Gülenist message.

¹⁰³ Tittensor, *House of Service*, 1.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 75.

CHAPTER THREE: SONG TYPE AND MESSAGE IN THE TURKISH OLYMPIAD

Organization of the Turkish Olympiad

TÜRKÇEDER, the umbrella association to which the international “Turkish” schools belong, has staged the International Turkish Olympiad (Uluslararası Türkçe Olimpiyatları) since the event’s inception in 2003.¹⁰⁵ Over that time, the components have changed almost every year, as new competitions are introduced or the rules for old ones are revised. Only three of the contests are usually televised: the song, poetry, and folk dance competitions, the first two of which were introduced in 2005 and the last in 2010.¹⁰⁶ From this point forward I will speak primarily of the song competition.

TÜRKÇEDER draws up a list of songs for each year’s competition and distributes this list to the schools, but organizing committee members emphasize that students also have the right to choose their own songs if they wish. Preliminaries are held at each school, usually beginning in February. In many if not all countries, regional preliminaries precede the national competition. Country finals are held in March, after which, according to a teacher from a school in Erbil, Iraq, “the records [of the country final performances] are sent to Turkey....Turkish officials assess the performances of the students and offer them advice in order to improve their performances, when

¹⁰⁵ In 2014, the festival was renamed the “International Language and Culture Festival” (Uluslararası Dil ve Kültür Festivali). Even though the word “Turkish” no longer appears in the title, the focus on Turkish language and culture is unchanged.

¹⁰⁶ “Türkçe Olimpiyatları: Yarışmalar” [Turkish Olympiad: Competitions], *Türkçe Olimpiyatları*, accessed on May 12, 2014, <http://test.turkceolimpiyatları.org/Yarismalar/?Dil=TR>.

necessary.”¹⁰⁷ This point shows the degree to which the officials of TÜRKÇEDER are committed to exerting control over the final artistic product.

Winners from each country are then brought to Turkey. Students selected for the song competition final must know at least three Turkish songs, while poetry contestants must memorize at least three poems. The songs are pre-recorded to give program organizers the option of using a backing track if a performer falls ill.¹⁰⁸ This seems to demonstrate that the officials value a polished performance rather than a more “authentic” – and less controllable – one.

In 2013, the activities in Turkey included performances in 55 Turkish cities. Not all students are sent to all cities: instead, according to TÜRKÇEDER General Art Director Cemil Özen, ““Which songs, folk dances or poems will be performed during the festival in each city is determined according the features of the region.””¹⁰⁹ In practice, this means that a student singing a folk song identified with the Aegean region would be sent to a city in that area, whereas performances of Kurdish folk dances take place only in Turkey’s Kurdish-majority southeast.

In the 2013 competition, after the city exhibitions were concluded, finals for poetry recitation, folk dance, and singing were held in Ankara (for poetry) and Istanbul (for the other two). Opening and closing ceremonies took place in Ankara and Istanbul, respectively.

¹⁰⁷ İpek Üzüm, “Success of Int’l Turkish Olympiads Result of Extensive Teamwork,” *Today’s Zaman*, June 10, 2012, <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-283038-success-of-intl-turkish-olympiads-result-of-extensive-teamwork.html>.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

The Music of the Turkish Olympiad

As noted in the introduction, the Turkish Olympiad has yet to receive any significant scholarly attention. Of course, the field of Turkish music in general has benefited from some excellent work, particularly by Martin Stokes on *arabesk* (*The Arabesk Debate*, 1992) and sentimentalism in Turkish popular music (*The Republic of Love*, 2010). Stokes's consideration of genres of Turkish music and their associations with particular social groups and political viewpoints proved invaluable for my research. Eliot Bates's overview of Turkish music in its contemporary contexts (*Music in Turkey: Experiencing Music, Expressing Culture*, 2011) has also been extremely helpful.

A Controversial Festival

The polarization of opinions about the Gülen movement is reflected in opinions about the Turkish Olympiad. One former participant in the Olympiad describes the experience simply as “crazy awesome,” adding that it made her “very culturally aware.” In the Islamist newspaper *Yeni Akit*, columnist Hüseyin Öztürk also offers an idealistic take on the Turkish Olympiad, citing mystical poets Yunus Emre and Rumi in support of the idea of multi-faith dialogue before telling readers who want to understand the Turkish Olympiad to look into the eyes of the children participating: “In those eyes you will see peace, love, brotherhood, trust, soulful conversation [*muhabbet*], and great hopes.”¹¹⁰ A fairly typical comment from YouTube user “reaLLifestyle,” praising a duet performance

¹¹⁰ Hüseyin Öztürk, “İnsanlık el ele” [Humanity hand-in-hand], *Yeni Akit*, June 8, 2012. <http://tr.fgulen.com/content/view/20902/12/>.

of the folk song “Göçmen Kızı” (Immigrant Girl), says, “God give us strength and power. Let him give us wisdom. My creator, do not let our unity and wholeness be destroyed. Protect this FATHERLAND, my Lord. AMEN,”¹¹¹ thus neatly combining devotion to Islam with Turkish nationalism.

The users of the satirical website eksisozluk.com, however, express their extreme disapproval of the Turkish Olympiad in colorful terms. The user “medical jesus” defines “closing ceremony of the 10th Turkish Olympiad” as

a ridiculous organization’s ridiculous ceremony. The AKP government’s understanding of culture and art leaves my mouth hanging open. A man goes and closes the state theaters because they “don’t make any money” but then spends millions on this pointless event. I have no idea what’s going through their heads. So what if some strange African learns Turkish?¹¹²

The next person to comment on the thread made his or her point even more succinctly, simply linking to a picture of the crowds listening to Hitler at the 1936 Berlin Olympics.¹¹³

Multiculturalism and the Turkish Olympiad

The opening of the competition juxtaposes Turkish nationalism not with references to Islam but rather with a vivid tableau of multiculturalism. Before the

¹¹¹ ReaLLifestyle, comment on “10. Türkçe Olimpiyatları 2012 – Göçmen Kızı – Bosna Hersek – Slovenya” [10th Turkish Olympiad 2012 – “Immigrant Girl” – Bosnia-Herzegovina – Slovenia], accessed May 8, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5IeyGcZN8Bw&list=PLur1JYItA6erXzHbn-0fXBScjP0HXx8JR&index=1>.

¹¹² Medical jesus, comment on “10. türkçe olimpiyatları kapanış töreni” [Closing ceremony of the 10th Turkish Olympiad], June 14, 2012, <http://eksisozluk.com/10-turkce-olimpiyatları-kapanis-toreni--3432131>.

¹¹³ Rabotnitsa, comment on “10. türkçe olimpiyatları kapanış töreni” [Closing ceremony of the 10th Turkish Olympiad], June 14, 2012, <http://eksisozluk.com/10-turkce-olimpiyatları-kapanis-toreni--3432131>.

performers come onto the stage, the audience stands and sings the national anthem, as do many of the students waiting in the wings. Next is the opening song described at the beginning of this paper, which was composed especially for the tenth anniversary of the Olympiad.

As one student and I noticed, the second stanza, which is also the fourth and final stanza, contains the word “laughing,” which in Turkish is “gülen.” In other words, the line can be translated, only slightly ungrammatically, as, “Let’s be the face of Gülen.” The mention of Yunus Emre is also noteworthy, as Yunus Emre was a Turkish Sufi poet and Gülen believes that Sufism is the “spiritual dimension of Islam.”¹¹⁴ The significance of the fact that this is a choral piece is best put into words by Philip V. Bohlman: “The chorus at once envoices and embodies the nation, giving voice to all its citizens and harmonizing those voices in an emblematic unisonance.”¹¹⁵ In this case, however, the chorus simultaneously embodies the nation and the international community of Gülen’s followers. Performed by students in either costumes from their own country or traditional Turkish clothing (usually worn if a student’s solo is a Turkish folk song), the opening number offers a spectacle that is simultaneously national and international/exotic for the Turkish audience to enjoy.

The Folk Song and Turkish Nationalism

The first solo I showed to the students I interviewed was a Turkish folk song

¹¹⁴ Thomas Michel, “Fethullah Gülen as Educator,” in *Turkish Islam and the Secular State*, ed. M. Hakan Yavuz and John L. Esposito (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2003), 83.

¹¹⁵ Philip V. Bohlman, *Focus: Music, Nationalism, and the Making of the New Europe*, 2nd edition, revised (New York and London: Routledge, 2011), 71.

called “Kütahya’nın Pınarları” (The springs of Kütahya), performed by Shohrukh Yunusov of Tajikistan. Almost all of my interviewees expressed a fondness for this *türkü* (folk song). The one exception recognized it as a *zeybek* (a folk song/dance characteristic of the Aegean region) but claimed not to know this particular song. Two interviewees alluded to the fact that the *zeybek* is associated with *efes*, guerilla fighters who, in the early twentieth century, protected residents of Aegean towns and villages from extortion by landlords and tax collectors. During the War of Independence after World War I, *efes* led much of the fighting in the region, thereby becoming a powerful national (and anti-Greek) symbol. Shohrukh Yunusov’s costume reproduces the distinctive clothing of the *efes* and even the curved knife they traditionally carried (although one student objected to the number and size of the tassels hanging from his hat, finding the look to be “over the top”). Another even speculated that the hat might be from Yunusov’s native Tajikistan.

Arabesk and Class

Folk songs are frequent entrants to the competition and have broad appeal as representative of the Turkish nation. Another genre that appears just as often, yet is much more controversial, is *arabesk*, a type of popular music that is often understood as drawing heavily on conventions of mid-twentieth century Egyptian film music.¹¹⁶ Its lyrics emphasize the harshness of fate and the condition of separation from the beloved, themes which, as Cemal Kafadar points out, *arabesk* shares with Sufi poetry as well as

¹¹⁶ Martin Stokes, *The Arabesk Debate: Music and Musicians in Modern Turkey* (Oxford; New York: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 1992), 92.

the Sufi-influenced poems of Turkish wandering minstrels, or *aşıks*.¹¹⁷ Thus, *arabesk* is not far removed from the spiritual and philosophical world in which Gülen was nurtured.

I showed the students a performance of “Gülüm benim,” a well-known song associated with *arabesk* megastar İbrahim Tatlıses. All but one of the students chose this as the “best” performance; as one said, the young singer, Ruslan Annamammedov of Turkmenistan, had impeccable pronunciation and mastered all of Tatlıses’s characteristic hand gestures and audience interactions, such as having an audience member sing a phrase of the song. The majority also chose this performance as the one they enjoyed the most, yet none would unconditionally admit to being fans of the *arabesk* genre. One student qualified her affection by saying that she only likes some high-quality *arabesk* by such singers as Orhan Gencebay. Much *arabesk*, she said, is “bad music. It’s low quality.... We aren’t going to say that all *arabesk* is quality music – that’s a reality.”

This reluctance to embrace *arabesk* is quite common among Turks who consider themselves middle-class, as the genre is often seen as the music of working-class immigrants who arrive in the cities without being able to adjust to urban life.¹¹⁸ In his column on the Turkish Olympiad, Caymaz levels a similar critique against the Gülenists and AKP supporters, whom he sees as bumpkins incapable of appreciating “high” Turkish culture.¹¹⁹ Jenny White tells a personal anecdote about middle-class perceptions of *arabesk*: “Twice I witnessed conductors begin classical music concerts with diatribes

¹¹⁷ Cemal Kafadar, “The New Visibility of Sufism in Turkish Studies and Cultural Life,” in *The Dervish Lodge: Architecture, Art, and Sufism in Ottoman Turkey*, ed. Raymond Lifchez (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), 314-15.

¹¹⁸ Stokes, *Arabesk Debate*, 99-103.

¹¹⁹ Caymaz, “Detone Küçük Çocuklar Yarışması.”

against arabesk music, and once, a young man in the audience, moved by the attack on arabesk, rose to his feet and bore witness to his and his generation's devotion to the principles of Atatürk. He was rewarded with thunderous applause."¹²⁰ Thus, in a kind of reverse snobbery, incorporation of *arabesk* into the Turkish Olympiad seems to have become a way for Gülenists to assert that they are not among the secularist elite, not among those Turks who try so hard to be European that they have forgotten where they came from.

The “Black” Alevi

If inclusion of *arabesk* in the competition is meant to show that Gülenists embrace all classes, another song chosen for the Turkish Olympiad introduces the element of race. “Kara değil mi,” originally performed and composed by the pop-rock group Badem, sets five stanzas of an eleven-stanza poem by the seventeenth-century poet Karacaoğlan (a nickname meaning “Dark Boy” or “Black Boy”). The protagonist, identified in the final stanza as the poet himself, addresses a woman who has called him black, listing for her all the beautiful things that are also black, including the woman's own eyes and eyebrows, coffee, and the covering of the Kaaba at Mecca.

Introducing the song, the host praises the singer, a Tanzanian boy named Abdülkadir (no last name given), for “being the translator of our [Turks'] feelings.” He continues, “You know how we [Turks] can't tell dark from blond? We can't really distinguish colors.” As two interviewees pointed out, however, Turks' supposed lack of

¹²⁰ White, *Muslim Nationalism*, 117.

racial prejudice is belied by the fact that this song, which begins with a reference to the protagonist's "darkness" or "blackness," was assigned to an African singer. In fact, three different African competitors, boys from Tanzania and Uganda and a girl from Senegal, sang "Kara değil mi" over the course of the 2012 Turkish Olympiad. Informed of this, one respondent remarked that this was "unnecessary" and that it might have been better to have a white person sing the song: "It [having a black person sing the song] draws your attention to the skin color rather than the *türkü*. I don't find it very pleasant....I'm not calling these people racist or anything, but it's not a nice thing." Interestingly, for another interviewee, Abdülkadir's performance style was also marked as "Black," continually utilizing what the interviewee described as a "hip-hop arm gesture" ill-suited to a Turkish folk (or folk-pop) song.

According to Eliot Bates, the fact that Karacaoğlan gives his name in the final stanza marks him as a member of Turkey's Alevi minority.¹²¹ It is noteworthy that, while many members of this heterodox Muslim movement are suspicious of Islamists in general, Gülenists have made some efforts to reach out to Alevis. A columnist for *Zaman*, the Gülenist newspaper with the widest circulation, criticized the ruling party for their failure to treat Alevis fairly, saying, "If somebody wishes to go to a *cemevi* [a place of worship for Alevis] to worship, we do not have any right to say no and ask them to go to a mosque instead. There is no such democracy. If a citizen demands a *cemevi*, it is the government's responsibility to meet the request. I mostly criticize the AK party in this

¹²¹ Eliot Bates, *Music in Turkey: Experiencing Music, Expressing Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 13.

respect. They have been putting the Alevi off for seven years. This is a shame.”¹²² Given this attempt at drawing Alevi into the Gülenist coalition, it is noteworthy that the song finals included not one but two songs with texts by Karacaoğlan, who is widely believed (although not universally acknowledged) to have been Alevi.

The Kurdish Question

Blacks and Alevi were not the only minorities implicitly acknowledged through the choice of song. At least one Kurdish song, “Şemname,” made it onto the program, although only in cities in southeastern Turkey, where the Kurdish minority is concentrated. The performer, a girl from Gabon, also introduced herself to the audience in Kurdish. In a country where the state has long waged an undeclared civil war with the Kurdish Worker’s Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan, or PKK), and where many bans on the use of Kurdish in public places still exist, the inclusion of both sung and spoken Kurdish in a contest that celebrates the Turkish language is remarkable. In performance, “Şemname” was further marked as Kurdish by the presence of male back-up dancers in traditionally Kurdish baggy pants (şalvar) performing a Kurdish line dance.

Gülen’s expressed attitude toward what is euphemistically called the “Kurdish problem” has not always been consistent. Gülen’s spiritual role model Said Nursi was himself Kurdish and even at one point agitated for Kurdish-language education to be

¹²² “Gülen’den Alevi Açılımı” [An Opening to the Alevi from Gülen], *Radikal*. October 15, 2010. Accessed April 30, 2013. <http://www.radikal.com.tr/radikal.aspx?atype=radikaldetayv3&date=&articleid=1023836>.

instituted in the southeast of Turkey.¹²³ It is therefore noteworthy that Gülen accepts anyone as “Turkish” who is (a) Muslim and (b) connected to Turkey in some way, even if through immigration. As Yavuz says, “In his memoirs, Gülen hardly differentiates between ethnic and nonethnic Turks and treats both groups as Turks *and* Muslims. He therefore has a more inclusive notion of identity, shaped by the Ottoman Islamic legacy.”¹²⁴

In practical terms, Gülenists have been active in charitable and educational activities aimed at Kurds, particularly those in Turkey and Northern Iraq. An article in the *Economist* (1/30/2008) “mentions that followers of Mr. Gülen distributed meat to some 60,000 families during the Feast of the Sacrifice and that doctors who are followers of Mr. Gülen are offering free check-ups and treatment in Kurdish regions, presenting the message that Kurds and Turks are brothers in Islam.”¹²⁵ Gülen has also assisted the AKP in its attempt to integrate young Kurds peacefully through Islam.¹²⁶

A well-known Gülen statement, however, sounded to Kurds like a call for genocide, although Gülen later insisted his prayer was directed only at members of the PKK: “Knock their homes upside down, destroy their unity, reduce their homes to ashes, may their homes be filled with weeping and supplications, burn and cut off their roots,

¹²³ Mardin, *Religion and Social Change*, 79-80.

¹²⁴ M. Hakan Yavuz, “The Gülen Movement,” in *Turkish Islam and the Secular State: The Gülen Movement*, ed. M. Hakan Yavuz and John L. Esposito (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2003), 24.

¹²⁵ Ebaugh, *Gülen Movement*, 3.

¹²⁶ Murat Güneş Tezcür, “Afterword,” in *Secular State and Religious Society: Two Forces in Play in Turkey*, ed. Berna Turam (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 202.

and bring their affairs to an end.”¹²⁷

Gülen’s faux pas regarding the Alevis and the Kurds recalls Jenny White’s assertion that neo-Ottomanism “does not provide a framework for encompassing Turkey’s other minorities, like Kurds and Alevis. The Ottoman state tried a number of different strategies to co-opt or control Kurds and Alevis, whom they saw as potentially rebellious subjects, with only intermittent success. It is not surprising, then, that today’s Muslim nationalists lack an ideological framework for incorporating these groups into the nation.”¹²⁸

A Multiplicity of Messages

In conclusion, it is impossible to distill the song competition into a single “message” intended for all members of its audience. For one, there is no single audience but rather multiple groups with various relationships to the Gülenist network and its Turkish schools. Even as the students perform and thus deliver the message intended for the audience, they themselves constitute an “audience.” As my interview with a graduate of a Gülenist school shows, participating in the Turkish Olympiad can have a profound effect on students’ attitudes toward Turkey. Of course, the second and much more numerous audience consists of Turks themselves, whether they live abroad or in Turkey.

A further complication is that the performances in the Turkish Olympiad song competition send different messages to different audiences. Gülen has been described as

¹²⁷ Quoted in Berlinski, “Who is Fethullah Gülen?”

¹²⁸ White, *Muslim Nationalism*, 12-13.

a “strikingly non-contentious” public speaker “[whose] speeches and sermons are usually cautious so as not to be offensive to certain groups. His statements can be made subject to different interpretations by different audiences.”¹²⁹ As mentioned in the first chapter, Joshua Hendrick, building upon the communications theory of E. M. Eisenberg (1984), sees this avoidance of controversy as part of an overall “strategic ambiguity.”¹³⁰

The same non-contentiousness can easily be seen in the message created by the song competition. (Ironically, for those with doubts about Gülen’s intentions, the very caution exercised in this regard seems to reinforce suspicions that Gülen is up to no good.) Students participating in the contest are meant to feel an affinity with Turkish culture and values. In addition, they are intended to understand that Turks in general and Gülenists in particular are tolerant toward non-Turks and non-Muslims (a message also intended for minorities within Turkey such as the Alevis and the Kurds). At the same time, Turkish audiences witness an affirmation that Fethullah Gülen’s brand of Islam is compatible with Turkish nationalism. Through the choice of songs and the ways in which the songs are presented, the competition organizers take pains to demonstrate that, however powerful they may have become, Gülen and his supporters are not a threat to the secularist Turkish state. In a sense, the multiplicity of messages is the only message, allowing the Turkish Olympiad to be all things to all audiences.

¹²⁹ Mucahit Bilici, “The Fethullah Gülen Movement,” 8.

¹³⁰ Hendrick, *Gülen: The Ambiguous Politics of Market Islam*, 56.

CHAPTER FOUR: PUBLICS AND COUNTERPUBLICS OF THE TURKISH OLYMPIAD

In another sense, these audiences themselves do the work of constructing the Olympiad. Therefore, we must consider who they are. In other words, who is the public organizing and being organized by the Turkish Olympiad? On the most basic level, the public consists not only of those sitting in the Istanbul sports hall watching the performance live but also those watching on various national and international television channels. Furthermore, the performances circulate via social media, with the most popular videos attracting hundreds of thousands of views. The languages used in the comments indicate that, while a solid majority of commenters are or at least speak Turkish, significant numbers come from other countries. Thus, the public is in some sense a transnational one.

Within this larger transnational public, I argue that there are in fact multiple smaller publics engaged with the Turkish Olympiad in divergent ways. I then seek to explore the natures and interactions of these sub-publics. First of all, if, as Michael Warner puts it, texts and publics are co-constitutive of each other, engaged in “[a] kind of chicken-and-egg circularity,”¹³¹ this definition seems to provide little support for the idea of a “text” (or in this case a performance) that organizes more than one public. In addition, there are fundamental differences between these sub-publics. While some have the oppositional political character that Nancy Fraser defines as being essential to the concept of a counterpublic, others could arguably be characterized as what Lauren

¹³¹ Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2005), 67.

Berlant terms juxtapolitical – in other words, “flourishing in proximity to the political because the political is deemed an elsewhere managed by political elites.”¹³²

In a 2014 article on the Turkish religious singer Mehmet Emin Ay, Martin Stokes has likewise analyzed YouTube comments in conjunction with theories on counterpublics. I find, however, that even a single “text” can give rise to and interact with multiple counterpublics. Moreover, even the distinction between public and counterpublic becomes blurred in the context of the Turkish Olympiad.

Given that not all members of the larger Turkish Olympiad public understand Turkish, the creation and communication of the messages of the “text” becomes an intriguing problem. Here I draw upon Sara Ahmed’s idea of affective economies, arguing that such transactional emotions create the type of “sentimental citizenship” discussed by Stokes, a concept that also assists in bridging political divides within the Turkish-speaking public.¹³³ Finally, the nature of some of these publics leads me to a reexamination of various views on rationality in public discourse.

Methodology

The primary sources I consulted were YouTube videos of the Turkish Olympiad and the comments thereon. My selections included the videos of the complete finals, for which 2011 to 2013 were the only years available, and the official competition channel’s

¹³² Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” *Social Text* 25/26 (1990): 67; Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 3.

¹³³ Sara Ahmed, “Affective Economies,” *Social Text* 22:2 79 (2004), op. cit.; Martin Stokes, *The Republic of Love: Cultural Intimacy in Turkish Popular Music* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2010), op. cit.

playlist of videos of the individual songs, which list included only the 2012 and 2013 competitions. I also selected the fifty most viewed Turkish-Olympiad related videos on YouTube. Beyond YouTube, I examined entries in the popular satirical online dictionary *eksisozluk.com*, specifically the top threads that appeared in searching for “Türkçe Olimpiyatları” (Turkish Olympiad), “Uluslararası Türkçe Olimpiyatları” (International Turkish Olympiad), and “Uluslararası Türkçe Olimpiyatları” preceded by the number of a particular year’s competition. Finally, I included 15 newspaper opinion columns from newspapers across the political spectrum, ranging from the Gülen-affiliated newspaper *Zaman* to the secularist/leftist publication *Radikal*.

In order to find patterns in the data, I organized the comments on each video according to language, with the categories being Turkish, non-native Turkish, English, and other. This step was omitted for *eksisozluk.com* because I found only Turkish comments there. For both sites, I also organized the comments according to content, which included like or dislike of the singer’s performance and sentiments that could roughly be categorized as religious, Turkish nationalist, other nationalist, pan-Turkic, universalist, pro-Gülen, pro-AKP, or other.

Categorizing the Publics of the Turkish Olympiad

Among the characteristics of a public that Warner lists in his essay “Publics and Counterpublics” is that a public is “constituted through mere attention.”¹³⁴ The fact that people are paying attention to the Turkish Olympiad can be documented through the

¹³⁴ Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 87.

newspaper columns and social media listed above. These texts also, however, make visible the multiplicity of identities and opinions to which members of the Turkish Olympiad public adhere.

Considering these factors, the Turkish Olympiad public outside Turkey can be divided into several categories. One such set is comprised of the performers themselves, who not only exert agency in constructing the message but are also among the intended recipients. Their friends, family, and fans certainly follow the performers on YouTube or other video-sharing sites. Finally, many Turkish expatriates form part of the Turkish Olympiad's audience.

Within Turkey, one group within the Turkish Olympiad public could be termed "Islamist," here meaning that they are sympathetic to Islam's public visibility rather than that they necessarily advocate for law based on Islamic precedents. These can be subdivided into the AKP and its supporters on the one hand and Gülenists on the other hand (since as we have seen, the two no longer present the united front that they once did). Opposed to both of these are nationalists and secularists, two groups that can be distinguished but are often found to be in agreement, particularly when it comes to reactions to Gülen.

Are these groups "publics"? Warner further defines a public as "the social space created by the reflexive circulation of discourse," so we must first consider the spaces within which the above groups interact. As already noted, the Turkish Olympiad attracts live audiences of thousands to its shows, of which there are around 60 (including the shows in each city, the various finals, and the opening and closing ceremonies).

Thousands more within Turkey watch the show on television. The numbers of YouTube views indicate that hundreds of thousands follow the competition on YouTube, and the various Turkish Olympiad threads on eksisozluk.com include a total of around two thousand comments.

Not only the identities and opinions outlined above but also these physical and virtual spaces help constitute the sub-publics of the Turkish Olympiad. [Eksisozluk.com](http://eksisozluk.com) is perhaps the easiest of these to define. Unlike those participating in the discourse on YouTube, its users all appear to be native speakers of Turkish. With few exceptions, the views expressed regarding the Turkish Olympiad are highly critical, attacking the Olympiad from secularist (anti-Gülen and anti-AKP) and nationalist angles. A typical entry mocks the Turkish Olympiad advertisements for their less-than-perfect usage of Turkish: “As it’s a Turkish Olympiad, in my opinion the organization is being ironic by using Turkish with mistakes in it. You don’t say, “Let us be acquaintances,” you say, “Let’s meet.” Using unnecessary helper verbs all over the place doesn’t make you more sympathetic.”¹³⁵ Given its oppositional character, eksisozluk.com for the most part fits Fraser’s description of “subaltern counterpublics” as “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs.”¹³⁶

The difficulty with this definition as it applies to this case arises with the word

¹³⁵ bdavis, comment on “uluslararası türkçe olimpiyatları” [International Turkish Olympiad], June 20, 2011, <https://eksisozluk.com/uluslararasi-turkce-olimpiyatları--16588>; “türkçe olimpiyatları olup da, sloganında hatalı türkçe kullanması kanımca ironik olan organizasyondur. tanış olalım denmez tanışalım denir, her yere gereksiz yardımcı eylem ekleyip sempatik olunmaz.”

¹³⁶ Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere,” 67.

“subaltern.” Historically speaking, secularists and nationalists have enjoyed a privileged position in Turkey since the founding of the Republic in 1923. Even though their dominance has been severely threatened by the lengthy tenure of the AKP, both groups still perceive themselves as the rightful heirs and owners of the state. (To give but one example, posters reading “Atatürk, we are following in your footsteps” [Atatürk izindeyiz] were ubiquitous during the Gezi protests in the summer of 2013.)

The description of *eksisozluk.com* as “subaltern” does not completely miss the mark. Upon several occasions, the current government has filed suit against *eksisozluk.com*. The most recent lawsuit, filed in January 2014, accuses the director of *eksisozluk* and 39 of the writers of insulting the prophet Muhammed. If the lawsuit succeeds, the writers will face prison sentences ranging from nine months to one and a half years.¹³⁷ This persecution is certainly consistent with the treatment of subaltern groups. Given the advantages long accorded to well-educated, secularist Turks, however, it might be more appropriate to speak of *eksisozluk.com* as acting as a counterpublic on behalf of what its users might consider the “legitimate” public – the (embattled) secular establishment.

Whatever the best label for *eksisozluk* may be, it is clearly a relatively unified social space – a single public. The case is not so clear-cut for the public or publics interacting via YouTube. One complicating factor is that YouTube is hardly a self-enclosed space. Videos viewed on YouTube can be and frequently are shared on

¹³⁷ “Ekşi Sözlük yazarlarına da ‘dini değerleri aşağılama’ davası” [A lawsuit against the writers of Ekşi Sözlük as well, on the grounds of “insulting religious values”], *CNNTurk.com*, January 14, 2014, <http://www.cnnurk.com/turkiye/eksi-sozluk-yazarlarina-da-dini-degerleri-asagilama-davasi>.

Facebook or Twitter, thereby bringing new people into the conversation. Furthermore, there are clear divisions within the YouTube public. While Turkish is the language most commonly represented in the comments, English appears as well. In addition, responses to videos featuring a singer from a particular country often include the language spoken in that country and articulate concerns that a Turkish-speaking audience would probably not share.

To give but one example of the complexities that arise, a video featuring the Indonesian singer Patton Otlivio Latupereissa, who finished third in the 2012 song competition, gave rise to seventeen comments in Turkish, English, and Indonesian. One of the comments in Indonesian refers to Latupereissa's appearance on Indonesian Idol and the oddness of hearing him perform a religious song. (The song in this video is titled "Ya Resulallah.") Another Indonesian-language comment asks if Latupereissa is Muslim, to which a third user replies that he is Christian. Of the Turkish comments, one is sharply critical of the Gülen movement, saying, "Fethullah Gülen's goal is to create a perverted religion." The writer then calls upon God to curse the Gülen movement. This drew four responses, three of which attack the writer for this curse. The fourth agrees with the condemnation of Gülen but points out the AKP's complicity in Gülen's political project (although the original comment never mentioned support of the AKP). The English comment, written by a user with a Turkish name, invokes the unity of the Ummah, whatever the nationality or race of its members.¹³⁸ This series of comments thus encapsulates the diversity of opinion among the Turkish Olympiad public and shows that

¹³⁸ Dini Paylaşım, "Ya Resulallah' Naati – Patton Otlivio," YouTube video, 4:51, uploaded on July 6, 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xfa804rlv_g.

the “linguistic communities” within the public have strong claims to be considered as sub-publics, if not necessarily oppositional or subaltern counterpublics.

This example also raises a potential objection to the idea of the Turkish Olympiad public as a transnational one. Even though the commenters inhabit the same virtual space, they clearly do not interact with each other across linguistic divides, at least not on a regular basis. Language thus constitutes a major stumbling block to the idea of a “transnational public sphere.” Fraser has questioned this concept on other grounds as well, her main concern being to preserve the political component of public sphere theory. As she puts it, “the *normative legitimacy* and *political efficacy* of public opinion...are essential to the concept of the public sphere in democratic theory.” In the case of the Turkish Olympiad public, I prefer to think of it in Warner’s sense – as a public created by a text, but not necessarily responding in an overtly “political” way.

Affective Economies

A transnational public does not have to communicate solely through language, however. In her theory of affective economies, Sara Ahmed places great emphasis on the impact of objects and signs:

Affect does not reside in an object or sign, but is an affect of the circulation between objects and signs (= the accumulation of affective value over time. Some signs, that is, increase in affective value as an effect of the movement between signs: the more they circulate, the more affective they become, and the more they appear to “contain”

affect.¹³⁹

Most of Ahmed's examples involve language. In the case of the song competition of the Turkish Olympiad, however, the circulation of emotion is not entirely, or even primarily, reliant upon language. Instead, the emotions travel through genre and the music of the song competition itself.

For members of the Turkish Olympiad public who do not understand Turkish and/or are not familiar with the music, the contest is nevertheless legible through its associations with other song competitions, such as Eurovision or American Idol and its various international spinoffs. Although Eurovision entrants do not always wear national costumes, symbols of the countries are evoked either through costumes, sets, or the television graphics used to transition between performances. The graphics used for the televised Turkish Olympiad performances seem deliberately to recall those used in Eurovision. More generally, the association of children, colorful folkloric costumes, and singing participates in an affective circulation of feelings of generalized love and tolerance.

Sentimental Citizenship

After Hakkı Devrim wrote a newspaper column criticizing certain aspects of the Turkish Olympiad, most of the letters he received in response characterized the contest,

¹³⁹ Ahmed, "Affective Economies," 120.

in Devrim's words, as a "tear-inducing marvel" (*göz yaşartıcı mucize*).¹⁴⁰ Another letter, more sympathetic to Devrim's initial skepticism, questioned why all of the poems and songs performed during the contest "were on the theme of melancholy and longing" (*hüzün ve hasret içerikliydi*).¹⁴¹

The behavior of many audience members (as captured by the television cameras) reinforces this atmosphere of sentimentality. Even the celebrities who judge the competition are not infrequently seen to react with overt emotion, up to and including tears, at certain particularly meaningful moments in the competition. One such moment, among the fifty most viewed YouTube videos of the entire competition, came in the 2009 competition, when Muhammad Salman from Pakistan sang a song entitled "This Man Is My Father" (*Bu Adam Benim Babam*), with lyrics and music by Fatih Kısaparmak.¹⁴² Kısaparmak himself was among the judges and was brought to tears by Salman's performance. He even joined in with Salman. Afterward, in a departure from the normal procedure, Kısaparmak joined the student on stage and embraced him. (Kısaparmak's reaction cannot have been entirely unanticipated by the producers, as he, unlike the other judges, was provided with a microphone.)

Politicians in the audience also share in the display of emotion, as with Bülent Arınç, the then-assistant prime minister, and Emine Erdoğan, the then-prime minister's

¹⁴⁰ Hakkı Devrim, "Alın size bir edebiyat öğretmeni" [Here's a literature teacher for you], *TürkçeBilgi.com*, June 28, 2006, <http://www.turkcebilgi.com/kose-yazisi/89215/alın-size-bir-edebiyat-ogretmeni>.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Turkishbeauties, "7. Türkçe Olimpiyatları - pakistan muhammad salman 'bu adam benim babam'" [7th Turkish Olympiad – Pakistan, Muhammad Salman, "This Man is My Father"], YouTube video, 4:20, accessed on January 4, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RVAIAAdHYO7o>.

wife. Cassette recordings of Fethullah Gülen’s sermons often include similar audience reactions.¹⁴³ In a personal communication, Dr. Zeynep Korkman informed me that in the Turkish context, crying is seen as a marker of Islamic male identity.¹⁴⁴ According to Saba Mahmood, weeping during prayer is meant to emulate Abu Bakr, who, as the Prophet Muhammad’s father-in-law and the first caliph, serves as a role model for Sunni Muslims.¹⁴⁵

Stokes views this sharing of emotion in the public sphere as a form of nostalgia, which he terms “sentimental citizenship.” In his work *The Republic of Love*, Stokes examines three Turkish artists who, in his view, were influenced by and in turn helped create an ideal of cultural intimacy – a way in which private thoughts and emotions can enter the public sphere without threatening to undermine it.¹⁴⁶ In Berlant and Warner’s description, cultural intimacy functions as “the mechanism by which a core national culture can be imagined as a sanitized space of sentimental feeling and immaculate behavior, a space of pure citizenship.”¹⁴⁷ Moreover, sentimentality itself becomes a marker of the national, and crying at the Turkish Olympiad becomes a marker of Turkishness.

¹⁴³ Stokes, *Republic of Love*, 22.

¹⁴⁴ Zeynep Korkman, note on preliminary version of chapter, May 19, 2014.

¹⁴⁵ Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005), 147.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, op. cit.

¹⁴⁷ Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, “Sex in Public,” *Critical Inquiry* 24:2 (1998), 549.

Rational and Emotional Discourse

Given the strong influence of sentimentality upon the Turkish Olympiad public, the eksisozluk.com entry on “the type of people who don’t get emotional when watching the Turkish Olympiad” (*türkçe olimpiyatları ’nı izlerken duygulanmayan tip*) takes on particular significance. All but a few of the eksisozluk.com users place themselves in this category and describe such people as “rational,” “well-informed,” “having good sense,” etc.¹⁴⁸ These writers, with their clear enjoyment of clever wordplay and pride in their own capacity for rational dialogue, seek to participate in a counterpublic that is, I posit, more Habermasian than the Turkish Olympiad public as a whole.

What Charles Hirschkind, referring to post-Enlightenment hierarchical rankings of the senses, calls the “innate susceptibility of the ear to the irrational”¹⁴⁹ could well explain some of the suspicion that the secularist counterpublic feels regarding the Gülenist public. Therefore, in the context of the Turkish Olympiad, eksisozluk is a counterexample to Warner’s dichotomy of publics as rational and text-based and counterpublics as constituted through the sharing of common emotions. Here, it is an affective public, not the rational counterpublic, that lays claim to representing “the people” – in fact, all the world’s people.

The example of Turkish Olympiad thus complicates the debate around publics and counterpublics in several ways. For one, the single “text” of the Olympiad gives rise

¹⁴⁸ “Türkçe olimpiyatları ’nı izlerken duygulanmayan tip” [The types who don’t get emotional when watching the Turkish Olympiad], *eksisozluk.com*, accessed on April 19, 2014, <https://eksisozluk.com/turkce-olimpiyatlarini-izlerken-duygulanmayan-tip--3412476>.

¹⁴⁹ Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 16.

to multiple publics and counterpublics, distinguished by media, languages, identities, and opinions, in a way not discussed by Warner. In fact, as my formulation implies, the very distinction between publics and counterpublics becomes contested, with both secularists and Gülenists/AKP supporters conceiving of themselves as Turkey's "true" public.

Secondly, the primacy of language in the creation of publics comes into question. This occurs partly because those commenting on forums like YouTube do not share a single language (not even the language glorified by the Turkish Olympiad itself!) but also because language is arguably less important in constituting the various publics than the emotions shared associatively through music, costume, gesture, and other aspects of the performance. The privileging of affect over language (and, by association, rationality) in this instance suggests new avenues of exploration for theorists of publics and counterpublics.

CONCLUSION

As we have seen, the public/counterpublic dichotomy is complicated by associations with publics beyond the Turkish Olympiad. In the Turkish context, Gülen's supporters could be characterized as a counterpublic. At least during the time when their cooperation with the AKP was at its peak, however, the Turkish Olympiad acted as "the" public, harnessing all of the resources of the state for the elaborate spectacle of the Olympiad. Secularists also see themselves as "the" public, yet their debates regarding the Turkish Olympiad take place in the medium of *eksisozluk.com*, which in every other way meets Fraser's and Warner's definition of a counterpublic. Furthermore, as seen in the Indonesian example, the transnational Turkish Olympiad public incorporates national publics from nations other than Turkey as its own sub-publics.

As I mentioned in the introduction, the Gülen network and the AKP worked in harmony for many years. In recent months, however, growing tensions between the two groups have exploded into open conflict. Most spectacularly, wiretapped conversations involving Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and various associates and family members seem to reveal almost unfathomable corruption among the AKP. It is widely believed that Gülenists in the police made the secret recordings and arranged for their strategic dissemination on the Internet in the lead-up to the March 30 elections. Erdoğan struck back at Gülen by declaring that the Turkish Olympiad (which Erdoğan attended as

recently as 2013) is “finished for us.”¹⁵⁰ Nevertheless, the Turkish Olympiad finals took place in 2014, although in Ethiopia rather than Turkey.¹⁵¹

Given the split with the AKP, it will be interesting to see whether future incarnations of the Turkish Olympiad are aimed exclusively at a Gülenist counterpublic, abandoning the idea of speaking to a broader Turkish public. Another possibility is that, as the AKP-Gülen relationship deteriorates, new bonds between secularists and nationalists on the one hand and Gülenists on the other will begin to form. Several 2014 newspaper columns on the Turkish Olympiad provide the first indications of this development, including the following opinion column by Ali Öncü. Writing in *Ortadoğu*, a newspaper whose tagline is the nationalistic Atatürk quote, “How happy is he who says, ‘I am a Turk,’” Öncü begins by acknowledging the reader’s (and by implication his own) ambivalent feelings toward the *Cemaat*: “You may love the Cemaat. You may not. You may like what they have done. You may not.”¹⁵² Over the course of the article, it becomes clear that he is evaluating both the AKP and the Gülenists according to what they have done for Turkey. Disgusted with the AKP’s corruption and hypocrisy, he turns

¹⁵⁰ Abdullah Karakuş, “Olimpiyatlar bizim için bitti” [The Olympiad is finished for us], *Milliyet*, March 16, 2014, <http://siyaset.milliyet.com.tr/olimpiyatlar-bizim-icin-bitti/siyaset/detay/1852235/default.htm>.

¹⁵¹ Ethiopia may have been selected as the Turkish Olympiad host for several reasons. One, the current president of Ethiopia, Mulatu Teshome, served as Ambassador to Turkey from 2005 until his election as president in 2013, which undoubtedly gave him opportunities to develop ties with the Gülen network. Additionally, Ethiopia is Africa’s second most populous country as well as one of the continent’s fastest-growing economies, making it particularly appealing for Gülenist businessmen. It is also worth noting that the Gülen movement has thrived in many countries that, like Ethiopia, have a Christian majority. Official statistics indicate that Christians make up around 65% of the population and Muslims the remaining 35%, although Muslims contend that they are undercounted. See David H. Shinn, “A Look at Muslim-Christian Relations in Ethiopia,” *International Policy Digest*, January 21, 2014, <http://www.internationalpolicydigest.org/2014/01/21/a-look-at-muslim-christian-relations-in-ethiopia/>.

¹⁵² Ali Öncü, “Adam; Afrika’daki ‘Zenciye’ Türkçe Öğretmiş” [A man has taught Turkish to black people in Africa], *Ortadoğu*, March 24, 2014, <http://www.ortadoguzetesi.net/haber.php?id=34254>.

to the Gülenists and their organization of the Turkish Olympiad: “Think about these children – tomorrow they’re going to make up the elite, educated set in their countries. They’re going to hold office at various levels of their states’ bureaucracies. Could there be anything better for Turkey than this?”¹⁵³ He moves from this instrumentalist viewpoint to strike an overtly nationalist note: “Yes, friends, when the TURKISH flag waves, when our INDEPENDENCE march is sung [lit. “read”], when OUR TURKISH is learned and spoken by foreigners, I consider it my duty to be present at every [such] event.”¹⁵⁴ He ends by slighting Erdoğan for what Öncü perceives as the prime minister’s excessive kowtowing to the Kurds and lack of Turkish patriotism, saying that Erdoğan would never have banned a Kurdish Olympiad.¹⁵⁵ Thus, Öncü’s column hints at a possible future alignment in which Gülenists and nationalists could find common ground against the AKP.

Through the sentimental and nationalistic associations of its musical performances, the behavior of its audiences, and the genres it includes, the competition attempts to draw together Turks of Islamist and national/secularist viewpoints through a type of sentimental citizenship in an international – albeit, crucially, Turkish-led – universe. The success or failure of that attempt remains to be seen.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

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