

Gülen Movement Activity in the United States

Turkish imam, Fethullah Gülen is known as an educator, an advocate of tolerance, and a moderate voice of Islam. Gülen's interfaith dialogue organizations are known to have opened around the globe. It is known that Gülen, the head of the neo-Nur, Gülen Movement, has inspired his followers, called the Fethullahci, to open hundreds of educational institutions around the world.¹ Gülen's schools in Turkey, Turkic Republics, Africa, Asia, and Europe are praised and are even the focus of academic studies.

Gülen's influence and visibility on the world stage has increased dramatically in the past decade. Even with the recent surge of exposure, what is still little known or publicised about Fethullah Gülen and the Fethullahci, is that they operate one of their largest and fastest growing operations in the United States with the majority of their start-up institutions being public, charter schools.

Minnesota signed into law the first charter school legislation in the United States in 1991. Since then, 39 other states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico have passed charter school legislation. The majority of that legislation was signed into law between the mid 1990's and the year 2000.² Gülen came to the United States in 1998 for medical treatment and, presumably, to avoid an indictment for attempting to undermine the secular, Turkish state.³ Since Gülen's arrival in the U.S., there has been a substantial increase in the number of Gülen-influenced non-profit institutions formed in the United States. The growth seems to have some organization. Turkish nationals residing in the United States for employment or graduate education, will form a non-profit, interfaith dialogue organization.⁴ The stated mission of these groups is to promote education, introduce Turkish culture, promote understanding and dialogue between Americans and Turks as well as interfaith dialogue.⁵ These organizations also sponsor dialogue trips to Turkey attended by the public as well as local⁶, state⁷ and national⁸ politicians. The education component of these groups are typically carried out by running Saturday schools or offering

1. Yavus, M. Hakan. *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003. Print.

2. US Charter Schools. http://www.uscharterschools.org/pub/uscs_docs/sp/index.htm

3. Sharon-Krespin, Rachel. "Fethullah Gulen's Grand Ambition: Turkey's Islamic Danger." *Middle East Quarterly* 16.1 (2009): 55-66. Print

4. For Example: Interfaith Dialog Center - New Jersey <http://idcnj.org/aboutus/>

5. For Example: Turkish Cultural Center New York <http://www.turkishculturalcenter.org/DetailPage.aspx?ContentID=160>

tutoring sessions.⁹ Individuals directly or indirectly related to these dialogue groups will then either transition the dialogue to a "doing business as" or create a completely new non-profit educational foundation that will petition the state's Department of Education to open a charter school. Support service companies for these schools have also developed such as the Accord Institute¹⁰ in Southern California and Concept Schools¹¹ in the Midwest. These companies offer management services and curriculum development to the associated schools.

There is also an affiliated for-profit business component. Apex Educational Services supplies many of the charter schools in the Western U.S. with information technology equipment-even sophisticated surveillance systems.¹² Atlas Group of Ankara, Turkey owns a subsidiary in Texas named Atlas Texas Construction and Trading Inc. The company's website states, "Our company has already begun construction work of a gymnasium project named "Dove Science Academy Gymnasium" in Oklahoma, school remodeling in San Antonio and Houston."¹³ There are also business groups that have been established such as the Texas-Turkish American Chamber of Commerce and the California Turkish American Chamber of Commerce. All of this is very similar to what Bayram Balci wrote about in his analysis of the Gülen Movement in Central Asia.¹⁴

6. *6th Annual Turkish-American Dialog & Friendship Dinner in Lubbock*. Retrieved December 11, 2009, from <http://www.interfaithdialog.org/dinners/6th-annual-turkish-american-dialog-friendship-dinner-in-lu.html>

7. *2009 Dialog Trip to Turkey*. Retrieved December 14, 2009, from http://www.mosaicfoundation.org/joomla/index.php?option=com_easygallery&act=categories&cid=63&Itemid=34

8. *Rumi Forum for Interfaith Dialogue-Sponsor of Congressional Travel*. Retrieved December 14, 2009, from [http://www.legistorm.com/trip/list/by/sponsor/id/9928/name/Rumi Forum for Interfaith Dialogue.html](http://www.legistorm.com/trip/list/by/sponsor/id/9928/name/Rumi%20Forum%20for%20Interfaith%20Dialogue.html)

9. *Divan Weekend School 2009/10*. Retrieved December 12, 2009, from http://www.divannc.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=82&Itemid=124

10. <http://www.accordeducation.org>

11. <http://www.conceptschools.org/>

12. <http://www.apexeducational.com/>

13. Retrieved December 15, 2009, from <http://www.atlas-grup.com/EN/Icerik.ASP?ID=131>

14. Balci, Bayram. *Fethullah Gülen's Missionary Schools in Central Asia and their Role in the Spreading of Turkism and Islam*. *Religion, State and Society*, 31: 2, 151-177

Proof that Gülen affiliated charter schools exist is difficult to find and is that way by design. Janes Islamic Affairs Analyst quotes Gülen, ""service on behalf of the movement would be discreet and quite," and that this stance constituted the "founding philosophy of his movement."" Janes also points out that Gülen sends out mixed messages between its Turkish and English language outlets.¹⁵ This is true for charter schools in the U.S. On Gülen's English website there is a *Sahab* article titled, "We Made Gülen's Ears Ring."¹⁶ The same article can be found on Gülen's Turkish site,¹⁷ but there is more text than there is in the English article. The additional text on the Turkish site translates:

It is estimated that the disciples of the Gülen movement have established approximately a thousand schools in 140 countries. Bermek told us that there are 3 schools and 6 cultural centers only in Tokyo and claimed that the number thousand is smaller than his personal estimate. Because lately, the number of Turkish schools in the United States have been increasing rapidly. The reason for this is the transfer of the so-called "charter schools" to the Service. The Government of the United States subsidizes these schools in lucrative amounts per student with the aim of generalizing educational opportunities in the less affluent districts where many residents are low-income families.

We discussed the subject among ourselves: If 600 schools are bought this way in the United States – and that's what the members of the Gülen movement are striving to do, - and if 200 students graduate from each one of these schools, then 120 thousand sympathizers of Turkey join the mainstream out there every year. We are trying to lobby against the Armenian genocide resolution every year. And yet, through education, we can teach tens of thousands of people the Turkish language and our national anthem, introduce them to our culture and win them over. And this is what the Gülen movement is striving for.

15. *Gulen Movement: Turkey's Third Power*. Jane's Islamic Affairs Analyst. February 2009. pp. 11-14.

16. Ilıcak, Nazli. (Sept. 2, 2009). *We Made Gulen's Ears Ring*. Sabah. Retrieved Dec. 14, 2009, from <http://www.fethullahgulen.org/press-room/columns/3444-we-made-gulens-ears-ring.html>

17. Ilıcak, Nazli. (Sept. 2, 2009). *Gulen'in Kulaklarini Cinlattik*. Sabah. Retrieved Dec. 14, 2009, from <http://tr.fgulen.com/content/view/17778/12/>

On Gülen's website, there is a paper written by Dr. Ian G. Williams in which he states, "My way into this area of research, which has taken me in the past three years to the U.S. to visit schools related to Fethullah Gülen and to Turkey." Also, "My encounters [sic] within these schools had begun in the USA-where there are both primary/elementary and high schools." He also notes the term "Hocaefendi" "is the term with which my respondents all used when referring to Gülen and his work."¹⁸ Also on Gülen's website, is a paper stating:

At that point, it should be noted that, the history of the movement in Europe and in Muslim World is quite short, but as a beginning, they have a good start in the Netherlands with almost all sorts of institutions and activities, in the United States with a striking rise in the amount of state-financed charter schools and in Kurdish controlled Northern Iraq with seven schools and despite a pretty slippery ground.¹⁹

A traveler on a dialogue trip to Turkey, sponsored by the Seattle, Washington Acacia Foundation wrote the following about her trip experience. "As our journey continued our primary guide discussed his experience as principal of a public charter school in Los Angeles, California that he created based upon the spiritual values of Fethullah Gülen."²⁰ A Rabbi traveling on another dialogue trip to Turkey sponsored by the Houston, Texas Institute for Interfaith Dialog had this to say about his trip, "Of course there are many of these schools in Turkey, but also in other countries with Turkish populations, as well as in many Muslim countries such as Afghanistan and Egypt, and even in the United States. In fact, there are Gülen schools here in Houston."²¹

18. Williams, Dr. Ian G. (Nov. 12, 2005). *An Absent Influence? The Nurcu/Fethullah Gulen Movements in Turkish Islam and Their Potential Influence Upon European Islam and Global Education*. Retrieved Dec. 14, 2009, from <http://www.fethullahgulen.org/conference-papers/the-fethullah-gulen-movement-i/2199-an-absent-influence-the-gulen-movement-in-turkish-islam-and-its-influence-on-global-education-and-inter-religious-dialogue.html>

19. Tedik, Fatih. (Oct. 25, 2007). *The Gulen Movement as a Mechanism for Integration of the Muslim Community in Europe: Potentials and Constraints*. Retrieved Dec. 14, 2009, from <http://www.fethullahgulen.org/conference-papers/contributions-of-the-gulen-movement/2458-the-gulen-movement-as-a-mechanism-for-integration-of-the-muslim-community-in-europe-potentials-and-constraints.html>

20. Lindquist, Karen. (2008). *Are We Listening?* Message posted to <http://www.interfaithcommunitychurch.org/Are%20We%20Listening.pdf>

Specific charter school ties to Gülen can also be established. The following is a small sampling due to the number of schools.

Cosmos Foundation operates charter schools in Texas under the name Harmony Science Academy.²²

They also have ties to established charter schools in Oklahoma and Louisiana and are petitioning the opening of a school in New Mexico.²³ In a Today's Zaman article dated March 4, 2009 it reads, "We are at the Turkish Olympiads in Houston, Texas, sponsored by the Cosmos foundation, a nonprofit organization that the Fethullah Gülen movement is involved in."²⁴

From their website, Niagara Education Services, Inc. in Chicago, Illinois, operates a subsidiary called Niagara Foundation. Niagara Foundation, at one point, listed Fethullah Gülen as their "Honorary President." In 2000, Niagara Education Services opened the Science Academy of Chicago, an Illinois charter school.²⁵

Beehive Science and Technology Academy in Salt Lake City, Utah, has been featured in the Salt Lake Tribune because of the school's alleged affiliations to Gülen. The principal of the school has said, "he supports Gülen's ideas, but wouldn't describe himself as a "follower."" "Many of Beehive's teachers and founders also support Gülen's ideals, but he said there's no formal tie."²⁶ "Some staff members

21. Morgen, Steven. (June 26, 2009). *Muslims Jews and Christians Travel to Turkey on a Mission of Faith*. Abrahamic Interfaith Dialogue Society of Istanbul. Retrieved Dec. 10, 2009, from http://bennettlawfirm.typepad.com/abraham_dialogue_society/2009/06/muslims-jews-and-christians-travel-to-turkey-on-a-mission-of-faith.html

22. <http://www.cosmostx.org/>

23. *Albuquerque School of Excellence Charter School Application*. Retrieved December 25, 2009, from <http://www.ped.state.nm.us/Charter/dl10/2009%20Charter%20School%20Applications/Albuquerque%20school%20of%20Excellence/Charter%20Application%20ASE%20COMPLETE.pdf>

24. Ovrur, Mahmut. (March 4, 2009) *Why is Fethullah Gulen in Texas?* Today's Zaman. Retrieved December 14, 2009, from <http://todayszaman.com/tz-web/detaylar.do?load=detay&link=168573>

25. *About Us*. Niagara Foundation. Retrieved May 28, 2009, from <http://www.niagarafoundation.org/niagara/about.php>

26. Stewart, Kirsten. (July 17, 2009). *Utah Charter School's ties to Turkey Draw Scrutiny*. Salt Lake Tribune. Retrieved December 15, 2009, from http://www.sltrib.com/education/ci_12855515

personally know the Pennsylvania preacher."²⁷ The principal is listed as a primary contact for the Multicultural Arch Foundation in Salt Lake City²⁸ and was the Vice President of the Dialog Foundation in Reseda, California.²⁹ Dialog Foundation changed its name to the Magnolia Foundation³⁰ which is now doing business as Magnolia Science Academy with a number of schools in Southern California.³¹

River City Science Academy in Jacksonville, Florida posted information about their annual Spring Break trip to Turkey. If a student's grades are high enough, twenty percent of the trip will be subsidized by the Amity Turkish Cultural Center.³² The third day of the trip will be spent in Istanbul with dinner at Coskun College which is noted to be a 'sister school' of FSA.³³ There are two issues presented here, the first being, this is River City Science Academy's trip not FSA's which is Fulton Science Academy, a charter school in Alpharetta, Georgia.³⁴ Secondly, Coskun College "was founded by Fethullahci, followers of the spiritual Islamic leader Fethullah Gülen, one of the most influential people in Turkey. The pedagogical

27. Adams, Andrew. (Nov. 13, 2009). *Investigation Finds No Evidence of Islamic Influence a Charter School*. KSL. Retrieved Dec. 15, 2009, from <http://www.ksl.com/index.php?nid=148&sid=8655892>

28. *Member Faith Groups*. Salt Lake Interfaith Roundtable. Retrieved Dec. 15, 2009, from <http://www.interfaithroundtable.org/membergroups.htm>

29. *Magnolia Science Academy San Diego Charter School Amendment*. Retrieved Dec. 15, 2009, from [http://www.boarddocs.com/ca/sandi/Board.nsf/bed78c7a5382b7b98725731b0060c8db/3d7fo81b6bbe8e04872575690062b841/\\$FILE/ATTOGHFP/MMS%20Charter%20Amendment.pdf](http://www.boarddocs.com/ca/sandi/Board.nsf/bed78c7a5382b7b98725731b0060c8db/3d7fo81b6bbe8e04872575690062b841/$FILE/ATTOGHFP/MMS%20Charter%20Amendment.pdf)

30. Murtagh, Heather. (Aug. 27, 2008). *Questions Remain for Charter School Proposal*. San Mateo Daily Journal. Retrieved Dec. 14, 2009, from http://www.smdailyjournal.com/article_preview.php?id=97054

31. <http://magnoliafoundation.org/>

32. *Spring Break Turkey Trip*. River City Science Academy. Retrieved Dec. 15, 2009, from http://rivercityscience.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=195&Itemid=1

33. *Tentative International Trip Itinerary*. River City Science Academy. Retrieved Dec. 15, 2009, from <http://rivercityscience.org/triptoturkey/ITINERARY.pdf>

34. <http://www.fultonscience.org/>

project is inspired by Gülen's principles of progress, enlightenment and development."³⁵ On the ninth day of the trip, the school visits Fatih University, a well known Gülen University.³⁶

Daisy Education Corporation in Arizona operates as Sonoran Science Academy.³⁷ Their Turkish Language teacher was quoted at the Turkish Language Olympics in Istanbul. The article says about those in attendance, "Nearly all the competitors are students of schools set up by a global network of millions of followers of the Turkish preacher and author."³⁸ Another article covering the Turkish Language and Performing Arts Contest Finals at Pacifica Institute in Irvine, California found on Gülen's website, dated March 2, 2009, lists Sonoran Science Academy along with Coral Academy of Science, Bay Area Technology School, Magnolia Science Academy and Beehive Science and Technology Academy as participants.³⁹ Pacifica Institute, formerly known as, Global Cultural Connections, in December 2009, organized a Gülen Conference and is described as an organization that, "works in Southern California in support of the Gülen movement"⁴⁰ and, "the Pacifica Institute is a foundation based upon the teachings of Fethullah Gülen."⁴¹

35. Danckaers, Tine. (Aug. 26, 2009). *The Growing Influence of a Religious Reform Movement in Turkey*. Mondiaal Nieuws.

Retrieved Dec. 15, 2009, from [http://74.125.95.132/search?q=cache:KHA2ZN9HOiEJ:www.mo.be/index.php%3Fid%3D340%26tx_uwnews_pi2%255Bart_id%255D%3D25982%26cHash%3D1af762bf13+Coskun+\"Gulen+Movement\"&cd=8&hl=en&ct=](http://74.125.95.132/search?q=cache:KHA2ZN9HOiEJ:www.mo.be/index.php%3Fid%3D340%26tx_uwnews_pi2%255Bart_id%255D%3D25982%26cHash%3D1af762bf13+Coskun+\)

36. Park, Bill. (2008) *The Fethullah Gulen Movement*. MERIA 12(3). Retrieved December 14, 2009,

from <http://www.merijournal.com/en/asp/journal/2008/december/park/index.asp>

37. <http://www.sonoranacademy.org/district/AboutUs/tabid/59/Default.aspx>

38. (June 8, 2009). *World's Gulen Brotherhood*. IslamOnline.net. Retrieved Dec. 15, 2009, from <http://www.fethullahgulen.org/press-room/news/3337-worlds-gulen-brotherhood.html>

39. (March 2, 2009). *Turkish Language and Performing Arts Contest Finals*. Pacifica Institute. Retrieved April 27, 2009, from

<http://www.fethullahgulen.org/press-room/news/3242-turkish-language-and-performing-arts-contest-finals-2009.html>

40. Carr, Dr. Mark (Nov. 25, 2007). *My Discovery of Islamic Renewal*. Faith House Manhattan. Retrieved Dec. 15, 2009,

from http://www.faithhousemanhattan.org/faith_house/2007/11/my-discovery--1.html

41. Bera, Ami. *ALF Invited to Experience Turkey*. American Leadership Forum Mountain Valley Chapter. Retrieved Dec. 15, 2009,

from http://www.alf-mvc.org/?link_id=107

The Fethullahci and others try to distance these schools and organizations from Gülen, but as the above ties show, that is not the whole truth. Even those close to the movement concede:

"In terms of formal organization, all facilities set up by Gülen's followers are independent units and promote themselves as such. Yet they are joined in an "educational network of virtue", as all the leading figures were socialized within the cemaat, participate in the cemaat's life and are connected to each other through the close interpersonal links of the cemaat."

"In the field of education, this part of the identity is however not stressed and teachers from outside the cemaat work at these schools as well. They may be non-Muslims and in many cases the pupils have never heard of Fethullah Gülen. In this sense, the schools may not be considered as Gülen-cemaat schools. But this assumption would deny the fact that without Gülen and the people of the cemaat, who view their work as a religious service, these schools would not exist.⁴²

Though these schools teach a secular curriculum in the classroom, there is still hesitancy to openly affiliate these charter schools with Gülen. Bayram Balci of the French Institute for Anatolian Studies and Hakan Yavus, professor at the University of Utah, are two of the most knowledgeable individuals as it pertains to the Gülen Movement. Balci's doctoral thesis was titled, "Fethullah Gülen's Missionary Schools in Central Asia and their Role in the Spreading of Turkism and Islam," and equates the Fethullahci's activities to that of the Jesuits.⁴³ Yavus, in an interview with Radio Free Europe and also Religioscope, says the Gülen Movement is, "a bottom-up Islamization approach of society" through education."⁴⁴ and its goal is, "to create sympathizers around the world," "sympathizers for Gülen, sympathizers for Islam

42. Agai, Bekim. (November 12, 2005). *Discursive and Organizational Strategies of the Gulen Movement*. Retrieved December 14, 2009, from <http://www.fethullahgulen.org/conference-papers/the-fethullah-gulen-movement-i/2132-discursive-and-organizational-strategies-of-the-gulen-movement.html#1>

43. Balci, Bayram. *Fethullah Gülen's Missionary Schools in Central Asia and their Role in the Spreading of Turkism and Islam*. *Religion, State and Society*, 31: 2, 151-177

44. Peuch, Jean-Christophe. (June 8, 2004). *Turkey: Fethullahci Schools--A Greenhouse for Central Asian Elites?* Retrieved December 14, 2009, from <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1053209.html>

and sympathizers for Turkey."⁴⁵ In a Reuters article Yavuz states, "It is a political movement ... and it has always been political. They think power is very important. They want to train an elitist class which will then turn Turkey into a centre of the religious world, Islamise the country."⁴⁶ This is a potential issue for these charter schools. The schools are funded by federal and state tax revenues. At the federal level, this means there is potential conflict with the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution which implies tax dollars are not allowed to fund religious institutions. The state level is where the schools could potentially have their biggest legal troubles. Most of the states' charter school legislation has language similar to that of the State of Pennsylvania which reads, "a charter school shall be non-sectarian in all operations."⁴⁷ Some 'outsiders' have taken notice of the movement's increased activity concluding, "Gülenism is essentially a cult."⁴⁸ and is a "cult of sorts."⁴⁹ Coupling this all together, It is clear why these schools do not want to be labeled Gülen schools.

To date, there are around 120 of these affiliated charter schools in the United States. Many of these schools are academically successful, producing above average student assessment scores. State's have labeled some of the schools as "exemplary"⁵⁰ and US News and World Report ranks some of the schools as the "Best High Schools in the Country."⁵¹ Many parents seem happy with the education their students are receiving. Partly due to the school's success and more to do with the fervor of the Fethullahci, there has been a tremendous surge in the opening of these schools over the past five years. This momentum does not seem to be slowing, even with numerous states cutting education budgets due to poor economic

45. Mayer, Jean-Francois. (July 24, 2004). *The Gulen Movement: a Modern Expression of Turkish Islam-Interview with Hakan Yavuz*. Religioscope. Retrieved December 14, 2009, from http://www.religion.info/english/interviews/article_74.shtml

46. Hudson, Alexandra. (May 13,2008). *Turkish Islamic Preacher-Threat or Benefactor?* Reuters. Retrieved Dec. 16, 2009, from <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSL0939033920080514>

47. Pennsylvania Code 24 P.S. §17-1715-A(4)

48. Schwartz, Stephen. (July 26, 2008). *The Real Fethullah Gulen*. Prospect. Retrieved December 14, 2009, from <http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/2008/07/therealfethullahglen/>

49. Park, Bill. (2008) *The Fethullah Gulen Movement*. MERIA 12(3). Retrieved December 14, 2009, from <http://www.merijournal.com/en/asp/journal/2008/december/park/index.asp>

50. *Harmony Schools Earn Top Academic Ratings*. Retrieved December 14, 2009, from <http://www.cosmostx.org/>

51. *SSA Tucson Gains National Recognition*. December 11, 2008. Retrieved on December 14, 2009, from http://www.sonoranacademy.org/tucson/Portals/o/Press_Release_US_News_and_World_Report.pdf

conditions. Next Fall, at least another half dozen schools across the country will be opening their doors. With rapid growth and increased, nationwide visibility, it is inevitable that more scrutiny and questions will be raised as to the nature of these schools. It will be interesting to watch how the Movement and the schools respond to this attention in the future.