

RETHINK
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UPDATE: PERSECUTION OF THE GÜLEN
MOVEMENT IN TURKEY

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The Gülen (a.k.a Hizmet) movement, a faith-based community, has been subject to political persecution for more than two years by the Turkish government since they stood up against corruption and injustice under the rule of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Erdogan has publicly called for a “witch hunt,” and arrests, threats, and harassments have now become a routine for participants and sympathizers of the movement. According to security officials, as of April 2016, as many as 2,261 individuals have been detained, 501 of them have been sent to jail, and 623 have been released on probation.¹ The detainees are people from all walks of life including businessmen, doctors, teachers, academics, police officers, philanthropists and even housewives. Most recent incidents include:

April 19, 2016 - Turkish police on Tuesday detained 28 people on allegations of being members of a movement led by U.S.-based Muslim cleric Fethullah Gulen in an operation launched in 28 provinces, state-run Anatolia Agency said. The group included journalists, lawyers and police officers, and prosecutors have issued arrest warrants for 64 people in the investigation, Anadolu said.²

April 18, 2016 - Executives of a major Turkish company were among 100 people detained by police on Monday over allegations of funding the movement of Muslim cleric Fethullah Gulen, a foe of President Tayyip Erdogan, prosecutors and company officials said...The raids were the latest police operations targeting thousands of supporters of the U.S.-based cleric, accused of leading what prosecutors described as a "Gülenist Terror Group" trying to overthrow Erdogan. Gulen denies the accusations.³

April 12, 2016 - Trustees have been appointed to 14 additional companies with “organic links” to Kaynak Holding, nearly five months after caretakers forcibly took over companies belonging to the holding for alleged ties with U.S.-based scholar Fethullah Gülen, a former government ally now considered the head of the “Fethullahist Terror Organization” (FETÖ).⁴

April 09, 2016 - 17 detained in Antalya for links to pro-Fethullah terror network in Turkey. Prosecutor orders arrest of two dozen for their activities related to US-led Muslim preacher's illicit group, which government officials term the 'parallel state'. Seventeen of

¹ “2,261 detained, 501 arrested in witch-hunt operations against Gülen movement,” *Turkish Minute* (April 17, 2016) [<https://www.turkishminute.com/2016/04/17/2261-detained-501-arrested-witch-hunt-operations-gulen-movement/>]

² “Turkish police detain 28 people over links to Gulen movement: Anatolia,” *Reuters* (April 19, 2016) [<http://ca.reuters.com/article/topNews/idCAKCN0XGoF5>]

³ Daren Butler, “UPDATE 2-Turkish executives among 100 detained over links to cleric Gulen,” *Reuters* (April 18, 2016) [<http://www.reuters.com/article/turkey-gulen-idUSL5N17L1E6>]

⁴ “Trustees appointed to 14 companies with ‘organic links’ to ‘Gülen-linked’ Kaynak Holding,” *The Journal of Turkish Weekly* (April 12, 2016) [<http://www.turkishweekly.net/2016/04/12/news/trustees-appointed-to-14-companies-with-organic-links-to-gulen-linked-kaynak-holding/>]

24 people detained in an investigation against the pro-Fethullah terrorist network in the southern Turkish province of Antalya, were arrested while another seven were released on judicial review.⁵

April 5, 2016 - Police detained 68 people across Turkey on Tuesday in an investigation into their alleged financial links to U.S.-based Muslim cleric Fethullah Gulen, an ally-turned-foe of President Tayyip Erdogan, state-run Anadolu Agency reported. It said suspects held in the raids across 22 provinces included former police chiefs, businessmen, academics, municipality workers and employees of state-run broadcaster TRT. Citing police fraud squad sources, Anadolu said arrest warrants for a total of 120 people have been issued as part of the latest 'Gülenist terror group' probe.⁶

Since the outbreak of the corruption scandal in Turkey in December 2013, then Prime Minister and President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his government have been especially targeting the Gülen movement. According to Erdogan and his lieutenants the alleged charges brought forward by Istanbul prosecutors on December 17 and 25, 2013, were in fact insidious attempts to topple the AKP government that were orchestrated by Hizmet sympathizers and affiliates in the Turkish state and bureaucracy, including judiciary and police forces. The Gülen movement, which suddenly found itself on defensive, has been vehemently denying these allegations, calling them baseless accusations serving to cover up the corruption charges. While, the corruption cases were effectively rendered obsolete through a series of legislations and executive interventions to the courts, the attacks on the Hizmet continue in full force, amounting recently to a full scale persecution campaign involving not only public officials but also businesspeople, donors, educators, volunteers and everybody else that are even loosely affiliated with the movement.

The Hizmet movement, which is essentially a loosely connected network of individuals and religious, educational, and humanitarian organizations and institutions inspired by the ideas of Turkish Islamic scholar Fethullah Gülen, who is now residing in the United States. The transnational Gülen movement represents a constructive alternative to narrow, radical and/or violent interpretations of Islam all over the world.⁷ The movement is known for its vast network of schools and charity organizations. Government officials and public leaders across the globe have commended the movement for its contribution to education, social peace and harmony.

The increasingly authoritarian AKP government is generally aversive to any form of dissent and has already produced many enemies and victims across the society. However,

⁵ “17 detained in Antalya for links to pro-Fethullah terror network in Turkey,” *Yenisafak* (April 9, 2016) [<http://www.yenisafak.com/en/news/17-detained-in-antalya-for-links-to-pro-fethullah-terror-network-in-turkey-2448513>]

⁶ Humeyra Pamuk, “Turkish police detain 68 people over links to cleric Gulen: Anadolu,” *Reuters* (April 5, 2016) [<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-gulen-probe-idUSKCN0X21K3>]

⁷ On the contrary, the Gülen movement has long been targeted by radical Islamic groups, most recently in Somalia: “Two teachers among five killed in terrorist attack in Mogadishu,” *Turkish Minute* (March 30, 2016) [<http://hizmetnews.com/17696/2-turkish-teachers-killed-somali-school-bus-attack/#.VxZCwpMgtmA>]

the attacks on the Gülen movement have reached to a level of obsession and collective delirium. This makes the situation all the more worrying, since the movement has presence in many countries outside Turkey. This fact, coupled with efforts of the Turkish government to discredit the movement in the other parts of the world, gives the issue an international dimension.

The clash between the AKP government and the Gülen movement had initially been portrayed as a “power struggle,” “a tug of war,” between the two by some domestic and international observers. In the meantime, taking advantage of the confusion, the AKP government passed a series of legislation in the guise of fighting the “parallel structure” in the state but essentially revoking separation of powers and restricting rights and freedoms of everyone. The ongoing persecution of Hizmet in Turkey is not only a major blow to pluralism, democracy, and the idea of progressive, globally appealing interpretation of Islam, but also a harbinger of things to come for all who dare to dissent in this new political setting.

The recently published annual report by the U.S. Department of State, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2015 (Turkey)*, vividly describes deteriorating political climate in Turkey and the extent of crackdown on the Gülen movement.⁸

The law provides for an independent judiciary, but the judiciary remained subject to government influence, particularly from the executive branch. Judges who ruled against prosecuting high-level members of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) on corruption charges in 2014 were subsequently promoted to more senior positions, while prosecutors and one judge who had conducted the initial investigation into allegations of corruption were indicted during the year.⁹

As a result, the Gülen movement people, as well as other dissidents, do not have the chance to stand a fair trial despite serious accusations levelled against them:

Legal professionals reported that peace courts created legal confusion due to unclear hierarchy and authority. The courts in December 2014, for example, ordered the arrest of Samanyolu Broadcasting Company CEO Hidayet Karaca and other members of the media as well as 33 police officers with alleged ties to Fethullah Gülen, a Muslim cleric accused of operating a clandestine network within the executive and judicial branches with a goal of overthrowing the government. After a higher-level court ruled on April 26 that detainees should be released, the Istanbul chief public prosecutor stated the higher court’s decision was null and void because another peace court had simultaneously ruled for the continuation of their detention. The defendants were indicted on September 17, and the case continued at year’s end.¹⁰

⁸ *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2015 (Turkey)*, U.S. Department of State (April 2016) [<http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/253121.pdf>]

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 16

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p.17

Despite the widespread incrimination efforts by government officials as well as pro-government media, no indictment have been made due to lack of credible evidence.

Prosecutions of journalists, judges, prosecutors, and police for membership of an alleged “Fethullah Gülen Terrorist Organization” were ongoing at time of writing, although there is no evidence to date that the Gülen movement has engaged in violence or other activities that could reasonably be described as terrorism.¹¹

The AKP government in 2015 continued efforts to purge the police and judiciary of alleged supporters of the Gülen movement. During 2015, prosecutors, judges, and police officers with perceived links to the Gülen movement were jailed and charged with plotting against the government and membership of a terrorist organization. The main evidence being cited against judges and prosecutors at time of writing was decisions taken in the course of their professional duties rather than any evidence of criminal activity.¹²

But the lack of evidence of criminal activity did not preclude the government from designating the Gülen movement as a terrorist organization trying to overthrow the government. This move allows the government to implement harsher antiterror laws on Gülen movement cases:

The HRA asserted there were hundreds of political prisoners from across the political spectrum, including journalists, political party officials, academics, and students. The government stated that these individuals were charged with being members of, or assisting, terrorist organizations...Authorities also used the antiterror laws during the year to detain individuals and seize assets, including media companies, of individuals alleged to be associated with the Gülen movement, designated by the government during the year as the Fethullah Gülen Terrorist Organization.¹³

Antiterror laws are used to detain the Gülen movement individuals and seize their assets. Because the Turkish government describes the Gülen movement as a terrorist organization, any type of donation to Gülen movement nonprofits and charity groups are considered as financing a terror group. Arrests are widespread including teachers, professors, executives, donors, and volunteers of nonprofit and charity organizations. Many are banned from leaving the country. There are also reports that public authorities seize the passports of movement affiliates who return from abroad.

Most movement-affiliated media has been subject to a “violent and illegal takeover”¹⁴ including highly circulated *Zaman* and *Bugün* newspapers and several TV stations,

¹¹ *World Report 2016*, Human Rights Watch (2015)

[https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/world_report_download/wr2016_web.pdf], p. 581

¹² *Ibid.* p. 582

¹³ U.S. Department of State, p. 19-20

¹⁴ *European Parliament Resolution on the 2015 Report on Turkey* (April 2016)

[<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=%2F%2FEP%2F%2FTEXT%2BMOTION%2BB8-2016-0442%2B0%2BDOC%2BXML%2BV0%2F%2FEN&language=EN>]

resulting thousands to be fired. It is widely expected that next in line for government takeover are the schools and universities affiliated with the movement.

Further Readings

Lord Woolf, Jeffrey Jowell, Edward Garnier, Sarah Palin, *A Report on the Rule of Law and Respect for Human Rights in Turkey Since December 2013* (London: July 2015) [http://www.onebrickcourt.com/files/report_combined__2__60576.pdf].

James C. Harrington, *Turkey Democracy in Peril: A Human Rights Report* (Houston: May 2015) [<http://www.turkeydemocracyinperil.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Turkey-Democracy-in-Peril.pdf>]

Turkey Task Force, *Persecution of the Hizmet Movement: A Chronicle*, Rethink Institute (Washington, DC: December 2014) [<http://www.rethinkinstitute.org/persecution-hizmet-gulen-movement-turkey-chronicle/>].