



A brief biography of Fethullah Gülen

(Compiled by the Gülen Institute)

Fethullah Gülen is a Turkish Muslim scholar, thinker, author, poet, opinion leader, educational activist, and preacher emeritus. He is regarded as the initiator and inspirer of the worldwide social movement of human values known as the Hizmet (Service) Movement or the Gülen Movement. Focused on education where secular curricula are taught by teachers who aspire to “represent” high values of humanity, this social phenomenon defeats easy categorization. Volunteer participants in the movement, consisting of students, academicians, business owners, professionals, public officials, white-collar and blue-collar workers, farmers, men and women, young and old, contribute to multiple ways of service, which crystallize in tutoring centers, schools, colleges, hospitals, a major relief organization, publishing houses, and media institutions, both in Turkey and in more than a hundred countries of the world.

Gülen’s discourse cherishes and his life exemplifies values like empathic acceptance, altruistic service of one’s community and humanity in general, complementary roles of the intellect and the heart, sincerity, holistic view of the human, deepening faith and love of the creation. He is noted for his pro-democracy, pro-science, pro-dialogue and non-violence stances in critical junctures of the history of his society. In May 2008, Fethullah Gülen was listed among the top hundred public intellectuals in the world by Foreign Policy magazine .

Despite the high regard millions hold for him, Gülen considers himself only one of the volunteers of the civil society movement he helped originate and denounces any attribution of leadership. He spends most of his time reading, writing, editing, worshipping, and receiving medical care. Sharing the suffering of humans in every corner of the world,



he has always been known for his deep respect for and connection to all creation. “Living to let others live” (“yasatmak için yaşamak” in Turkish) is the core principle of his understanding of service. His promotion of dialogue, empathic acceptance, and harmonious coexistence can best be reflected in a comparison with that of Rumi, the 13th Century Anatolian spiritual poet and one of Gülen’s sources of inspiration.

Fethullah Gülen was born into a humble family in Erzurum, Turkey, in 1941 , and was raised in a spiritually enriching environment. He attended a public elementary school for three years but could not continue due to the appointment of his father to a village where there was no public school. He later obtained his diploma by self-studying and passing a comprehensive examination. His religious education consisted of studies in classical Islamic sciences such as Qur’anic recitation and memorization, exegesis (tafseer), Arabic language, Prophetic Tradition (hadith) as well as the spiritual tradition of Islam (tasawwuf), which he studied under renown scholars and spiritual masters around his hometown such as Muhammed Lutfi Efendi of Alvar.

During the 1950s Fethullah Gülen completed his religious education and training under various prominent scholars and Sufi masters leading to the traditional Islamic ijaza (license to teach). This education was provided almost entirely within an informal system, tacitly ignored and unsupported by the state and running parallel to its education

system. At the same time, Fethullah Gülen pursued and completed his secondary level secular education through external exams. In the late fifties, he came across compilations of the scholarly work *Risale-i Nur* (Epistles of Light) by Said Nursi but never met its famous author.

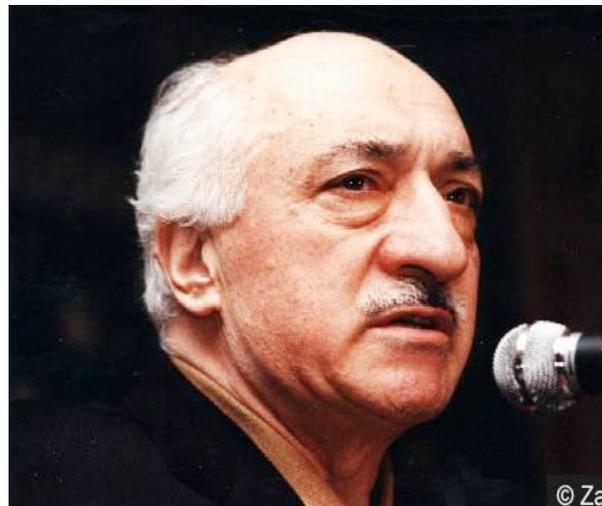
After passing an exam administered by the Turkish State's Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyamet Isleri Baskanligi) in 1958, he was awarded a state preacher license and began to preach and teach in Edirne, a province on the European part of the country. In this period of his youth, he had the opportunity to deepen his knowledge in the Islamic tradition, informally study social and natural sciences, and examine the classics of both Eastern and Western philosophy and literature. Among the historic figures who had the most impact on his intellectual life we can mention Abu Hanifa, Ghazali, Imam Rabbani, Rumi, Yunus Emre, and Nursi. It was his broad-ranged reading attitude that equipped him for his well-known comprehensive interpretations.

Throughout his career he maintained his personal life style of devout asceticism while mixing with people and remaining on good terms with the civic and military authorities he encountered in the course of that service. He witnessed how the youth were being attracted into extremist, radical ideologies, and strove through his preaching to draw them away from that. Using his own money he would buy and distribute published materials to counter an aggressively militant atheism and communism. He saw the erosion of traditional moral values among the youth and the educated segment of Turkish society feeding into criminality, political and societal conflict. These experiences were formative influences on his intellectual and community leadership and reinforced his faith in the meaning and value of human beings and life.

In 1961, Fethullah Gülen began his compulsory military service in Ankara and was later transferred to the Mediterranean coastal city of Iskenderun. In Iskenderun, his commanding officer assigned to him the duty of lecturing soldiers on faith and morality, and, recognizing Fethullah Gülen's intellectual ability, gave him many Western classics to read. Fethullah Gülen attributes his comprehensive exposure to the western philosophical thought to the encouragement of this commander. Throughout his military service Fethullah Gülen maintained his ascetic lifestyle as before.

In 1963, following military service, Fethullah Gülen gave a series of lectures in Erzurum on Rumi. He also co-founded an anti-communist association there, in which he gave evening talks on moral issues. In 1964, he was assigned a new post in Edirne, where he became very influential among the educated youth and ordinary people. The militantly laicist authorities were displeased by his having such influence and

wanted him dismissed. Before they could do so, Fethullah Gülen obliged them by having himself assigned to another city, Kırklareli, in 1965. There, after working hours, he organized evening lectures and talks. In this phase of his career, just as before, he took no active part in party politics and taught only about moral values in personal and collective affairs.



In 1966, Yasar Tunagur, who had known Fethullah Gülen from earlier in his career, became deputy head of the country's Directorate of Religious Affairs and, on assuming his position in Ankara, he assigned Fethullah Gülen to the post that he himself had just vacated in Izmir. On March 11, Gülen was transferred to the Izmir region, where he held managerial responsibility for a mosque, a student study and boarding-hall, and for preaching in the Aegean region. He continued to live ascetically. For almost five years he lived in a small hut near the Kestanepazari Hall and took no wages for his services. It was during these years that Fethullah Gülen's ideas on education and service to the community began to take definite form and mature. From 1969 he set up meetings in coffee-houses, lecturing all around the provinces and in the villages of the region. He also organized summer camps for middle and high school students.

In Izmir, the largest province of the west coast of Turkey Fethullah Gülen's outstanding discourse began to crystallize and his audience to expand. He traveled from city to city to give sermons in mosques, speeches at gatherings in various places including theatres and coffee houses. Speaking on essential subjects ranging from peace and social justice to philosophical naturalism, his primary aim always remained as urging the younger generation to harmonize intellectual enlightenment with spirituality anchored in the faith tradition, and to serve fellow humans altruistically.

Gülen's discourse, which had been easily distinguished by its depth of knowledge, logic, sensitivity, proper referencing and stellar eloquence, attracted the

attention of the learned citizens including academic community and college students, as well as common people all around the country. His speeches were recorded on tape, distributed even in villages, and zealously embraced. As he frankly asserts, he simply thought to cultivate this public credit, “though he never deserved it,” by channeling good intentions and devotional energy towards a positive end.

Fethullah Gulen describes this initially national and subsequently universal ideal as “gathering around high human values” by means of education and dialogue. Regarding this ideal, Fethullah Gulen has always named his function as an “advisor” or “motivator” at most. His audience in Izmir initially served as a seed to form a community of like-minded citizens from all walks of life and later expanded to citizens from very different backgrounds, including non-Muslims who share the humanistic dimension of Gulen’s vision if not its Islamic roots.

In 1970, as a result of the March 12 coup, a number of prominent Muslims in the region, who had supported Kestanepazari Hall and associated activities for the region’s youth, were arrested. On May 1, Fethullah Gulen too was arrested and held for six months without charge until his release on November 9. Later, all the others arrested were also released, also without charge. When asked to explain these arrests, the authorities said that they had arrested so many leftists that they felt they needed to arrest some prominent Muslims in order to avoid being accused of unfairness. Interestingly, they released Fethullah Gulen on the condition that he gave no more public lectures.

In 1971, Fethullah Gulen left his post and Kestanepazari Hall but retained his status as a state-authorized preacher. He began setting up more student study and boarding-halls in the Aegean region: the funding for these came from local people. It is at this point that a particular group of about one hundred people began to be visible as a service group, that is, a group gathered around Fethullah Gulen’s understanding of service to the community and positive action.

Between 1972 and 1975, Fethullah Gulen held posts as a preacher in several cities in the Aegean and Marmara regions, where he continued to preach and to teach the ideas about education and the service ethic he had developed. He continued setting up hostels for high school and university students. At this time educational opportunities were still scarce for ordinary Anatolian people, and most student accommodation in the major cities, controlled or infiltrated by extreme leftists and rightists, seethed in a hyper-politicized atmosphere. Parents in provincial towns whose children had passed entrance examinations for universities or city high schools were caught in a dilemma – to surrender their children’s care to the ideologues or

to deny them further education and keep them at home. The hostels set up by Fethullah Gulen and his companions offered parents the chance to send their children to the big cities to continue their secular education, while protecting them from the hyper-politicized environment. To support these educational efforts, people who shared Fethullah Gulen’s service-ethic now set up a system of bursaries for students. The funding for the hostels and bursaries came entirely from local communities among whom Fethullah Gulen’s service-ethic idea (hizmet) was spreading steadily. With Fethullah Gulen’s encouragement, around his discourse of positive action and responsibility, ordinary people were starting to mobilize to counteract the effects of violent ideologies and of the ensuing social and political disorder on their own children and on youth in general. Students in the hostels also began to play a part in spreading the discourse of service and positive action. Periodically, they returned to



their home towns and visited surrounding towns and villages, and, talking of their experiences and the ideas they had encountered, consciously diffused the hizmet idea in the region. Also, from 1966 onward, Fethullah Gulen’s talks and lectures had been recorded on audio cassettes and distributed throughout Turkey by third parties. Thus, through already existing networks of primary relations, this new type of community action, the students’ activities, and the new technology of communication, the hizmet discourse was becoming known nationwide.

In 1974, the first university preparatory courses were established in Manisa, where Fethullah Gulen was posted at the time. Until then, it was largely the

children of very wealthy and privileged families who had access to university education. The new courses in Manisa offered the hope that in future there might be better opportunities for children from ordinary Anatolian families. The idea took hold that, if properly supported, the children of ordinary families could take up and succeed in higher education. As word spread of these achievements, Fethullah Gülen was invited, the following year, to speak at a series of lectures all over Turkey. The service idea became widely recognized and firmly rooted in various cities and regions of the country. From this time on, the country-wide mobilization of people drawn to support education and non-political altruistic services can be called a movement – the Gülen Movement.

In 1976, the Religious Directorate posted Fethullah Gülen to Bornova, Izmir, the site of one of Turkey's major universities with a correspondingly large student population and a great deal of the militant activism typical of universities in the 1970s. It came to his attention that leftist groups were running protection rackets to extort money from small businessmen and shopkeepers in the city and deliberately disrupting the business and social life of the community. The racketeers had already murdered a number of their victims. In his sermons, Fethullah Gülen spoke out and urged those being threatened by the rackets neither to yield to threats and violence, nor to react with violence and exacerbate the situation. He urged them, instead, to report the crimes to the police and have the racketeers dealt with through the proper channels. This message led to threats being made against his life. At the same time, he challenged the students of left and right to come to the mosque and discuss their ideas with him and offered to answer any questions, whether secular or religious, which they put to him. A great many students took up this offer. So, in addition to his daily duties giving traditional religious instruction and preaching, Fethullah Gülen devoted every Sunday evening to these discussion sessions.

In 1977, he traveled in northern Europe, visiting and preaching among Turkish communities to raise their consciousness about values and education and to encourage them in the same hizmet ethic of positive action and altruistic service. He encouraged them both to preserve their cultural and religious values and to integrate into their host societies. Now thirty-six, Fethullah Gülen had become one of the three most widely recognized and influential preachers in Turkey. For example, on one occasion in 1977 when the prime minister, other ministers and state dignitaries came to a Friday prayer in the Blue Mosque in Istanbul, a politically sensitive occasion in Turkey, Fethullah Gülen was invited to preach to them and the rest of the congregation.

Fethullah Gülen encouraged participants in the Movement to go into publishing. Some of his articles

and lectures were published as anthologies and a group of teachers inspired by his ideas established the Teachers' Foundation to support education and students.



In 1979, this Foundation started to publish its own monthly journal, Sızıntı, which became the highest selling monthly in Turkey. In terms of genre, it was a pioneering venture, being a magazine of sciences, humanities, faith, and literature. Its publishing mission was to show that science and religion were not incompatible and that knowledge of both was necessary to be successful in this life. Each month since the journal was founded, Fethullah Gülen has written for it an editorial and a section about the spiritual or inner aspects of Islam, that is, Sufism, and the meaning of faith in modern life.

In February 1980, a series of Fethullah Gülen's lectures, attended by thousands of people, in which he preached against violence, anarchy and terror, were made available on audiocassette.

In 1980, on September 5, Fethullah Gülen spoke from the pulpit before taking leave of absence for the next twenty days because of illness. From March 20, 1981, he took indefinite leave of absence. By the third coup, the Turkish public appeared to have learnt a lesson. There was no visible public reaction. The faith communities, including the Fethullah Gülen Movement, continued with their lawful and peaceful activities without drawing any extra attention to themselves. Fethullah Gülen and the Movement avoided large public gatherings but continued to promote the service-ethic through publishing and small meetings. At this point, the Movement turned again to the use of technology and for the first time in Turkey a preacher's talks were recorded and distributed on videotape. Thus, in spite of the atmosphere of intimidation following the coup, the hizmet discourse, far from being suppressed, continued to spread in a way that, ironically, was possibly more effective. In the years immediately following the coup, the Movement continued to grow and act successfully. In 1982, Movement participants set up a private high school in Izmir, Yamanlar Koleji.

In 1989, Fethullah Gülen was approached by the Directorate of Religious Affairs and requested to resume his duties. His license was reinstated to enable him to serve as an Emeritus Preacher with the right to preach in any mosque in Turkey. Between 1989 and 1991, he preached in Istanbul on Fridays and on

alternate Sundays in Istanbul and Izmir in the largest mosques in the cities. His sermons drew crowds in the tens of thousands, numbers unprecedented in Turkish history. These sermons were videotaped and also broadcast. At the beginning of the 1990s, the police uncovered a number of conspiracies by marginal militant Islamists and other small ideological groups to assassinate Fethullah Gülen. These groups also placed agent-provocateurs in the areas around the mosques where he preached with the aim of fomenting disorder when the crowds were dispersing after Fethullah Gülen's sermons. Due to Fethullah Gülen's warnings and the already established peaceful practices of the Movement, these attempts failed and the agent-provocateurs were dealt with by the police.

In 1991, Fethullah Gülen once again ceased preaching to large mosque congregations. He felt that some people were trying to manipulate or exploit his presence and the presence of Movement participants at these large public gatherings. However, he continued to be active in community life, in teaching small groups and taking part in the collective action of the Movement. In 1992, he traveled to the United States, where he met Turkish academics and community leaders, as well as the leaders of other American faith communities. By this stage, the number of schools in Turkey established by the participants in the Gülen Movement had reached more than a hundred, not counting institutions such as study centers and university preparatory courses. From January 1990, Movement participants began to set up schools and universities in Central Asia too, often working under quite harsh conditions.

Starting in 1994, Fethullah Gülen pioneered a rejuvenation of the Interfaith Dialog spirit in the Turkish-Muslim tradition, which was forgotten amidst the troublesome years of the early twentieth century. The Foundation of Journalists and Writers, of which Gülen was the honorary president, organized a series of gatherings involving leaders of religious minorities in Turkey such as the Greek Orthodox Patriarch, Armenian Orthodox Patriarch, Chief Rabbi of Turkey, Vatican's Representative to Turkey and others. The "Abant" platform, named after the location of the first meeting in Bolu, Turkey, brought together leading intellectuals from all corners of the political spectrum, the leftists, the atheists, the nationalists, the religious conservatives, and the liberals, providing for the first time in recent Turkish history a place where such figures could debate freely about the common concerns of all citizens and pressing social problems.

During this period Fethullah Gülen made himself increasingly available for comment and interview in the media and began to communicate more with state dignitaries in order to help ease the tensions generated by the artificial debates around a phantom threat to the secular nature of the Turkish republic.

The showdown between the military wing of the National Security Council and the ruling Virtue Party-True Path Party coalition eventually led to the so-called "February 28, 1997 post-modern military coup," which forced the coalition government to resign and a harsh set of social engineering measures to be pursued by the new government under close military scrutiny.

In March 1999, upon the recommendation of his doctors, Fethullah Gülen moved to the U.S. to receive medical care for his cardiovascular condition. Upon recommendation of his doctors, Gülen stayed in the U.S. to continue to receive medical care and to avoid stress caused by politically charged atmosphere of the February 28 post-modern military coup.



The growing influence of Fethullah Gülen and the significance of the civic movement he helped generate worried some circles in the country who benefited from a closed society with government-favored enterprises, a monopoly on the intellectual life and an isolationist approach to foreign affairs. These circles accused Gülen of having long-term political ambitions and eventually persuaded an ultra-nationalist prosecutor to bring charges against him in 2000 based on a doctored set of video clips which first appeared in mass media in June 1999. While these charges were found to be baseless and eventually dismissed in 2008, the case caused a setback in the interfaith and intercultural dialog spirit that Gülen helped re-ignite.

He currently lives at a retreat facility in Pennsylvania together with a group of students, scholars and a few visitors who consider it a "good" day in terms of his health if he is able to have a half-hour conversation answering their questions.

This brief biography is mainly based on Fethullah Gülen's biographical interview, *Küçük Dünyam* (Istanbul: Ufuk, 2006), his latest publications, the series of *Kırık Testi* (7 volumes, Istanbul), the biographical analysis about Fethullah Gülen by Ali Ünal, *Bir Portre Denemesi* (Istanbul: Nil, 2002), and it includes excerpts from "Chapter 2: Historical Background" of the book entitled "The Gülen Movement: Civic Service without Borders" by Muhammed Cetin (New Jersey: Blue Dome, 2008).

Selected Publications on Gülen in English

1. **Esposito, J.**, and Yilmaz, I., 2010, *Islam and Peacebuilding: Gulen Movement Initiatives*, New Jersey: Blue Dome.
2. **Ebaugh, Helen R.**, 2009, *The Gülen Movement: A Sociological Analysis of a Civic Movement Rooted in Moderate Islam*, New York: Springer.
3. **Cetin, Muhammed**, 2010, *The Gulen Movement: Civic Service without Borders*, New Jersey: Blue Dome.
4. **Ergene, Enes**, 2008, *Tradition Witnessing Modern Age: An Analysis of the Gulen Movement*, New Jersey: Tughra.
5. **Carroll, Jill**, 2007, *A Dialogue of Civilizations: Gulen's Islamic Ideals and Humanistic Discourse*, New Jersey: Tughra.
6. **Hunt, Robert**, and Aslandogan, Yuksel, eds. 2006. *Muslim Citizens of the Globalized World: Contributions of the Gülen Movement*, New Jersey: The Light Inc. and IID Press.
7. **Yavuz, Hakan**, and Esposito, John L. eds. 2004. *Turkish Islam and the Secular State*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.
8. **Gündem, Mehmet**. 2005. *11 Days with Fethullah Gülen: An Analysis of a Movement with Questions and Answers*, Fifth Edition. Istanbul: Alfa; also available in English at <http://en.fGülen.com/content/view/1925/14/>
9. **Saritoprak, Zeki**. 2005. *An Islamic approach to peace and nonviolence: A Turkish experience*. In Special Issue of The Muslim World 95(3): Blackwell.
10. **Ünal, Ali**, and Williams, Alphonse, eds. 2000. *Fethullah Gülen: Advocate of Dialogue*. Fairfax: The Fountain.

Representative Publications in English by Gülen

1. **Gülen, M. Fethullah**. 2000. *Pearls of Wisdom*. Ali Ünal, trans. Fairfax: The Fountain.
2. **Gülen, M. Fethullah**. 2000. *Questions and Answers about Faith*. Muhammed Selcuk, trans. Fairfax: The Fountain.
3. **Gülen, M. Fethullah**. 2000. *Criteria or Lights of the Way*. London: Truestar.
4. **Gülen, M. Fethullah**. 2004. *In True Islam, Terror Does Not Exist. In Terror and Suicide Attacks: An Islamic Perspective*. Ergün Çapan, ed. New Jersey: The Light Inc.
5. **Gülen, M. Fethullah**. 2004. *Key Concepts in the Practice of Sufism*, vol. 1. New Jersey: The Light Inc.
6. **Gülen, M. Fethullah**. 2004. *Key Concepts in the Practice of Sufism*, vol. 2. New Jersey: The Light Inc.
7. **Gülen, M. Fethullah**. 2004. *Love and the Essence of Being Human*. Faruk Tuncer, ed. Mehmet Ünal and Nilüfer Korkmaz, trans. Istanbul: Journalist and Writers Foundation Publications.
8. **Gülen, M. Fethullah**. 2004. *Toward a Global Civilization of Love and Tolerance*. New Jersey: The Light Inc.
9. **Gülen, M. Fethullah**. 2005. *The Messenger of God, Muhammad: An Analysis of the Prophet's Life*. Ali Ünal, trans. New Jersey: The Light Inc.
10. **Gülen, M. Fethullah**. 2005. *The Statue of Our Souls: Revival in Islamic Thought and Activism*. Muhammed Cetin, trans. New Jersey: The Light Inc.

Academic Events Focusing on Fethullah Gülen and the Gülen Movement

1. **East and West Encounters:** The Gulen Movement, University of Southern California, December 4-6, 2009.
2. **The Fifth International Conference on Islam in the Contemporary World:** The Gulen Movement in Thought and Practice, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, LA, March 6-7, 2009.
3. **Islam in the Age of Global Challenges:** Alternative Perspectives of the Gulen Movement, Georgetown University, Washington, D.C., November 14-15, 2008.
4. **International Conference on Muslim World in Transition:** Contributions of the Gulen Movement, School of Oriental and African Studies, and London School of Economics, October 25-27, 2007.
5. **Third International Conference on Islam in the Contemporary World:** Contributions of the Gulen Movement, University of Texas at San Antonio, November 3rd, 2007.
6. **International Conference on Islam in the Contemporary World:** The Fethullah Gülen Movement in Thought and Practice, Rice University, Houston, Texas, November 12-13, 2005, co-sponsored by the Boniuk Center for the Study and Advancement of Religious Tolerance, Rice University, and A.D. Bruce Religious Center at University of Houston.
7. **The Chicago Interfaith Gathering Towards Interreligious Dialogue in the New Millenium:** Finding Common Ground, Special Session on the Gülen Movement, November 10-11, 2005, co-sponsored by the Loyola University of Chicago, The University of Chicago Divinity School, DePaul University Department of Religious Studies, Catholic Theological Union, Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, Archdiocese of Chicago Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs.
8. **Second International Conference on Islam in the Contemporary World:** The Fethullah Gülen Movement in Thought and Practice, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas, March 3-5, 2006, co-sponsored by the Graduate School for Religious Studies, Southern Methodist University.
9. **Second Annual Conference on Islam in the Contemporary World:** The Fethullah Gülen Movement in Thought and Practice, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma, November 3-5, 2006, co-sponsored by the Department of Religious Studies, Petree College of Arts and Sciences at Oklahoma City University.
10. **The Muslim World in Transition:** Contributions of the Gülen Movement, House of Lords, United Kingdom, October 25-27, 2007, co-sponsored by the University of Birmingham, UK, Hartford Seminary, USA, Leeds Metropolitan University, London Middle East Institute, and SOAS, University of London.
11. **Peaceful Coexistence:** Fethullah Gülen's initiatives for peace in the contemporary world, Rotterdam, The Netherlands, November 22-23, 2007, organized at Erasmus University Rotterdam, co-sponsored by Leeds Metropolitan University and Dialoog Academie.

Source: <http://www.guleninstitute.org/index.php/Fethullah-Gulen-s-Biography.html>