

# From Theory to Action

*The Shape of the Hizmet Movement  
Today and Tomorrow*

Edited by

Ori Z. Soltes and Fevzi Sarac

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The present binding first published in 2026.  
Ethics International Press, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British  
Library

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ISBN (Hardback): 978-1-83711-574-7  
ISBN (Ebook): 978-1-83711-575-4

To the beloved and revered memory of

Fethullah Gülen: Hocaefendi

*A lifetime of teaching how to “become the light...”*

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# Preface and Acknowledgments

Drawn from selected papers delivered at the International Hizmet Conference that took place at Long Beach University in February 2023, this volume is intended for a threefold audience.<sup>1</sup>

It is intended to be useful to those outside the Hizmet Movement interested in a concise introduction to who Fethullah Gülen—who inspired the Movement—was, what *hizmet* means and what the Movement has been about in the course of its history, how that history became complicated in particular ways after July 2016 and events in Türkiye, the homeland of Gülen and of the Hizmet Movement. It specifically pushes back against the false narrative most commonly put forth, thanks to the anti-Hizmet words and actions of the regime in Ankara, with regard to those events and the broader picture connected to and emanating from those events.

It is also intended for members of Hizmet, who, like all humans, may sometimes need reminding, particularly when circumstances might engender despair, regarding what the Movement is about and how it has not only survived the events of July 2016 but has flourished, furthering the vision of Fethullah Gülen for an extensive group of people, across faiths, ethnicities, races, genders, cultures, national

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<sup>1</sup> A brief orthographic note: for simplicity's sake, we are italicizing the word "*hizmet*" when it is used simply as the Turkish word meaning "service" but not as the name of the thusly-named Movement. Similarly, we are following the relatively recent convention for the spelling of the country's name: thus, "*Türkiye*" rather than "Turkey." The exception to this rule will be when a book or article is referenced in the title in which the older English spelling was used.

borders, and continents, committed to lives of altruistic action that help improve the condition of the world.

It is in particular intended for young people, born to families already engaged in the Hizmet Movement. One might suppose—and this would be correct—that they have missed out on the unique opportunity accorded to many of us engaged with the Movement, at varied levels over the past half century or so, to have met *Hocaefendi* in person, because there was something to his unique form of genuine modest charisma—his clear care and concern for others rather than for himself, his intelligence and perceptive qualities, at both an intellectual and an emotional level—that cannot be conveyed through any printed or verbal description. On the other hand, a generation too young to have had that opportunity or to remember such a moment may be said to have an advantage over us: for us it may be difficult to disentangle our emotional attachment to his memory and our retrospective awe at his qualities from the ideas of *hizmet* that he was so intent on promoting. There is an irony to the adulation that we cannot avoid for someone who so detested adoration. Those who never met him in person can more fully absorb the ideas of *hizmet* without emotional interference.

This volume explores, inevitably, some of *who* Fethullah Gülen was but more so what his *ideas and actions* were, what his *vision* for humanity was—as a pious Muslim who was simultaneously a universalist, along lines articulated by some of his spiritual heroes, most obviously Mevlana Rumi—and why that vision is so important, even as the volume inevitably explores reasons for the irrational and vicious opposition to that vision and the expression of that opposition that began to evolve from the Turkish government by late 2013, reaching a climax after July 2016—and which has continued since,

even in the aftermath of the passing of Fethullah Gülen in October 2024.

\* \* \* \* \*

We would like to acknowledge Sophia Pandya for hosting the 2023 conference and for her perceptive help in giving this volume its final shape. So, too, not only the contributors to this volume but those who delivered papers and reports at the 2023 international conference whose work could not be included—and the courageous members of the Hizmet Movement around the planet who have continued to work in diverse ways to improve the world, often at risk to themselves and their families, in the face of constant threats from the current regime of Türkiye. The threats abroad and the persecution at home must and will ultimately cease. The leading perpetrator of threats and acts of persecution and violence will be gone—and, certainly not immediately, but gradually both Türkiye and Hizmet will heal and the adherents of the latter will be able to return home, if they wish to do so.

This volume is dedicated to the revered memory of Fethullah Gülen, whose life, in his words and his actions, has inspired so many millions of individuals to be better human beings, fundamentally committed to serving others altruistically, and to improving both the human condition and the condition of the planet that is the home shared by all of us.

Ori Z Soltes and Fevzi Sarac  
August, 2026

# Introduction

**Ori Z Soltes**

The chapters that follow in this volume represent a carefully selected range of papers from among those presented at a conference in Long Beach California in February 2023. The three-day gathering offered the first international discussion of the state of the Hizmet Movement—its continued principles and actions—since the fiasco of July 2016 that had created such a significant trauma and an apparent diminishment in the Hizmet Movement and its world-wide activities. That the conference was taking place—and with such an energetic participation from far and wide, more extensive than this partial written record can hope to indicate—was itself symptomatic of the fact that, not only was Hizmet not actually diminishing; on the contrary, it had bounced back from that unhappy summer and its aftermath consequences, seven years earlier, and was flourishing.

The obvious first three questions that this introduction must address, both for those who are not aware of the Hizmet Movement but also, in part, for those who are—even, perhaps, for some of those who are actively part of the Movement: what “*hizmet*” means and what the Hizmet Movement is all about; what the phrase “fiasco of July 2016” means in specific terms; and—given the central importance of Fethullah Gülen to both the Hizmet Movement and the events of that summer: who he *was*.<sup>1</sup> Although there are both an increasing number

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<sup>1</sup> At the time of the conference Fethullah Gülen was still alive; between then and the time of this writing, he passed back, as he would say, to the Beloved Source, in October, 2024. I have replaced “*is*” with “*was*.”

of articles and books about Gülen,<sup>2</sup> and although by one of those nice twists of irony of which history is so fond, both he and Hizmet are probably much better known since 2016 than before, it behooves us to briefly review all three of these: the movement, the event, and the man, as part of introducing and validating the chapters that follow.

## **Fethullah Gülen and *Hizmet***

A brief biography of Fethullah Gülen will ultimately encompass both the shaping of the Hizmet Movement that he has inspired and the events of July 2016, so this is where we begin. He was born in Erzurum, in 1938, into a pious family of limited means with an illustrious lineage of Islamic scholarship.<sup>3</sup> His father was an imam who spent much of his time reading and reflecting on the nature of the early Islamic world. He also enjoyed reciting poetry and was an important early inspiration for his son, both as a lover of learning and as one impassioned with the stories and teachings of Muhammad and the first generation of his followers, the *rasheedun*. So, too, Gülen's mother, a teacher of Qur'an, instilled in him a love of recitation from that sacred text. She was the one, in fact, who was his first teacher of Qur'an recitation, when he was four years old. He had both an innate inclination toward Islam's spiritual traditions and an extraordinary

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<sup>2</sup> Among recent volumes, see those by Anwar Alam, Jill Carrol, Faruk Mercan, Jon, Pahl, Ori Z Soltes, and Salih Yucel—just to name a few. The full citations are in the bibliography to this essay.

<sup>3</sup> Many popular sources present his birth year as 1941. Due to the extremist secular perspective of the Turkish Republic's government under and following the tenure of its founder, Kemal Atatürk—not merely secular but overtly hostile to the practice of religion—his birth was not registered because his parents had given him a “religious” name: “Mohammed Fethullah,” the latter with the word for God, ‘*Allah*, embedded in it. Three years later, a clerk sympathetic to his highly respected father registered the baby.

talent for both memorization and analysis—after all, he had siblings, none of whom were drawn in the direction that drew him.

Gülen was educated along traditional Islamic lines—he became a *hafiz*, one who knows the entire Qur'an by heart, by or before age twelve; and he began to preach in local mosques as a fourteen-year-old—and also along modern lines, beginning a life-long series of intellectual and spiritual interests that extend from the Qur'an and hadith to the literatures of other religious traditions to math and the sciences. His study encompassed the history of Islam and its particular contributions over many centuries to math and science—and not only to Abrahamic spirituality.

Aside from the formally obtained, government-mandated teaching certificate in Islamic learning that he eventually earned, Gülen became part of the training circles of local Sufi sheikhs, with their focus both on deep—mystical—spirituality and on a universalist, broadly humanistic perspective with regard to faith. On the one hand, a centerpiece of such study that would emerge for him as an interest and an influence, was Jelaluddin Rumi, as well as other key Sufi thinkers, from Rabi'a to al-Ghazali to Ibn'Arabi. On the other hand, his intellectual and spiritual reach would extend deeply into the Western tradition, beginning with Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, and as far forward as Einstein and also, importantly, the teachings of the Turkish master, Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, who preceded Gülen by barely a generation.

In 1958 Gülen passed the examinations administered by the Turkish State's Directorate of Religious Affairs, permitting him to be officially appointed as an imam, preacher and teacher. His first appointment was to a mosque in Edirne, not far from Istanbul, on the European side

of Türkiye.<sup>4</sup> There he lived modestly—indeed ascetically—as he continued his self-directed course of diverse studies while quickly acquiring a reputation throughout the city as an outstanding preacher. He developed a web of friends and followers from varied walks of life through his charismatic personality and the depth and diversity of his learning.

This was also the period during which he began perceiving in Turkish society a diminishment of moral and spiritual values. He developed a concern for the future of youth caught in a web of spiritual uncertainty and lack of ethical clarity and found himself compelled to find a way to pull them away from a condition of feeling lost. After doing his military service he returned to Edirne. He began to reach beyond the mosque which—not surprisingly in secular Türkiye—was poorly attended, and mostly by older people, offering a series of public lectures that, together with his preaching his Friday sermons (*hutbe*s) in his mosque, led to his promotion to a new post. First transferred to Kırklareli, in 1966 Gülen became the main Imam and the director of a boarding school in İzmir, Türkiye’s second-largest city.

The move to İzmir would be transformative. There, as Gülen’s own thinking deepened and broadened through ever more diverse self-directed reading, his charismatic influence began to spread through an ever-widening range of preaching and teaching, delivering lectures and leading seminars. He addressed varied subjects, from religious study and practice—focused on the Qur’an and the hadith and their relationship both to Muslim jurisprudence and theology and to the

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<sup>4</sup> At the time of the conference and the initial writing of the essays in this book, Erdoğan had not yet insisted on a de-Westernized, Turkish spelling of the country’s name: what had been called “Türkiye” has since become “Türkiye” and we have endeavored to follow that orthographic prescription throughout the chapters that follow.

modern world—to theories of education and its relationship to shaping children into adults with a concern for others: a devotion to social justice and a passion for appreciating and maintaining the natural world around us.

In Izmir he began to redirect the role of the mosque toward what it had been in Islam's golden age: the center of life, attending not only to the prayer-centered spiritual needs of its constituents, but also to their emotional and intellectual needs. Aside from preaching *hutbehs* from the *minbar*, he began to conduct discussions (*sohbets*) focused on questions relating to everyday life to which the Muslim tradition, linked to contemporary thought, offers answers. His deep learning and his psychological acuity combined to help him develop a wider reputation and to expand his following. Moreover, in continuing to recognize that young people were not forming any part of the mosque audience, he sought them out where they were, by going into coffeehouses—often coffeehouses in grungy neighborhoods, where nobody would expect to find an imam—to engage in *sohbets*. His charisma as well as his remarkable memory and analytical acumen soon gained him a singular audience: if he could not answer a question, he would draw them back the next day and meanwhile have learned the answers to those questions over the intervening night.

So, too, over the following years he began to interweave his preaching and discussions with a call to action along lines centered on serving others: *hizmet* (the Turkish word for “service”). Particularly in encouraging young people to think about the future of the world and their role in contributing to its fuller beauty, in pushing them to recognize the importance of combining intellectual awareness with spiritually-grounded virtue and also *altruistic service* toward others, he helped foster a generation grounded in the certainty that service to others serves the self. For he emphasized how each “self” is connected

to all “selves” and thus helping others and helping to improve the world benefits the one helping.

The 1960s offered an era of socio-cultural and political turmoil across much of the western world. Türkiye, too, was subject to political turmoil and, as elsewhere in the world, young people were often drawn to extremist ideologies perceived as pure. In many cases extremism also meant turning to violence. Against this backdrop, Gülen operated at an intense pace in his will to inspire Turkish youth to engage the shaping of a peaceful world, not a violent one, dominated not by ego-centric politics but by a commitment to serving society at large.

Gülen travelled widely, visiting countless cities, towns, and villages across Türkiye, giving sermons in mosques and speeches and lectures in coffee-houses and lecture halls. Talks became dialogues, speaking never outdistanced listening, as he sought both the pulse of the Turkish people and a means of pushing that pulse toward a calmer, more *hizmet*-driven rhythm. Followers began to tape-record his words and to distributed the tapes; by decade’s end he was one of a few imams recognized throughout the country.

He succeeded in turning their admiration for him into actions benefiting the community. His inspiration led to the building of more effective educational facilities and making education more accessible and available to more young people—including the funding of institutions and scholarship-granting entities directed toward economically-deprived students. A student, say, from rural eastern Anatolia would be provided with the necessities both to travel to and live in and study in Izmir, living in a dorm—they called these dorms “Houses of Light”—where older students would help the younger not

only with their studies but with the challenge of negotiating big-city culture.

Gülen's success also led, to some extent, to fear of him on the part of the secular government—echoing the condition under which Said Nursi suffered persecution more than a generation earlier. In 1971, Gülen was arrested on false charges that he had been trying to change the Turkish governmental structure toward an Islamicist regime. He remained in prison for several months, eventually released—and later acquitted of the charge. He continued thereafter to teach and to preach, but retired in 1980 from his formal position as an Imam.

But by then his following had expanded exponentially from its beginnings in the 1960s. He had also come to recognize that the solution to the threefold primary problem for humanity, and not just for Türkiye—ignorance, poverty, and violent strife—required worldwide cooperation, not just a Turkish effort, across religious, ethnic, racial, and gender lines as well as national borders, if it was to be solved. Ultimately, by the 1980s, an extensive network of Gülen-inspired groups of educators and entrepreneurs began an extended program of establishing schools—by now, several hundred of them both within and beyond Türkiye. As private institutions, these schools offered—and continue to offer—an incomparable opportunity for their constituents; they strictly follow the curricular prescriptions demanded by the state but extend well beyond those prescriptions to offer well-balanced curricula that wed tradition to modernity and interweave a focus on the intellect with an interest in the soul and a recognition of the importance of the body in shaping fully contributing members of society. The one subject *not* usually taught in Hizmet-founded schools is religion unless part of the mandated curriculum: these institutions bear no relationship to the Muslim-world *madrasas* about which Westerners tend to be somewhat aware.

The most prevalent theme across the world of Gülen-inspired schools is that of contributing to society: embrace of the diversity of humanity and *hizmet* on all levels. Over time the Hizmet Movement extended its educational initiatives not only outward from Türkiye to Turkic countries and to the farther and farther reaches of Europe, Asia, Africa and the Americas, but extended their education offerings from kindergarten level to that of colleges and universities. So, too, as Hizmet spread its wings, it promoted programs to engage socio-economic issues, together with altruistically-inclined practitioners of other faiths and ethnicities—as well as developing programs, such as interfaith iftar dinners that created hospitable contexts for interfaith dialogue: not to convert but to come to understand one another. The most direct textual inspiration for this were (and are) the Qur’anic words “We have created you into different peoples and tribes so that you may get to know one another,” found in *Surah Al-Hujurat* (Qur. 49:13).

By 1991 Gülen decided to retire from public life, to devote his time in a quieter way to the community: to teaching seminars of graduate students and taking part in service projects. He continued to travel in order to meet with diverse religious and political world leaders—ranging from Israel’s chief Sephardic Rabbi, Eliyahu Bakshi Doron, to Pope John Paul II—who shared his vision of a better world. In interviews and commentaries in various media he promoted the ideas of *hizmet* and of peaceful coexistence across the ethnicities and religions, races and nationalities that define human society.

He became particularly active in promoting interfaith dialogue—emphasizing the most forward-looking of features of the Muslim tradition with regard to embracing non-Muslims and connecting these features to contemporary reality. And above all, he expanded the range of his writing, making his thinking on both intra-Muslim

spiritual matters and interfaith and multicultural issues available to an increasingly wide audience.

In spite of Gülen's consistent assertion of being apolitical—he has written and spoken about diverse ideas, from human rights and humane secularism to democracy, open society and mutual tolerance—as his renown spread he found himself under attack from two sides. On the one hand, the secular leadership within Türkiye feared that his goal was to reshape Türkiye as an Islamist theocracy. On the other hand, extremist Islamist groups found his interest and activity in interfaith discussions and initiatives to be anti-Islamic—accusing him of heresy.

To the secularists he insisted that the most compatible form of government for Islam is democracy—in which all forms of faith are equally accepted; to the Islamists he pointed out that openness to diverse spiritual perspectives may be understood not merely as acceptable to Islam, but as a Muslim religious *obligation*.

His critics managed to bring criminal charges against him in 2000—which were proven baseless and dismissed eight years later. As a practical matter, this episode was irrelevant: Gülen had left Türkiye for the United States in 1999 primarily for health reasons—to receive treatment for a cardiovascular condition. This culminated in a heart operation in 2004, and on the advice of his doctors that he avoid stress he remained in the United States, away from the politically-charged world of Türkiye, in a retreat in Pennsylvania where, until his passing in October 2024, he continued to read and to write and to teach a small group of advanced students and to receive occasional visitors from a range of disciplines and walks of life.

His profound interest in the triple weave—of love of traditional Muslim thought with a passion for contemporary scientific thought;

of intra-Islamic concerns with embrace of true interfaith dialogue; and of an insistence that such love, passion, concern and embrace lead one to serve others—marks his most enduring contribution during the past three decades as a writer and activist.

The Hizmet Movement of altruistic words and actions inspired by him focuses on education, primarily by founding schools, often in countries or, within the US, in inner cities where schools are lacking or limited in their offerings and where they are most needed. The movement focuses on interfaith and intercultural dialogue through the mental and moral agency of *hoşgörü*—“seeing the world from within someone else’s eyes”; in other words: *embrace*, not mere *tolerance*—by way of interfaith iftar dinners and a host of young people’s arts and culture programs that bring participants from all over the world.

The Movement focuses on poverty, by initiating and/or participating in soup kitchens and Thanksgiving and Christmas food-package programs and, for instance, by senior high school projects in which the senior class grows organic vegetables (gaining an understanding the kind of effort it takes for a farmer to do this), selling the vegetables in the neighborhood (where often organic vegetables are not easily available), and sending the proceeds to a village that they have researched, usually in Africa, where fresh water is not available nearby, so that they have the funds needed to put in a well or a piping system from the river.<sup>5</sup> This last-mentioned example also intersects another growing focus that has evolved in recent years: the environment, in terms of both human health and the health of the planet.

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<sup>5</sup> I encountered two different such programs in Hizmet schools in my recent travels, one in Sydney, Australia and one in Berlin, Germany.

## ***Hizmet*, Politics, and Civil Islam**

I have left out an important—indeed decisive—development in Gülen’s life trajectory and that of the Hizmet Movement, to which I now briefly turn. Gülen consistently emphasized the importance of *civic, spiritual, and cultural* Islam—this is, in part, the foundation of his conviction that democracy is the political system most compatible with Islam—over and against *political* Islam: the version of Islam (think ISIS or Al-Qaeda or the Taliban, most obviously) that seeks power and the ability to convert everyone else to its particular interpretive version of submission to God’s will.<sup>6</sup> As such, he never sought a position within the Turkish government or to gain political power for himself within it—in spite of the fact that his extraordinary popular success as a teacher and inspirer of action was often viewed with fear by the various governments in power through the last few decades of his residence in Türkiye. Politicians have a difficult time comprehending an individual who, with the potential to assume political power, has no interest in doing so.

As a practical matter, the succession of Turkish governments, and the near every-decade coup d’état reshaping of those governments during the last third of the twentieth century meant that the country accompanied whatever spiritual issues assailed it with political instability. This was the context in which Gülen was, for quite some time, an ally of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. As the competent and forward-looking mayor of Istanbul (1994-98), Erdoğan appeared to be

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<sup>6</sup> Keep in mind that the Arabic word “*islam*” means “submission [to God’s will]” and that every religious tradition—from Judaism and Christianity to Islam to Hinduism to Sikhism, to name a few—begins with some form of revelation, and then spends its entire post-first-generation history in the throes of interpreting what, exactly, the details of the revelation *mean*. Hence extensive rabbinic literature, expansive patristic and scholastic literature, diverse schools (*madhabs*) of *Shari’a*—and so forth.

the sort of individual who, as Prime Minister, might bring stability into the Turkish political maelstrom. He and Gülen seemed to share a pious traditionalism with regard to Islam, a love of Türkiye, a sense that bringing Islam back into an accepted place would benefit Türkiye, and that both the instrumentation and most successful future for such a vision would be democracy. They even both ran afoul of the federal government at around the same time—in Erdoğan's case, he was removed from his mayoralty for having read a poem in public deemed by the courts to have violated secular laws.

Their respective comments before they were at all associated with each other reflect important differences between them, however. Back in 1994, Gülen commented that "there will be no turning back from democracy; it is not perfect, but it is the best system we have."<sup>7</sup> By contrast, in a frank and unguarded moment in the late 1990s, when he was Istanbul's mayor, Erdoğan commented that "Democracy is like a train: when we reach our destination, we get off."<sup>8</sup>

Where Gülen consistently shunned politics, both for himself personally and for Islam as he envisioned it, Erdoğan was from the outset and remains a politician—from his turn as the Mayor of Istanbul and, in his popular return after his jail time and period of exile from politics and from Türkiye itself,<sup>9</sup> to his eventual founding

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<sup>7</sup> See Faruk Mercan, *No Return from Democracy: A Survey of Interviews with Fethullah Gülen*, 7 and 12; the second page quotes Gülen's speech on June 29, 1994 at a dinner celebrating the founding of the Journalists and Writers Foundation.

<sup>8</sup> This is quoted, among other places, in the article by Matt Trezza, "Three Freedoms Erdoğan Scorns but Saved His Regime," in the *Huffington Post*, July 20, 2016. In that same article, Trezza notes that Erdoğan commented in March 2016 that "democracy, freedom, and rule of law have absolutely no value" in Türkiye.

<sup>9</sup> His 10-month sentence was commuted to 4 months (March-July 1999). After his release, he lived for several months in Tetovo, Macedonia, with an Albanian family.

of the “Freedom and Justice” Party (the AKP) and rise to the Prime Ministership. His early actions seemed to point toward an ambition of transforming Türkiye in forward-looking ways, modernizing while re-asserting traditional values. It turned out, given that unguarded comment, that his interest in that sort of government was both brief and never genuine. Moreover, his pretense at Islamic piety has more and more, particularly in the past fifteen years, revealed itself as no more than that: a pretense.

His corrupt political life has both steadily progressed backwards from democracy to dictatorship, and led away from traditional Muslim values toward his own species of Islamist values. Gülen’s initial support of Erdoğan was based on the mistaken notion that the two shared the same hopes for Türkiye’s future. By the time Gülen came to the United States in 1999, he already had a huge following in and beyond Türkiye—of individuals similarly desirous of improving the condition of Türkiye and the overall human condition and the state of the world through embracing the simple syllogism that if one loves God, and God created the entire world, then one must love the entire world, or one does not truly love God. This was and is the point and purpose of the Hizmet Movement.

While initially Gülen saw no reason not to support Erdoğan, as the latter began gradually to turn away from the values of democracy, integrity, and humility, Gülen turned away from him. By then, in any case, Erdoğan had already turned—viciously—away from Gülen, and against anyone, from judges and journalists to professors, media personalities and athletes, who supported the values of Hizmet. One might ask why. Aside from the obvious simplicity of a divergence of their paths, it is not likely, even after Gülen had left Türkiye, that Erdoğan could imagine that his erstwhile political ally was not

interested in using his followers to acquire political power and it surely worried him.

It turns out that there was something more specific. When Erdoğan was still mayor of Istanbul and Gülen and he were still in amicable contact, Erdoğan was heading for a dangerous political ambush. Gülen, through his contacts, became aware of this and warned Erdoğan, perhaps saving his political life. Ironically, *this* moment yielded the true beginning of the end of their relationship: Erdoğan was afraid for more than two decades that Gülen would expose him by revealing precisely what it was that he (Gülen) prevented from happening.<sup>10</sup> There is a double logic to this: for someone with the ego and thin skin of Erdoğan, the ongoing burden of obligation to someone else must be unbearable. Moreover, someone like Erdoğan, were the circumstances reversed, would quickly make public the contents of that event, to Gülen's disadvantage and, as one who can only see things from his own perspective, he assumed that Gülen would offer to the world what would be harmful to Erdoğan. He cannot imagine behaving with integrity, like Gülen always did, to a fault.

So Erdoğan was desperate for over two decades to silence Gülen's voice, even as he, Erdoğan, slowly and systematically dismantled Türkiye's democratic infrastructure, beginning in 2011. He gradually took personal control of the media, the military, and the police force, and the three branches of the federal government (executive, legislative, and judicial) in a carefully calibrated step-by-step process, reminiscent of Hitler's process of dismantling the German Weimar Republic and replacing it by his own dictatorship.

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<sup>10</sup>I learned about this from Mr. Gülen in a summer, 2019, conversation—in which, not surprisingly, he would not reveal to me exactly what the event/issue had been.

Where the specifics of his relations with Gülen concerned, as Erdoğan became more comfortable and confident, he saw less and less need for the support of Gülen and his hundreds of thousands of followers. By the end of his third term as Prime Minister a clear schism had opened between the two. One of two things seems to have occurred. One possibility is that Erdoğan had been clever enough to mask his true intentions and ambitions all along—and if so, then he was engaging in a twisted version of what is referred to in Arabic as *taqiyya*.<sup>11</sup> The term refers to the permissibility of temporarily denying the specifics of one's beliefs in order to protect one's life and property. Not all Muslims accept *taqiyya* even under circumstances of threat to one's survival—and few legitimate scholars of Islamic jurisprudence would embrace the sort of dissimulation in which Erdoğan may have engaged, although he would not be the first individual to pervert the concept. In any case, if he was dissimulating, not only was much of Türkiye duped, but so was Gülen—and most of the world, including the United States government. Alternatively, perhaps the power that he achieved gradually corrupted him, breeding an unslakable thirst for more power and an increasing distaste for anyone who might stand in the way of its acquisition.

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<sup>11</sup> *Taqiyya* in the sense of concealing one's real thoughts and deceiving others is practiced by followers of some Shi'i schools and believed to be an important principle of their creed. This is general and different in nuance from dissimulating in a compelling situation accepted more widely, as when a Muslim is being threatened with torture or death if s/he does not deny Islam; under such circumstances, it is permissible to dissimulate and one is not considered to have committed a sin. Such religious *taqiyya* is permissible—however, in most Sunni schools of *shari'a* only under the unbearable circumstances of threat to one's survival. Clearly the context of Erdoğan's dissimulation hardly falls into any category of acceptable *taqiyya*, if that is what he was about before coming out as an aspiring dictator.

A vast corruption scandal involving Erdoğan and his sons and colleagues emerged in November-December 2013<sup>12</sup>—in which he stuffed hundreds of millions of dollars into his own pockets, and during which his son was recorded asking his father, by telephone, where to place several million that couldn't be hidden away quickly enough. The uncovering of his malfeasance he blamed on followers of Gülen, while asserting that Hizmet was making the whole thing up in order to undermine his government—all of which expanded the gut-level animosity to which I have just referred.

Gülen's public presence, however distant and divorced from politics, was a constant reminder to Erdoğan of how opposite they actually are, or certainly became, in their convictions. Where Gülen preached the compatibility of Islam and democracy, Erdoğan undermines the first and has actively destroyed the second in Türkiye. Where Gülen has long spoken and written "against the politicization of religion, and ha[s] considered it just as harmful as hostility to religion," Erdoğan has consistently politicized and used religion to create his base of political support among rural, uneducated Turks. Where Gülen taught altruism to his followers—to do for others, he insists, is to serve God—Erdoğan has consistently served himself, amassing a fortune. He spent Türkiye's money in constructing an enormous—1,100-room—palace for himself in Ankara and many other palaces and mansions, not to mention possessing many luxurious planes in his service.

In the progression toward Erdoğan's explicit autocracy, one might note, next, *inter alia*, the 2014 mining disaster in Eastern Türkiye, in

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<sup>12</sup> See "Why Türkiye's Mother of All Corruption Scandals Refuses to Go Away" by Berivan Oru coglu, in *Foreign Policy*, January 6, 2015 and also Constanze Letsch, "Leaked tapes prompt calls for Turkish PM to resign" in *The Guardian*, February 25, 2014.

which Erdoğan hurried to the area, proceeded not to commiserate with but to lambast the miners. When a relative of one of the deceased miners objected to the then-Prime Minister's cruel rhetoric, Erdoğan slapped the man in the face—a simple but highly symbolic act, accompanied as it was by his assertion that *nobody* dare criticize the national leader. There are other events, from Erdoğan's role in the Gaza Flotilla disaster in 2009 to the Ghezi Park debacle of 2013. Add to all of this the fact that Erdoğan manipulated the political system not only to become president, but to elevate that role so that he functionally continued as Prime Minister—a page out of Vladimir Putin's book. All along the way, while he has expanded his subversion of the rights of Turkish citizens on the one hand and all but destroyed Türkiye's relationship with every country with which it had decent relations in the Middle East on the other; he has very publicly tried to look the part of a pious man, praying where he can be seen, (such displays of false public piety might be considered a form of tertiary *shirk* in Islam, particularly if we understand them not only as hypocritical but as a reflection of his idolatrous self-conception); and he has with increasing vehemence continued to attack Fethullah Gülen and anyone believed to be associated with Gülen—to return to the central issue at hand.

Fundamentally, Gülen continues (even now, almost two years after Gülen's death) to offer a reflection of what Erdoğan pretends to be and never was: a mirror into which, every time Erdoğan looks, he must see his own increasingly ugly reflection. It would be preferable for him to have that mirror removed, so that his sycophants can continue to call him the fairest pious Muslim in the land without the contradiction that rings in his ears no matter how thick the earmuffs that he wears. Erdoğan is both Dorian Gray's picture in the novella by Oscar Wilde of that name—growing older and uglier in the attic, thanks to the moral malfeasance of the physically youthful Dorian Gray—and

Snow White's Wicked Stepmother, querying in his mirror every morning "who is the most pious of them all?" and being told "Fethullah Gülen" and not by any means "Recep Tayip Erdoğan" and thus causing him to well up with a passion to destroy Gülen. He is these two characters rolled into one and his level of desperation is profound. From closing hundreds of schools where they are most needed; to dismantling every aspect of Türkiye's democratic infrastructure, from its legal system to its parliamentary system to its military; culminating with the Hitlerian organization of a fake coup in July 2016, in order to provide a pretext for these and other actions; Erdoğan has done everything to expand his power and to destroy anyone in his way. This is not limited to, but has most particularly focused on Gülen and anyone associated with him.

## **The Aftermath of July 2016's Fake Coup and this Volume**

It is hard to believe that anyone who is astute—and certainly anyone who has been watching Erdoğan degenerate into a tyrant over the last fifteen years—could take the story he has been presenting about the 2016 so-called "coup" attempt seriously. It's just as difficult to imagine any serious observer believing Fethullah Gülen was in any way, shape, or form behind the failed "coup." The growing split with Fethullah Gülen has led Erdoğan to attack the Hizmet Movement in a manner reminiscent of how Hitler began to target the Jews in Germany in 1933-35. He has gone so far as to accuse the group, which he sees as the most serious threat to his demagoguery, of seeking to shape a "government within the government." At the same time as he began leveling anti-Hizmet accusations, Erdoğan initiated a succession of acts that demonstrate how desperate he had become to assert and maintain his authority.

He has abrogated Turkish law in order to shut down Hizmet's schools—secular schools, that have always followed government guidelines with regard to curricula and conduct—as well as its newspaper and other media outlets. His government has also, in an expansive arc, arrested members of the professional Turkish world who merely support Hizmet—and in the last five years, even those who do not, but are so-accused because it serves his purposes: to crush anyone whom Erdoğan perceives as oppositional. Nothing but extermination, however, will apparently satisfy Erdoğan's animosity for a man and a movement that stand for everything he is not. So along comes this "failed coup." Except that there was apparently no leadership behind it, no organization to it, no substantial numbers who were part of it—the oddest coup in Turkish history (a country with a history of skilled military coups, nearly one a decade in the two generations before the advent of Erdoğan) or any other country's history. Surprise! Erdoğan has accused the Hizmet Movement of fomenting it, and the Movement's inspiration, Fethullah Gülen, who had, to repeat, been living in eastern Pennsylvania since 1999.

And what, after all, is it that Gülen was all about? He believed that Türkiye lost its soul when it became emphatically secular—laicist—but he also believed that the way forward is for a Muslim Türkiye to be completely open to other faiths, (including atheism); and that a better future for a more perfect world will come through members of diverse faiths, cultures, and ethnicities engaging in dialogue. He steadfastly asserted that one must work with and through governments and must never try to undermine them. Moreover, the need for the mystic to eliminate his ego in order to be filled with God could not be more evident than in his bearing and his being: he was, in his own unique way, the consummate Rumi-esque Sufi. I have, by now, met scores of individuals affiliated with Hizmet—and unless they are attending the same acting school, they invariably walk the

real walk and don't just talk the talk of seeking a better world, by working across sectarian lines with not merely tolerance but love, and through a consistent stream of projects that serve others. Simply put: these people are the opposite of everything that Erdoğan has come to stand for in his ego-ridden, tyrannical, crush-anyone-who disagrees-with-me manner of being-in-the-world.

The Hizmet members I know are far less likely to have had anything to do with the so-called coup attempt than he, who will do anything to expand his control and to destroy those who don't agree with him. All roads point to this as an action shaped by Erdoğan himself to give him the excuse to arrest Hizmet members and to demand Mr. Gülen's extradition from the United States. Consider the events of July 15, 2016: For starters: they were initiated during rush hour, not in the middle of the night. Erdoğan arrived too quickly on the scene with too large a list *completely prepared*, too soon, of those who needed to be arrested. Further details reinforce the idea that his assertion of a Gülen-directed coup attempt smells of nothing less than Hitler's actions after the burning of the Reichstag in 1933, which was accomplished by Hitler's followers so that he could accuse his Communist political opponents and the Jews of having set the blaze and arrest them.

Since July 2016, Erdoğan has cleaned out the army, the judiciary, the educational system, and the media, of anybody he deems oppositional—and regardless of their politics, (in other words, including secularists hostile to Mr. Gülen) the nearly 200,000 people (and still counting) stripped of jobs and/or in prison are accused of association with the Hizmet Movement. As in the darkest days of Stalin's Russia, people disappear into prisons from which they do not return—or return, marked by the torture to which they have been subject—and someone safe today may suddenly find him or herself in

danger tomorrow. Erdoğan has reached beyond his own borders, feuding with Germany, insulting the EU, and providing economic assistance to organizations (like ISIS) he claims to be fighting. Conversely, he has bullied or bribed and/or blackmailed poor countries from Nigeria to Pakistan where Hizmet has provided schools and hospitals—all but forcing them to eliminate the very people and institutions that such countries so desperately need.

It is against the backdrop of this narrative that the 2023 international Hizmet conference was held. The papers that follow in this volume resonate from the enthusiasm with which its practitioners continue to serve across the globe, and of the failure of Erdoğan to destroy the movement or the man who inspired and continues to inspire its altruistic actions. As such, there are two general notes that I must offer regarding the content that follows in this book. One is that the papers tend to fall into two categories, those that are more theoretical and those that function as practical informational reportage on how and where Hizmet has been active in the last few years, dealing both with its ability to relocate and become comfortably integrated in new locations and/or what it has done within its new communities—although some may be said to combine these two features. The other note is that we have not edited out aspects of the narrative that occur as repetitive when moving from one paper to the next. Given the power of a well-deceived international press to repeat the fiction that the July 2016 event was a failed coup masterminded by Fethullah Gülen and attempted by his followers, the counter-expressions of how that event transpired and what it was about cannot be repeated too often. And a reader without knowledge of the Hizmet Movement who reads a given article but not all of them may want the context that many of these very diverse articles provide in slightly differing ways.

Thus, the first chapter, by Anwar Alam, offers both a concise discussion of how the Hizmet Movement developed, and an aperçu, specifically, into how Gülen's thinking, which shaped the Movement, offers a postmodern perspective with a unique series of non-postmodernist, traditionalist aspects. The second chapter, by Fevzi Sarac offers a detailed and very thoughtful discussion of how the nature of the Hizmet Movement as embedded in a cultural orientation is so radically different from the institutional shape of political Islam—with consequences both within Türkiye itself and in the world of and beyond Islam in which Hizmet is so passionately engaged.

The third chapter, by Ori Z Soltes, offers an extended discussion of how and why the July 2016 event was not a failed coup but a fake coup, and how strikingly it emulated Hitler's February 1933 burning of the Reichstag in Berlin, how Hitler's Communists and Jews are Erdoğan's *Hizmetis*, and how Erdoğan's insistent attempts to destroy Hizmet have backfired; how Hizmet, like the surviving Jews after the Holocaust, has flourished and not merely survived—and what its promising future of ongoing service is. The fourth chapter, by Ferah Armutcu, functionally re-angles this sort of comparison in discussing the escape of academics, particularly Jewish academics, from Hitler's Germany, in particular to Türkiye, in comparison with the flight of Turkish academics, who, in the wonderful irony of which history is so fond, have overwhelmingly preferred Germany as a destination of refuge and reshaping of their lives.

The book's fifth chapter, by John A. Tures and Jenna Pittman, Daniel Cody and Eli Rogers, offers an analysis of how Türkiye's turn from democracy to despotism under Erdoğan has had a particular—deleterious—effect on the shape of *sports* within the realm of international competition, and how that follows a general pattern with regard to success and failure in the world of contending states