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Taş, Hakkı

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Collective Identity Change under Exogenous Shocks: The Gülen Movement and Its Diasporization

HAKKI TAŞ 

German Institute for Global and Area Studies, Hamburg

ABSTRACT: *Diasporas do not arise from fixed connections to objective circumstances such as dispersion or relation to a homeland, but instead constantly are negotiated and re-constituted. Ranging from internal gradual change to sudden exogenous change, the re-making of a diaspora can take diverse forms. Despite the prevalence of constructivist and processual approaches, however, research on diaspora identity change has been limited. This paper takes a comparative historical perspective to the post-2016 diasporization of the Gülen Movement (GM) and discusses how the GM responded differently to sudden exogenous shocks in 1997, 2007, and 2016. In both historical institutionalism and rational choice theories, the sudden exogenous shocks do the heavy lifting to explain change; however, it is rather the endogenous parameters that account for the variation in the GM's responses to those shocks.*

KEY WORDS: *Diaspora identity; Exogenous shocks; Gülen movement; Identity change; Islamism; Turkey*

Contrary to most projections, the post-Kemalist order has ushered in neither liberal democracy nor Sharia rule in Turkey. Instead, a fratricide between the ruling Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* – AKP) and the religious Gülen Movement (GM) over state power shaped the country's political trajectory in the 2010s. Following the abortive coup on 15 July 2016, which the AKP mainly blamed on the GM and its extensions within the Turkish military, many Gülenists have fled the massive crackdown, leading to an exilic diasporization of the movement.

For a long time, the Islamists regarded the movement's leader, Fethullah Gülen, as an agent of the secular Turkish state to tame and incorporate Islamic activism, whereas the secularists saw Gülen as the same evil as Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini, only in different colors—with his initial moderate, democratic stance concealing a hidden agenda of Islamic revolution. Compared to its vast presence, knowledge about the movement was limited by its disparate portrayals, ranging from a faith-based humanitarian civic movement to a criminal gang engulfing the Turkish state apparatus.¹ This obscurity

Correspondence Address: Hakkı Taş, Institute for Middle East Studies, The German Institute for Global and Area Studies, Neuer Jungfernstieg 21 20354, Hamburg, Germany. Email: hakki.tas@giga-hamburg.de

¹ Simon P. Watmough and Ahmet Erdi Öztürk (2018) The Future of the Gülen Movement in Transnational Political Exile: Introduction to the Special Issue, *Politics, Religion & Ideology*, 19 (1), pp. 1–10.

would soon fade after 15 July, when the GM became more exposed to public scrutiny than ever before. In the post-2016 debates, both the Gülenists and their adversaries have painted a static resilient identity, which has been bound to the GM's sacred ideals or nefarious intentions, respectively, since its inception in early 1970s. Nevertheless, the GM is renowned for its pragmatism and ideological elasticity, which have resulted in multiple re-configurations of its collective identity in response to political and social exigencies.

What are the ways in which movements and their collective identities change? Theoretically, this paper aims to contribute to the theorization of collective identity change, which, despite its centrality, is scattered around diverse disciplines and paradigms and awaits further theorization.² To develop a common approach, it builds on the contributions of institutional theory and social movement literature and argues that while the academic scholarship emphasizes the importance of sudden exogenous shocks among different sources of identity change, their impact is largely moderated by endogenous parameters such as institutional structure. Empirically, the research adopts a historical institutional approach to explore the current inertia of the GM that survived through constant change but has been unable to do so while re-making its diaspora. It examines how exogenous shocks in 1997, 2007, and 2016 resulted in disparate consequences for the GM's collective identity and relates this variation to elite decisions and the community base's orientation. In addition to a thorough literature survey and collection of primary materials, the article is based on fieldwork undertaken in Greece and Germany during October and November of 2018.

Sources of Identity Change

Collective identity is “an interactive and shared definition produced by several individuals (or groups at a more complex level) and concerned with the orientations of action and the field of opportunities and constraints in which the action takes place.”³ It is not a given and requires the construction of cognitive and normative appeals about the ends, means, and field of collective action that delineate membership. Paradoxically, whereas identities without permanent and objectively given boundaries are not impervious to change, they exist on the assumption of some consistency and continuity, which must be constantly re-established at the very least through narration.⁴ This process is largely based on “collective identity stories,” which not only project a coherent image of we-ness and legitimate the core practices, but also distill a plethora of contradictory actions into a simplified coherent portrayal.⁵

Collective identities may experience “stability,” when an event does not disrupt the equilibrium of the group's social and normative structures, or “inertia,” when the majority of members desire change but are unable to sustain it due to a lack of collective social support or unclear identity.⁶ Nonetheless, when it comes to change, macro

² Bahar Rumelili and Jennifer Todd (2018) Paradoxes of Identity Change: Integrating Macro, Meso, and Micro Research on Identity in Conflict Processes, *Politics*, 38 (1), p. 4.

³ Alberto Melucci (1995) The process of collective identity, in H. Johnston and B. Klandermans (eds) *Social Movements and Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), p. 44.

⁴ Bahar and Todd, “Paradoxes of Identity Change,” p. 11.

⁵ Tyler Wry, Michael Lounsbury, and Mary Ann Glynn (2011) Legitimizing Nascent Collective Identities: Coordinating Cultural Entrepreneurship, *Organization Science*, 22 (2), p. 450.

approaches tend to focus on structural and dramatic changes, oblivious to other types. This results in exclusive attention on exogenous factors because the rational choice approach's unavoidable conclusion is that changes in self-reinforcing institutions can only have an exogenous origin.⁷ While rejecting this approach's bias toward institutional stability, historical institutionalists focus on process and develop a model based on path dependency and critical junctures. Accordingly, lengthier periods of stability are punctuated by sudden exogenous shocks, which alter future choices. However, the path-dependency model similarly fails to acknowledge endogenous gradual change. Groups, for instance, may happen to leave interpretational gaps and leeway for maneuver that can be exploited by some agents to gradually replace or modify institutional structures and collective identity.

To capture this complexity, Johannes Gerschewski suggests to cross-tabulate the two dimensions of change (exogenous vs. endogenous and sudden vs. gradual) and develops a typology applicable to collective identity changes.⁸ The first of these categories, the exogenous sudden change, represents the punctuated equilibrium—borrowed from evolutionary biology—at which extended phases of stability are interrupted by sudden events and then followed by local adaptation. Exile and the emergence of exilic diasporas exemplify this type. The second category is exogenous gradual change, in which the substance of the group is incrementally eroded by external factors. Globalization and urbanization may impose environmental stresses on local diaspora groups in several ways. A good illustration of these stressors is the gradual erosion of the Dede (the religious leader) position in the Alevi diaspora. While the dede-centered hidden religious practices used to be a rural phenomenon in Turkey, the circumstances of the host state, Germany, compelled the Alevis to develop formal associations and public practices in urban centers. Hence, unlike the hereditary charisma of their counterparts in the home state, the dedes' traditional authority has been incrementally challenged by the authority of the elected community leaders in modern associations.⁹ The third category of change is endogenous sudden change, which involves shocks with their cause inside the group, for instance, when the diaspora leader dies, or one faction of the power elite gains dominance over the other. The final and fourth category is endogenous gradual change, which occurs, for instance, when the subversives slowly transform the group from within. These endogenous explanations may focus on either the decisions and actions of ideational entrepreneurs or the social learning of the community base. The radicalization or secularization of Islamist diasporas reflect such a gradual change with seeds of change implanted in the diasporic configuration.

While disentangling different types of change uncovers the most salient methods of institutional change, social life presents a more complicated picture, with the impacts of exogenous and endogenous sources of change being difficult to discern. Substantial change occurs when both sources complement one another. Thus, studying the impact

⁷Roxane de la Sablonnière (2017) Toward a Psychology of Social Change: A Typology of Social Change, *Frontiers in Psychology* 8, p. 2.

⁷ Avner Greif and David D. Laitin (2004) A Theory of Endogenous Institutional Change, *American Political Science Review*, 98 (4), p. 634.

⁸ Johannes Gerschewski (2021) Explanations of Institutional Change: Reflecting on a “Missing Diagonal,” *American Political Science Review*, 115 (1), pp. 218–233.

⁹ Martin Sökefeld (2002) Alevi Dedes in the German Diaspora: The Transformation of a Religious Institution, *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*, 127 (2), pp. 163–186.

of sudden exogenous shocks as critical junctures requires a systematic consideration of endogenous factors.

Growth and Change in the Gülen Movement

From humble beginnings in the 1970s, the Turkish preacher Fethullah Gülen grew his mosque congregation into one of the largest Islamic networks in the world. His movement has spread throughout the world through education and interfaith dialogue, with a 500,000 to two million supporter group in Turkey and over 2,000 schools in about 160 countries by the early 2010s.¹⁰ While the GM, unlike revolutionary Islamists, promoted generational transformation through inner-worldly ascetism; its informal and amorphous structure, as well as “strategic ambiguity” of its key concepts and goals, provided the movement with pragmatism and adaptability.¹¹ With this elasticity, the GM could reinvent itself for both domestic and international consumption in response to changing political contexts, although the lack of transparency led many to suspect the movement’s ulterior motives. Eventually, it acquired substantial social and economic power as well as access to state power, with some Gülenist bureaucratic cliques driving the political show in 2010s Turkey. The trajectory of the GM depicts three stages of growth as gradual endogenous change between 1972 and 1997, followed by three exogenous shocks in 1997, 2007, and 2016, each with its own distinct impact on collective identity and action.

1972–1982: The Formation

Despite his genuine pro-state and pro-order position, the military pursued and persecuted Preacher Fethullah Gülen on multiple occasions for challenging Kemalist secularism. Nonetheless, between two military interventions in 1971 and 1980, Gülen found motivation to build his own community in the Aegean city of Izmir. The 1970s were tumultuous years defined by ideological agitation and violent clashes between the left and the right. The religious groups, notably the Nurcu Movement, would align with the right-wing nationalist camp and find some legitimacy for maneuver inside the anti-communist campaign and nationalist moralism (*milliyetçi mukaddesatçılık*).¹² While Gülen’s intellectual and activist origins go all the way back to Said Nursi and his Nurcu Movement, this nationalist dimension would characterize the GM’s subsequent formations.

Gülen maintained his contacts to Nursi’s disciples but gradually went his own way and built his own religious community called *jamaah*. He convened meetings in coffee houses and organized preaching tours throughout the Aegean region. His oratory skills were evident in his passionate public sermons, which drew a larger audience. By disseminating his sermons via their audio and video recordings, the GM transformed the

¹⁰ Hakkı Taş (2019) The Gülenists in Exile: Reviving the Movement as a Diaspora, *GIGA Focus* (3), p. 2.

¹¹ Joshua Hendrick (2013) *Gülen, The Ambiguous Politics of Market Islam in Turkey and the World* (New York: New York University Press), p. 16.

¹² Mucahit Bilici (2006) The Fethullah Gülen Movement and Its Politics of Representation in Turkey, *The Muslim World*, 96 (1), p. 7.

text-based system of the Nurcu Movement into an oral one.¹³ His early followers included lower-income groups like tiny artisans and *Eşrefpaşalılar*—drug-addicted ruffians living in a crime-laden neighborhood of Izmir. The defining story of the GM drew on the cultural alienation of religious Anatolian people and the secularist filters of the civil-military bureaucracy to advocate for the restoration of the state to the nation's long-excluded sons. Thus, raising a religious educated youth, “the golden generation,” was a key component of the GM's collective action. The foundation of the first dormitory was laid in 1972 in Bozyaka, Izmir. The other firsts include the first cram school (*dersane*) opened in Manisa in 1974, the Akyazılı Foundation for Middle and Higher Education and the Teacher's Foundation opened in 1976, and the GM's flagship monthly publication *Sızıntı* launched in 1979.¹⁴ The movement's student apartments, *ışık evleri* (lighthouses), which served as “recruitment tools, and social conditioning facilities—incubators for the GM's ‘golden generation’,”¹⁵ were already slowly spreading since 1968, building the informal network. Gülen also traveled to Germany for the first time in 1977, his first trip to the country to mobilize the Turkish immigrant communities there.

1982–1992: The National Expansion

The Turkish-Islamic Synthesis, which the military promoted in order to de-politicize society and neutralize the leftist movements after the 1980 coup d'état, and the political support of then-Prime Minister Turgut Özal offered the GM with new prospects for growth at the national level. With a clearer break from Nursi and even a reluctance to utter his name in order to escape the stigma associated with the Nurcu title, Gülen now found a legitimate framing in conservatism as a middle way between nationalism and Islam.¹⁶ In 1986, the GM also bought the Islamist daily *Zaman*, explicitly distinguishing themselves from the Nurcu Movement and its daily *Yeni Asya*. The audio and video cassettes of his sermons were reaching thousands and Gülen gained nation-wide recognition, now being widely referred to as *Hocaefendi* (esteemed teacher), and his movement as *Hizmet* (Service).

Unlike the National Outlook (*Milli Görüş*), which formed political parties in order to reach out to a broader audience, the Gülenists pursued a non-partisan and elitist strategy to cultivate well-educated cadres for the state bureaucracy. In the Turkish polity, which distinguishes clearly between government and state, these cadres would be the true agents developing and implementing public policies, regardless of who was in power.¹⁷ Gülen's motto “build schools, not mosques,” much to be adored by the Kemalists in 1990s, rested on this aspiration to cultivate the required human resources.¹⁸ To maximize resource mobilization in the shortest amount of time possible, the growth-oriented policy of the GM targeted clever students and wealthy businessmen. Supporting Turkey's economic liberalization under Özal, the GM was now appealing

¹³ Etga Ugur (2019) Religious Frames: The Gülen Movement, *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, DOI:10.1093/ACREFORE/9780190228637.013.1345, p. 4.

¹⁴ Recep Dogan (2020) *Political Islamists in Turkey and the Gülen Movement* (Cham: Springer), p. 46.

¹⁵ Hendrick, *Gülen*, p. 108.

¹⁶ Bilici, “The Fethullah Gülen Movement,” p. 8.

¹⁷ Ömer Laçiner (2012) *Cemaat-Siyaset, Birikim*, (282), p. 22.

¹⁸ Taş, “The Gülenists in Exile,” p. 3.

to the emerging class of Islamic capitalists to build and support the education network. In 1982, the GM opened its first private school, Yamanlar High School, in Izmir, which was quickly followed by hundreds across the country. These institutions were delivering non-religious education to students and were earning their country-wide recognition by regularly winning national and international science competitions, but they were preferred by conservative families to protect their children from “Westoxification.” Considering this together with the proliferation of cram schools, the GM became an influential player in national education.¹⁹

1992–1997: The International Expansion

In the early 1990s, the GM capitalized on post-Cold War opportunities to expand its education and business networks in newly independent Central Asian and Balkan countries, eventually reaching over eighty countries by the end of the decade.²⁰ The expansion, which began with the 1992 opening of the first school in Azerbaijan, also overlapped with Turkey’s new foreign policy strategy and developed into a significant instrument for the state to diversify its foreign policy agenda and to reach out to Turkey’s ethnic and cultural corollaries. In continuation with Özal’s neo-Ottomanism, Gülen projected this opening as a historical responsibility, by which the country could reclaim its old role of leading the Turkish and Islamic worlds.²¹

The concurrent rise of the National Outlook’s Welfare Party (*Refah Partisi* – RP) in politics, however, was alarming the military—the self-appointed guardian of Kemalist secularism. The GM attempted to avert the wrath of an impending military intervention in three ways. First, the movement took a solely pro-state posture in various contentious disputes, including the headscarf controversy, and demonstrated its utility by investing in foreign regions of primary significance to Turkey. Second, Gülen sought to distinguish himself from political Islam, namely the National Outlook, and championed the concepts of *Türkiye Müslümanlığı* and *Anadolu İslamı* in order to emphasize his way’s indigenous and moderate Sufi roots. Accordingly, the GM was not motivated by an imported foreign ideology based on Arab cash or intellectuals, but rather inspired by local Sufi figures such as Mawlana and Yunus Emre, who embodied the Turkish understanding of Islam.²² In January 1995, Turkey’s leading dailies, *Sabah* and *Hürriyet*, were competing to publish his interviews to discredit the National Outlook’s political exploitation of religion and to show the modern, enlightened face of true Islam. Center right political parties also supported the GM to recapture the religious votes lost to the National Outlook. They showed their public support when the GM, for instance, opened Bank Asya and Fatih University in 1996. Third, it created channels, such as the Foundation of Journalists and Writers (*Gazeteci ve Yazarlar Vakfı* – GYV) founded in 1994, to mitigate the secular-religious polarization and bring diverse actors together. In the 1990s, the GM managed to reach out to the top echelons of Turkish business, politics, and culture, buttressing its elitist image. However, these maneuvers did not prevent the 1997 military intervention from happening and targeting the GM, either.

¹⁹ Hendrick, *Gülen*, p. 128.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

²¹ Hakan Yavuz (2003) *Islamic Political Identity* (Oxford: Oxford UP), p. 205.

²² Laçiner, “Cemaat-Siyaset,” p. 22.

Table 1. The growth stages of the Gülen movement.

	Growth stages	Defining moments	Defining stories
1970s 1972-1982	The Formation	First dormitory opened in 1972	Islamic activism within national moralism
1980s 1982-1992	The National Expansion	First school opened in 1982	Islamic activism within conservatism
1990s 1992-1997	The International Expansion	First school opened in Azerbaijan in 1992	Turkish Islam
2000s 1997-2007	Submission and Secularization	The February 28 Process	Moderate Islam
2010s 2007-2016	Assertion and Politicization	The 2007 e-memorandum	Multiple incoherent narratives
late 2010s 2016-present	Diasporization	The 15 July 2016 abortive coup	No dominant narrative

Change with Exogenous Shocks: Quod Me Alit Me Extinguit

Following three stages of growth, which primarily reflect gradual endogenous changes in interaction with the opportunities of the political context, the GM has encountered three exogenous shocks (Table 1). In a hierarchical identity group like the GM, change took place after 1997 and 2007 because change was initiated in both cases by the group elite's decisions and was also consistent with the community base's social orientations. In 2016, however, despite critical voices from the base, change was largely obstructed by the group elite, eventually leading to an inertia.

1997–2007: Submission and Secularization

The February 28 Process refers to the military's long-term project to reshape Turkey's social and political system, which had brought the Islamist RP to the office after its electoral victory in 1995. It denoted "the suspension of normal politics until the secular correction was completed,"²³ and thus, did not end with the downfall of the RP-led coalition government on 20 June 1997, nor with the dissolution of the RP by the Turkish Constitutional Court on 21 February 1998 for being the epicenter of anti-secular activities. The military's anti-Gülen campaign began in 1999, when Turkish television stations broadcast a leaked video excerpt of Gülen urging his pupils: "You must move in the arteries of the system, without anyone noticing your existence, until you reach all the power centers."²⁴ The Gülenists elaborated on Said Nursi's principle, "*sırran tenevveret*" (enlightening in secrecy), and steadily pursued dissemblance, concealing their faith and affiliation in the face of—also later even in the absence of—military pressure.²⁵ The movement acquired a foothold particularly within the police

²³ Umit Cizre and Menderes Çınar (2003) Turkey 2002: Kemalism, Islamism, and Politics in the light of February 28 Process, *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 102 (2/3), p. 310.

²⁴ Hendrick, *Gülen*, p. 6.

force, which Özal sought to reinforce as a counterweight to the secularist military and staffed with nationalist and religious personnel.

While Gülen, citing health reasons, fled the country to the United States (US) in March 1999, the GM's members and institutions were brought under high scrutiny. Broad and indiscriminate repression is considered to be a catalyst for radicalization.²⁶ However, while Gülen unequivocally reiterated since 1993 that there is no return from democracy, he progressively drew on global discourses of human rights, multiculturalism, and democracy. He toned down his traditional anti-Western and anti-Semitic rhetoric, questioned the role of the state, and came to accept democratic values, strategically or otherwise, opting for greater institutionalization and formalization within the existing secular system. The GM tried to retain its informal grass-roots activities, but formalized several of its other activities, especially cash flows, when the military publicly questioned where the water for the mill came from.²⁷ The initial contacts between the GM and AKP date back to 2003 but remained limited under the shadow of the February 28 Process. The GM was instead getting more vociferous on questions of democratization. From July 1998 on, Abant Platform's annual meetings brought together intellectuals, politicians, activists, and journalists from diverse backgrounds to discuss Turkey's divisive sociopolitical problems, mostly in direct challenge to the official orthodoxy.²⁸

Globally, in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks in the United States, the GM was distinguishing itself from radical Islamist groups and thriving on a mild brand of Islamic collective action. Its message of non-violent, democratically oriented moderate Islam was the fitting antidote to the rising Islamophobia and garnered a wider global audience's appreciation. In 1994, the GYV began inviting leaders of local religious minorities to initiate the interfaith dialogues and Gülen himself had audience with Pope John Paul II in 1998.²⁹

All these efforts at institutionalization, secularization, and interaction with other religions and cultures were imposed within the hierarchical structure of the movement. However, it also paralleled a transformation occurring within the base as well. The post-1997 repression only accelerated the secularization of the movement's youth by restricting the sources of indoctrination, such as religious summer camps or the light-houses. The 1990s already reflected elements of post-Islamism as Asef Bayat defined it: the political and social condition in which "the appeal, energy, symbols and sources of legitimacy of Islamism get exhausted even among its once ardent supporters."³⁰

²⁵ Yüksel Taşkın (2012) Gülençiler: Dinsel milliyetçilik ve ulus-aşırı dinamizm arasında sıkışan bir hareket, *Birikim* (282), p. 34.

²⁶ Donatella della Porta (2018) Radicalization: A Relational Perspective, *Annual Review of Political Science*, 21, p. 464.

²⁷ Hendrick, *Gülen*, p. 144.

²⁸ Bilici, "The Fethullah Gülen Movement," pp. 12-16.

²⁹ Günter Seufert (2014) *Is the Fethullah Gülen Movement overstretching itself? A Turkish Religious Community as a national and international player* (Berlin: SWP), p. 10

³⁰ Asef Bayat (1996) The Coming of a Post-Islamist Society, *Critique: Critical Middle East Studies*, 5 (9), p. 45

2007–2016: Assertion and Politicization

On April 27, 2007, the military issued an e-memorandum reminding politicians of its role as the guardian of the secular state. The AKP came to power in 2002; however, they remained on shaky ground till 2008, when the party barely survived the closure case at the Constitutional Court for serving as a hub of anti-secular activities. Likewise, the GM stayed on the agenda of the military as demonstrated by the National Security Council's (*Milli Güvenlik Kurulu*, MGK) 2004 advisory ruling on measures to counter the GM's activities. Following amendments to the Counterterrorism Law, the Ankara Criminal Court acquitted Gülen in 2006 of charges of subverting the secular regime, and the acquittal was reaffirmed by the Supreme Court of Appeals in 2008.³¹ This time, however, the GM did not opt for submission but joined forces with the AKP to oppose the Kemalist establishment. The GM grew to be a substantial force in Turkey, controlling one of the country's largest media conglomerates, a number of the country's most globally connected companies at the Turkish Industrialists Confederation (TUSKON), which was formed in 2005, and the largest education network of schools and cram schools. Apart from what was visible, the GM expanded exponentially within the state bureaucracy during the AKP rule. By leveraging the human capital that it developed over decades, the GM reached a point where it could negotiate its autonomy with the state.³²

The GM aimed to maintain its image as a volunteer-led civic movement promoting tolerance and dialogue, but this was becoming increasingly difficult. It became an archipelago of formal and informal institutions with incoherent discourses, making it hard for even its members to define the movement's collective identity and structure. The larger the movement got, the more difficult it became to sustain the strategic ambiguity. As a result, alternative self-definitions to *jamaah* circulated, including *cemiyet* ("society"), *hizmet* ("service"), and *gönüllüler hareketi* ("volunteers' movement").³³ However, a defining element was the movement's over-politicization and empowerment within the public bureaucracy, which turned a remote compound in rural Pennsylvania, where Gülen has been residing in self-exile since 1999, into "a site of political pilgrimage" for politicians, businessmen, and bureaucrats.³⁴ In time, the Gülenist security clique within the state bureaucracy eclipsed the GM's larger civilian organization in internal decision-making mechanisms. Along with the allegations of evidence fabrication, wiretapping, and blackmail against the Kemalist figures during the 2008 Ergenekon and 2010 Sledgehammer trials, the intimidation and pursuit of those daring to criticize the GM or the AKP resulted in the motto "the one who touches, burns" (*Dokunan yanar*).³⁵

Once the Kemalist establishment was neutralized, the AKP and the GM wielded their swords against each other. Contrary to its self-proclaimed non-partisan stance, the power coalition with the AKP and the subsequent war of attrition heavily politicized the GM in the 2010s. While Gülen personally campaigned for Turkish citizens to vote affirmatively in the 2010 constitutional referendum, Gülenist media outlets served as the flag bearers for the war against the deep state during the judicial trials. To

³¹ Hakkı Taş (2018) A History of Turkey's AKP-Gülen Conflict, *Mediterranean Politics*, 23 (3), pp. 397–398.

³² Berna Turam (2007) *Between Islam and the State – The Politics of Engagement* (California: Stanford UP).

³³ Taş, "The Gülenists in Exile," p. 4.

³⁴ Aslı Aydıntaşbaş (2016) *The Good, the Bad, and the Gülenists: The Role of the Gülen Movement in Turkey's Coup Attempt* (London: European Council on Foreign Relations), p. 15.

³⁵ Taş, "A History," p. 399.

mobilize broader masses, Samanyolu TV, for instance, broadcast conspiratorial television series such as Şubat Soğuğu (2004–2006), Tek Türkiye (2007–2010), and Şefkat Tepe (2010–2014), all referring to contemporary political events and depicting a shadowy council ruling the country and doing everything possible to weaken Turkey.³⁶ This politicization largely succeeded because both the AKP and GM were already appealing to the same conservative base. When the fratricide began, the GM would utilize the AKP's 2013 decision to close the cram schools in order to detach its base from the AKP.³⁷

2016–Present: The Purgatory

While the AKP government's anti-Gülen campaign began right after the 2014 local elections, it reached a colossal level following the failed coup attempt on 15 July 2016. The government sought to pursue not only those involved in the plot but also launched a massive crackdown on the entire movement. Possessing Gülen's books at home or maintaining a Bank Asya account became instant proof of membership in or association with the so-called Gülenist Terror Organization (*Fethullahçı Terör Örgütü*, FETÖ). By the end of 2021, nearly 320,000 people were detained and 99,962 were imprisoned on terror charges.³⁸ To bring down the global GM network, the political authorities pressed countries, ranging from Venezuela to Pakistan, to close GM schools and deport its affiliates. Although the GM invested more in the Global South, the majority of its followers have fled Turkey at any cost and sought refuge in Western democratic countries, which provide a relative degree of protection outside the reach of Turkish state. Given the dire circumstances in Turkey, Fethullah Gülen urged his followers to leave the country and unite under the umbrella of "Hizmet Diaspora."³⁹ He portrayed it as a forced migration for a sacred cause (*cebri hicret*), referring to *Hicra*—Prophet Muhammad's migration in 622 to Medina in order to escape persecution in Mecca.⁴⁰

The GM is attempting a comeback as a diaspora. It has already developed into a transnational movement spanning 160 countries. Nevertheless, this transnational mobility was entirely voluntary, Turkey-centric, and mostly facilitated by the Turkish state authorities. Now, the post-15 July 2016 crackdown has created an exilic status. Moreover, the persecution deprived the movement of its financial resources in Turkey, which subsidized a sizable amount of its overseas activities. According to a July 2017 report by the MGK, the authorities seized USD 15 billion worth of assets, including approximately a thousand enterprises affiliated with the GM.⁴¹ With drastically decreased cash flow and the added burden of sustaining its members in a grim

³⁶ Petra de Bruijn (2018) Deep State. Visual Socio-Political Communication in the Television Series and Serials of the Turkish Television Channel Samanyolu, *TV/Series*, 13, DOI: 10.4000/tvseries.2500, pp. 1–22.

³⁷ Dogan, *Political Islamists*, p. 71.

³⁸ Abdullah Sarıca (2021) FETÖ'cülere nefes yok, in *Yeni Şafak* (November 21).

³⁹ Fevzi Kızılkoyun (2016) Gülen Orders Followers to "Unite" Abroad, in *Hürriyet Daily News* (August 15).

⁴⁰ Fethullah Gülen (2019a) Migration and the Greater Struggle, on *Fethullah Gülen's Official Web Site* (January 16). Available online at: <http://www.fethullahgulenmovement.net/en/videos/migration-and-the-greater-struggle>, accessed 30 July 2021.

⁴¹ Okan Müderrisoğlu (2017) FETÖ'nün 48 milyarı devletin kasasında, in *Sabah* (July 19).

situation, the GM halted many of its transnational operations and opted for a considerable institutional downsizing. Finally, the exodus has not guaranteed an entirely safe haven for Gülenists. The Turkish state's "repertoire of extraterritorial repression" includes the abduction and extradition of Gülenists, the confiscation of Gülen schools and their transfer to the state-owned Maarif Foundation, the lynching and vandalization of GM institutions by pro-AKP groups, massive surveillance and profiling of Gülenists by Turkish diplomats and imams, the denial of diplomatic services, and the intimidation of relatives in Turkey.⁴²

Gülen's residence in the United States boosted the growth of his movement in the United States, operating 136 charter schools in 26 states by 2012.⁴³ However, Germany has become the "new hub" for the Gülenists.⁴⁴ Gülen made two trips to Europe in 1977 and 1990 to establish a foothold. Compared to other Turkish Islamic movements, the GM is a latecomer in Europe. Nevertheless, beginning to institutionalize in the mid-1990s, it established a wide network of schools, tutoring centers, and media outlets in a short period of time. After the abortive coup, the movement's support base in Germany declined from 100,000–150,000 to 60,000–80,000 people, accompanied by a drop in the number of schools and tutoring centers.⁴⁵ Conversely, the GM's organizations, such as the Berlin-based Refugee Support Action (Aktion für Flüchtlingshilfe), assist newcomers in settling in and finding language courses and jobs. With the Gülenist refugee influx to Europe, a schism has developed within the GM between existing residents and newcomers. Historically, the local Gülenist communities in Europe have been less educated and relied on modest ventures. In contrast, the newcomers, including exiled teachers, engineers, doctors, and businessmen, are better-educated and professionally more successful. Nevertheless, because newcomers lack financial resources, the locals have the upper hand so far. Another divide arises from the generational gap within the movement. While the older generations bear the scars of previous persecutions and have a more conservative approach to the paths the GM can take, the younger generation, with a more globally-integrated background, feels more empowered to confront the decision-makers.⁴⁶

Five years after the abortive coup, the GM is still in inertia, unable to initiate its social change. In 1997 and 2007, leadership was crucial in bringing about change. This time, however, given the magnitude of exilic trauma, the leadership rather has opted to consolidate its base. To bolster its sense of purpose, the GM has dubbed the ongoing agony as "the destiny of the road" (*yolun kaderi*)—arguing that all the prophets and their faithful companions have faced atrocities at some point.⁴⁷ The earlier intra-community narrative explaining the steep growth of the movement as the grace of God for those who follow the right path now has been replaced by this fatalistic narrative about the movement's current demise, where the silver lining is supposed to be the salvation at the end of that road. Living in denial through mystic narratives was particularly widespread in the immediate aftermath of 15 July. For example, the

⁴² Ahmet Erdi Öztürk and Hakkı Taş (2020) The Repertoire of Extraterritorial Repression: Diasporas and Home States, in *Migration Letters*, 17 (1), pp. 59–69.

⁴³ Hendrick, *Gülen*, p. 207.

⁴⁴ Gunnar Köhne and Volker Siefert (2018) Die Gülen-Bewegung: Neues Zentrum "Almanya," on *Deutsche Welle* (July 13). Available online at: <https://www.dw.com/de/die-gülen-bewegung-neues-zentrum-almanya/a-44645120>, accessed 25 July 2021.

⁴⁵ *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (2017) Türkei: Mehr als 1000 Festnahmen. (July 31).

⁴⁶ Taş, "The Gülenists in Exile."

⁴⁷ Fethullah Gülen (2016) *Yolun Kaderi* (New Jersey: Blue Dome).

movement members attributed the widespread support for Erdoğan to the sorcery performed on Erdoğan's face, the dough prepared in the public bakery called *Halk Ekmek*, and the four gates of Ankara. To avoid the impact of this sorcery, the Gülenists were advised to say some prayers.⁴⁸ The conservative approach to change is bolstered by the GM's status as a victim of Turkish regime, which, in light of the overwhelming contempt for Erdoğan in Europe, could be enough for many observers to view the GM positively. Likewise, while the GM has not leaned toward radicalization in the face of repression, its emphasis on education and interfaith dialogue makes the movement an appealing alternative for European policymakers, who have begun to raise the need of constructing European Islam more vocally.⁴⁹ Capitalizing on their modern, non-violent, and eager-to-integration stance, "We aim to use our abilities here in Germany," a Gülenist says, "we want to be of value to the country and its people."⁵⁰

Almost every decade, the GM underwent rapid social and identity changes. This could create a sense of collective identity discontinuity among members who regard the change as a drastic alteration of their core identity elements; however, the movement leadership presented narratives explaining how the changes are consistent with the GM's basic premises. In the post-2016 period, the GM leadership has not been able to articulate such a compelling narrative that would reconcile the gap between expectations and reality. For a practice-oriented movement, this period has been an entirely different phase marked by debates, not activities. The fall from grace and the traumatic experience of exile have sparked strong internal disputes over what went wrong. For the first time in the movement's history, internal criticism has been amplified and resonates throughout its membership base.

Exile has precipitated an emotional rupture among many Gülenists, who are now revisiting their very conceptions of state, nation, and religion.⁵¹ The GM's inability to provide a coherent narrative regarding what occurred on 15 July 2016 and prior to that has resulted in mounting resentment. "This too shall pass" rhetoric has provided little consolation to those seeking to make sense of the ongoing events. Being subjected to an extensive crackdown by a government championing the Islamic faith, the unwavering public support for the crackdown, and now being sheltered by secular Europe also undoubtedly have created an emotional break with the Turkish state and society among many Gülenists. This break was not only with the state and nation, however, but also with religious belief itself, compelling many Gülenists to revisit their basic understandings of Islam and secularism. It also echoes the growing secularization and atheism among those persecuted by the emergency decrees.⁵²

Considering the GM's strongly nationalist and statist rhetoric and the long-standing Turkish-Greek animosity, for instance, this change of heart begins in their first stop,

⁴⁸ *Cumhuriyet* (2017) FETÖ Sanığı: Halkı Etkilemek İçin Halk Ekmek Hamuruna Büyü Yapıldı. (April 13). Available online at: http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/turkiye/719943/FETO_sanigi_Halki_etkilemek_icin_Halk_Ekmek_hamuruna_buyu_yapildi.html, accessed 20 September 2021.

⁴⁹ Taş, "The Gülenists in Exile," p. 7.

⁵⁰ *Qantara* (2018) Refugees from Erdogan's Turkey seek to make a new life in Germany (March 29). Available online at: <https://en.qantara.de/content/refugees-from-erdogans-turkey-seek-to-make-a-new-life-in-germany>, accessed 21 July 2021.

⁵¹ Taş, "The Gülenists in Exile," p. 1.

⁵² Dicle Eşiyok (2019) KHK ve OHAL ateistleri. *Ahval* (January 15). Available online at: <https://ahvalnews.com/tr/ohal/khk-ve-ohal-ateistleri>, accessed 15 October 2021.

Greece, where they witness the support of the Greek people for refugees without any prejudice and also observe how so many Greek families they have met fled Turkey due to similar past atrocities. “I was wrong, the Greeks save my life and my family,” confides a Gülenist refugee.⁵³ In general, the traumatic experience of exile has broken the community’s social contract and paved the ground for a fresh start in social learning. Many Gülenists abandoned not just their homes and families, but also their community roles and networks in Turkey. Now that they are establishing a new life in a new environment, they reconsider their attachments.

The erosion of established mechanisms under exile fostered the growth of intracomunity debates on social media. Numerous critical articles and interviews have been published on online platforms such as Maviyorum [www.maviyorum.com], Kitalararası [www.kitalararasi.com], or The Circle [www.thecrcl.ca]. Criticisms include calls for localization, bottom-up administration, transparent decision-making mechanisms, disassociation of the movement from the state bureaucracy, and the abandonment of Turkey-centric and Machiavellian strategies, and the understanding of “chosen-ness” and the leader’s infallibility.⁵⁴ More broadly, social media became the only platform capable of connecting all those dispersed across multiple countries and provided more varieties of interactivity with other members and the outside world. While the GM leadership tends to use social media to nurture networks of supporters, it was also a fertile ground to air criticisms long kept hidden within the movement. The exiled members now have developed a nascent digital diaspora with the new opportunity to be part of the reconstruction and directly contact the GM’s leading figures.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study is to foster a more nuanced understanding of the interrelationship between collective identities and sources of change with a special focus on the making and re-making of diasporas. Despite the widespread acceptance of the processual approach, research on diaspora identity change has been extremely limited and local. While mapping out the contours of identity change, this article problematized the emphasis on sudden exogenous shocks and illustrated how they have resulted in diverse outcomes in the GM’s recent history. Exogenous shocks create incentives, and sometimes, imperatives for change, but this process is mediated within the group and requires the consideration of endogenous factors particularly in those groups resting on the personal charisma of the leader. The GM’s current inertia in comparison to its prior experiences indicates that the exogenous factors alone cannot account for identity change. Groups can introduce some institutional or discursive safeguards to impede, if not halt, change. Identity change enables adaptation to the new context of the host state; however, the discrepancy between the top-down impositions to resist change and bottom-up demands to reform the organization has created inertia, which may lead to multiple trajectories in the middle run. Since the 1990s, the GM was a Turkey-centric transnational movement and its current self-reconstruction as a diaspora movement in

⁵³ Christides Giorgos and Maximilian Popp (2018) Türkische Flüchtlinge in Griechenland: Zuflucht Beim Erzivalen, on *Spiegel Online* (March 8). Available at: <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/griechenland-tuerkische-fluechtlinge-suchen-schutz-vor-erdogan-a-1196494.html>, accessed 21 October 2021.

⁵⁴ Taş, “The Gülenists in Exile,” p. 6.

exile has paved the way to the loud utterance of various identity projects. The movement is now at a crossroads of its own making.

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ORCID

Hakkı Taş  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3463-0804>

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