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**TURKEY'S
KURDISH QUESTION &
THE HIZMET MOVEMENT**

MUSTAFA GURBUZ

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DIALOGUE PLATFORM
Rue montoyer 31
1000 Brussels, Belgium
www.dialogueplatform.eu
info@dialogueplatform.eu
Tel: +32 (0) 513 81 16

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Summary

The Kurdish question is one of the major issues that have dominated the Turkish political landscape. In the aftermath of the corruption scandal in December 2013, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Justice and Development party (AKP) officials have frequently accused the Hizmet movement of impeding the negotiations between the government and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). This paper attempts to provide an overview and assessment of where Hizmet stands on the Kurdish issue.

Takeaways

- The Kurdish question poses a challenge, not only to Turkey at large, but also to the Hizmet movement, which has a diverse following that includes a large number of Kurdish participants.
- By recognizing Kurdish identity, the Hizmet movement has taken a progressive attitude by supporting ethnocultural reforms in both discursive and institutional conduct.
- Educational and charitable efforts by Hizmet volunteers are aimed at removing prejudices in both Turkish and Kurdish constituencies, and accordingly, building social trust in the long run.
- Critics find Hizmet to be assimilationist. The main reason referred to by critics is the content of some TV shows in Hizmet-affiliated media.
- The AKP government's attempt to shut down Hizmet schools in the region has accelerated disenchantment with the peace process among Hizmet participants.
- Hizmet participants find official talks with the PKK on disarmament acceptable with one caveat: Kurdish cultural rights should not be on the table with the PKK, since that would make the PKK "the" legitimate advocate of all Kurds.
- As long as the AKP government negotiates pro-Kurdish rights solely with the PKK, refusing to consult other civil actors including the Hizmet organizations, the movement's constituency may remain skeptical about the peace process.

Introduction¹

Often referred to as Turkey's "Achilles heel," the Kurdish question has long been a major issue in the modern Turkish Republic. Going as far back as the 1920s, numerous official documents, military intelligence reports, political party programs, and policy papers have proposed ways to address Kurdish demands. Until very recently, however, the Turkish state's position vis-à-vis Kurdish nationalism was primarily one-dimensional, regarding the issue as a security threat. As late as the 1980s, the very existence of the Kurds was denied by Turkish state officials, who used to refer to Kurds as "mountain Turks."² Until 2013, all elementary school children in Turkey (including Kurdish students) recited a nationalist oath every morning, called "Our Pledge," written in 1933. "I am a Turk; I am honest; I am hard-working," begins the oath that ends with the following statement: "Let my entire being serve as a gift to Turkish existence. Happy is the one who says I'm a Turk!"³

In the past two decades, especially following the beginning of Turkey's European Union membership negotiations in 1999, positive developments have begun. For the first time, Turkey officially recognized its Kurdish minority, and it accordingly undertook many reforms that introduced new political and cultural rights for Kurds. In 2009, the Turkish government launched an official Kurdish TV channel and initiated "Kurdish opening." Despite setbacks in the government's negotiations with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a bilateral cease-fire was finally endorsed in 2013, which is popularly called the "Peace Process."

The past two decades have also witnessed the rise of an Anatolian elite that wholeheartedly supports the *Hizmet* (service) movement, led by Muslim preacher Fethullah Gülen. Primarily focusing on educational activism since the 1960s, Hizmet has become a leading civil actor in Turkey, attracting a global network of volunteers. The movement was a significant contributor to the rise of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) until the corruption scandal in late 2013. Hizmet's tension with political Islamism, however, is deeply rooted in philosophical and pragmatic perceptions of politics.⁴

Hizmet schools and educational centers have developed in every city in Turkey, recruiting volunteers who have diverse ethnic backgrounds and are from all walks of life. Turkish

¹ The author thanks Dogan Koc for sharing data from his original dataset, as well as Seyma Akyol and Yousaf Majid for their research assistance.

² The narrative on the Turkish roots of the Kurds was systematic state propaganda in the early years of Turkish Republic. The term "mountain Turks" goes back to the one-party regime era. See William G. Elphinston, "The Kurdish Question," *International Affairs* vol. 22, no: 1 (1946), pp. 91–103.

³ *Andımız*, "Our Pledge," was written by Reşit Galip, who served as Minister of Education (1932–33). The final sentence, "Happy is the one who says I'm a Turk!," which belongs to Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, was later added to the student oath. Atatürk first expressed that dictum in his 10th Year Address (*Onuncu Yıl Nutku*), a famous address given on the 10th anniversary of the foundation of the Republic (Oct. 29, 1933). After eight decades, in October 2013, the Turkish government decided to remove the Pledge from the curriculum.

⁴ For philosophical roots, see Zeynep Akbulut-Kuru and Ahmet Kuru, "Apolitical Interpretation of Islam: Said Nursi's Faith-based Activism in Comparison with Political Islamism and Sufism," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* vol. 19 no: 1 (Spring 2008), pp. 99–111. For key strategic differences, see Mustafa Gurbuz and Mary Bernstein, "'Thou Shall Not Protest!': Multi-Institutional Politics, Strategic Non-Confrontation and Islamic Mobilizations in Turkey," *Research in Social Movements, Conflict, and Change* vol. 34 (2012), pp. 63–91.

Hizmet activists in Central Anatolia and Kurdish Hizmet activists in southeastern Turkey are unified around a common philosophy that is shaped by the teachings of Fethullah Gülen (b. 1938) and the writings of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi (1877-1960), a Kurdish scholar seen as source of inspiration for the Hizmet movement.

Having participants with diverse backgrounds, the Hizmet movement faces difficulties in pleasing both its Turkish and Kurdish constituencies, especially on public policy issues such as education in the mother tongue (i.e., full education in Kurdish) in public schools. Moreover, in seeking popularity at large, the Hizmet-affiliated media are often prone to being Turkish nationalist in tone, and in return, draw criticism from Hizmet's Kurdish participants.

The Hizmet Movement in Southeast Turkey: A Brief History

The development of the Gülen movement, also known as the Hizmet movement, in Kurdish-populated cities goes back to the late 1980s. The first Hizmet institutions were university exam prep centers (*dershane*) in Diyarbakir and Urfa in 1988.⁵ Hizmet's educational initiatives were financed by local businessmen, who developed friendship ties through weekly tea conversations (*sohbet*). In his research on the Gülen movement in the city of Mardin, Mehmet Kalyoncu explains how these *sohbet* meetings were crucial in raising consciousness among the Kurdish population:

Between 1988 and 1991, periodic *sohbet* meetings served as an agent of outreach. These meetings took place in the participants' houses on a rotating basis, and through them more people were brought to understand the necessity of doing something to combat deprivations in the city, especially in the field of education. Most of them agreed that the state was unable to provide the necessary education services not only in Mardin but in all of southeastern Turkey. In fact, some of them even thought that the ultra-secular state deliberately deprived the region of schools and other basic services to punish the region's Kurdish population. Either way, the unchanging realities were that the number of unemployed and uneducated youth in Mardin steadily increasing and these people constituted the main recruitment source for both PKK and Hizbullah. Eventually, they all agreed that the local people would have to bear the responsibility of tackling the education problem in Mardin.⁶

In addition to prep centers, Hizmet volunteers established private high-schools in the early 1990s. The main curriculum and philosophy of these schools followed the path of earlier Gülen movement schools in Western Turkey such as Yamanlar and Fatih.⁷ These expansive projects were often followed by successful establishment of local *sohbet* networks, which reached out to wealthy Kurdish businessmen in Istanbul for funds.

⁵ Dogan Koç, "The Hizmet Movement and the Kurdish Question," in *Understanding Turkey's Kurdish Question*, edited by Fevzi Bilgin and Ali Sarihan (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013) p. 184.

⁶ Mehmet Kalyoncu, *A Civilian Response to Ethno-Religious Conflict: The Gülen Movement in Southeast Turkey* (Somerset, NJ: Light, 2008), p. 45.

⁷ For pedagogical aspects of Hizmet schools, see Bekim Agai, "Fethullah Gülen and his Movement's Islamic Ethic of Education" *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* vol. 11, no: 1 (Spring 2002) pp. 27-47.

Atak high-school in Mardin, for example, was the product of a few visits by a Mardinian local businessman to Dr. Vahid Atak, owner of a private hospital and several shoe factories in Istanbul.⁸ In the early years, most teachers in Hizmet educational facilities were ethnically Turkish; but as Kurdish volunteers in the Hizmet movement increased in number, Kurdish teachers replaced them. Kalyoncu notes that, in fact, teachers' western origins proved to be an advantage rather than an issue for concern. In the words of Hayri Bey, "Most of us were quite impressed to see teachers, who were originally ethnic Turks from modern western cities like Istanbul and Izmir, coming to the underdeveloped Southeast and preparing ethnic Kurdish and Arab students for the university admissions test."⁹



Figure 1. At a Hizmet prep school in Batman; students checking their test scores. Photo by the author (June 2013).

The 1990s witnessed rapid proliferation of *sohbet* groups in every Kurdish city and town,¹⁰ but only after the European Union reform initiatives (2002-2004) did Hizmet activists become more visible in Kurdish civil society. A decrease in PKK violence enabled Hizmet volunteers to engage in large public projects such as charity organizations, village development associations, reading halls for poor students, and women's fraternity clubs. The opening of democratic channels helped not only civic association development but also strengthened Hizmet's reach to ordinary Kurds. In Nusaybin, for example, Hizmet's prep school

(Sur Dershanesi) had only 15 students in 1996. The number of students increased exponentially in 2000s, reaching 280 in 2004, 480 in 2005, and 900 in 2006.¹¹ Given that Nusaybin was under strict control by the PKK in the early 1990s, and was later dominated by Hizbullah, Hizmet volunteers had severe difficulties in their activism.

⁸ Kalyoncu, p. 61.

⁹ Quoted in Kalyoncu, p. 48.

¹⁰ In this rapid development, the influential Kurdish thinker Said Nursi's symbolic linkage with the Hizmet movement played a remarkable role. See Mustafa Gurbuz, "Revitalization of the Kurdish Islamic Sphere and Revival of Hizbullah in Turkey," in *Understanding Turkey's Kurdish Question*, edited by Fevzi Bilgin and Ali Sarihan (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013) pp. 173-75.

¹¹ Kalyoncu, p. 70.

Among the most powerful civic initiatives, reading halls are worth mentioning. In the past decade, Hizmet participants have established 25 reading salons in Diyarbakır alone, serving more than 3,000 students annually. One of the directors of these salons indicated that maintenance of a single reading salon requires almost YTL 100,000 (about USD 55,000 at the time) annually.¹² In addition to full-time teachers, some volunteer teachers in public schools work on weekends. The reading salons are active not only in the eastern and southeastern provinces, but also in Kurdish-populated suburbs in western cities such as Izmir and Mersin. According to one estimate, the Hizmet movement has reached over 140,000 students across the country by establishing free reading halls in shantytowns.¹³

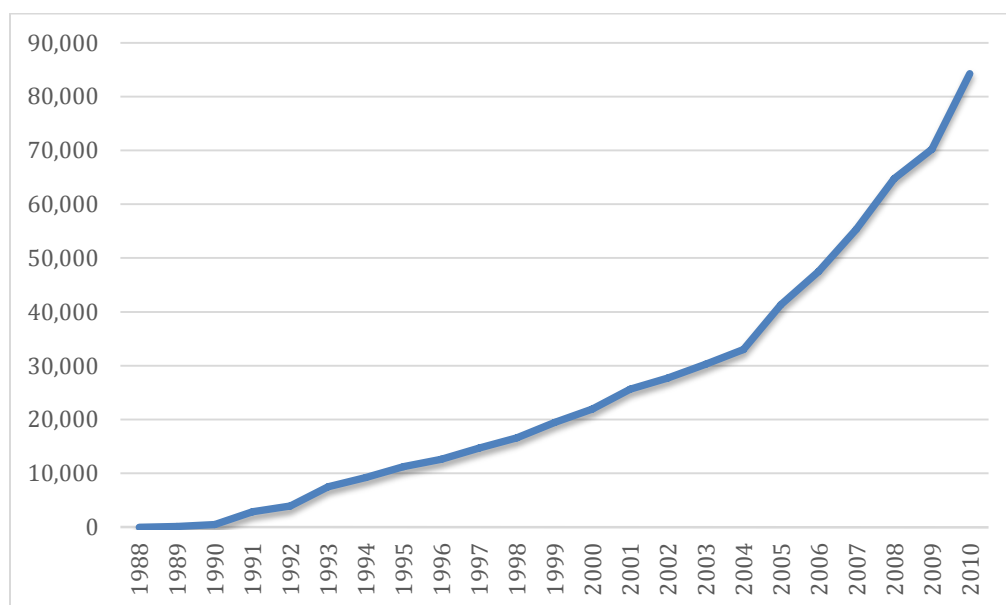


Figure 2. Number of students attending Hizmet institutions in Kurdish-populated cities. Source: Dogan Koç, “The Hizmet Movement and the Kurdish Question,” in *Understanding Turkey’s Kurdish Question* edited by Fevzi Bilgin and Ali Sarihan (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013) p. 187.

The number of private schools and prep centers also increased rapidly. Offering high-quality education from kindergarten through grade 12, private schools charge tuition and are not as numerous as prep centers. Yet, 20% - 25% of students in these schools receive full scholarships; the schools operate in every city, including Dersim (Tunceli).¹⁴ By the year 2009, the overall number of Hizmet educational institutions in Kurdish-populated provinces was 289, with 84,282 registered students.¹⁵ As Figure 2 indicates, enrollment

¹² Author interview. Diyarbakır, July 22, 2009.

¹³ “Gülen Hareketi PKK’ya Karşı.” *Yeni Aktüel* November 22, 2007.

¹⁴ Koç, pp. 184-85.

¹⁵ The data covers 16 provinces, namely Adiyaman, Agri, Batman, Bingol, Bitlis, Diyarbakir, Elazig, Hakkari, Gaziantep, Mardin, Mus, Sanliurfa, Siirt, Sirtak, Tunceli, and Van. See, Koç, p. 187.

numbers skyrocketed after 2004, increasing at an average rate of 8,544 students per year.¹⁶

Moreover, Hizmet's charity activism in the past decade has supported its educational ventures. The movement's nationwide charity organization *Kimse Yok Mu* began opening branches in the region in 2004. *Kimse Yok Mu* has its origins in a show of the same name on Samanyolu TV, a channel established by Hizmet volunteers in 2002. *Kimse Yok Mu* literally means "Isn't anyone out there (to help)?" Although the organization's primary focus is relief rather than poverty alleviation, it has paid attention to victims of endemic poverty in the Southeast. *Kimse Yok Mu* branches had rapidly mushroomed all over Turkey by 2007.

In 2006, after severe flooding struck Kurdish-populated Eastern Turkey, *Kimse Yok Mu* distributed the equivalent of almost EUR 2 million in supplies. Hizmet volunteers regard Islamic holidays as special occasions for charity distribution. *Kimse Yok Mu* annually sets up Ramadan tents and distributes meat during the Feast of Sacrifice, an Islamic ritual known as *Eid Al Adha*. Launching a major campaign, the organization aided about 17,000 families in 2006 and 60,000 families in 2007 in celebration of the Feast of Sacrifice.¹⁷

One particular feature of the Feast aid is striking: local Kurdish Hizmet activists invite Turkish Hizmet activists from the western regions of Turkey to attend the Feast observation and make donations to families directly. Each year, thousands of Turkish activists distribute meat to the needy during the Feast of Sacrifice, visiting the region for the first time in their lives.¹⁸

Alpay, a local representative of *Kimse Yok Mu*, told me that this is a helpful way to create bridges between Kurds and Turks. He told the story of a businessman from Istanbul who was so prejudiced about Kurds that he wouldn't employ them in his factory. As a donor to Hizmet initiatives in Istanbul, he was invited to participate in one of the Feast of Sacrifice campaigns by *Kimse Yok Mu*. After visiting the region for the first time and distributing meat to the needy, the businessman regretted his bigotry.

Thus, Hizmet's charity activism is aimed at removing prejudices in both Turkish and Kurdish constituencies, and accordingly, building social trust in the long run.

Recognition of Kurdish Identity and the Hizmet Movement

In the past decade, a plethora of reforms have been focused on the recognition of Kurdish identity in Turkey. Turkey's bid for European Union membership empowered pro-

¹⁶ Koç, pp. 186-87.

¹⁷ Hizmet participants organize similar campaigns worldwide. In the initial phase of the campaign, over 1.5 million people in more than 50 countries were recipients of food. See Thomas Michel, "Fighting Poverty with *Kimse Yok Mu*?" Paper presented at international conference, *Islam in the Age of Global Challenges: Alternative Perspectives of the Gülen movement*, Georgetown University, Washington, DC. November 14-15, 2008.

¹⁸ In the initial phase of the campaign in December 2006, for example, 18,073 people from Western Turkey visited the region as *Kimse Yok Mu* volunteers. See Koç, "The Hizmet Movement and the Kurdish Question," p. 191.

Kurdish voices to challenge the state and provided both political and discursive opportunities for changes in institutional practices. Between 2001 and 2004, several EU harmonization packages were introduced, and they have significantly diminished the Turkish military's dominant position in defining the Kurdish issue (see Figure 3).

In addition to reforms in cultural rights, the EU membership reforms have included the abolition of the state security courts, reforms to ensure civilian control over the National Security Council, the abolition of the death penalty, and most importantly, the eradication of the Emergency Rule Law in the Southeast. These initial reforms were supported by other significant steps, such as establishment of an official TV channel in Kurdish, *TRT Şeş*, and most recently, allowing private schools that conduct education in the mother tongue, i.e., Kurdish.

Type	Title	Date	Reform
Constitutional		October 2001	The ban on using languages and dialects (other than Turkish) in disseminating thoughts (in daily life) was removed.
Constitutional		October 2001	The statement that “publication shall not be made in any language prohibited by law” was removed.
Legislative	2 nd Harmonization Package	March 2002	Restriction on using Kurdish in the media
Legislative	3 rd Harmonization Package	August 2002	Radio and television broadcasts (public and private) in Kurdish were legalized and the establishment of Kurdish private language courses was allowed.
Legislative	4 th Harmonization Package	January 2003	Associations can use foreign languages (including Kurdish) in their non-official correspondence.
Legislative	6 th Harmonization Package	June 2003	The Civil Registry Law was amended to permit parents to name their children as they desire (including Kurdish names).

Figure 3. Constitutional and Legislative reforms regarding Kurdish cultural rights. Adapted from Zeki Sarigil, “Endogenizing Institutions.” PhD dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 2007, pp. 184-85.

The Hizmet movement proactively supported the EU democratization packages as well as the overall framework of reformist attitudes toward the Kurdish issue. For example, as a part of the Abant Platform initiative, Hizmet volunteers organized two major conferences

on the Kurdish issue to promote liberal and reformist perspectives, even preceding the “Kurdish Opening” of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government.¹⁹

The conference in Erbil gathered more than 200 intellectuals of both Turkish and Kurdish origin. One of themes of the conference focused on Turkey’s long-standing fear of naming “Kurdistan.” The official discourse has long resisted the usage of “Kurdistan,” perceiving such naming as an existential threat to Turkey’s unity. Upon criticism by some Kurdish participants, Ali Bulac, a *Zaman* columnist, responded, “I am in the capital city of the Federation of the Kurdish Region in Iraq, and I’m not someone who minds stating this.”²⁰ The final declaration of the Abant Platform termed the region “Kurdistan Regional Government.” Only a week later, Turkey’s President Abdullah Gül paid a visit to Erbil and called the region “Kurdistan,” becoming the first official uttering the term.²¹

Similarly, the movement’s progressive approach regarding education in the Kurdish language preceded AKP reforms on the issue. A few months before constitutional amendments that endorsed establishment of Kurdish-instruction private schools, Fethullah Gülen gave an interview to *Rudaw* to declare his support for education in the mother tongue. Recognizing the Turkish government’s attempts to use such reforms in bargaining, he emphasized that such issues should not be an object of any political bargaining:

Human rights and freedoms are natural rights and no one has the authority to grant those rights to others as if they were favors... It is bizarre to discriminate based on ethnic differences, as being Turkish or Kurdish was not our choice. All human beings, including prophets, are equal since they were created by God as humans.

In the same interview, Fethullah Gülen further challenged the official Turkish discourse by stating that Turkey should not only grant Kurdish rights, but also take a leading role in defending and supporting all Kurds around the globe. Such a perspective still remains marginal among Turkish elites, as recently reflected in the AKP government’s much-criticized response to ISIS attacks on Iraqi Kurds as well as developments in Kobane.²²

Fethullah Gülen’s statements were influential in shaping Hizmet’s discourse. When asked about Hizmet’s proposal for education in Kurdish, the chairman of the Journalist and Writers Foundation, a prominent Hizmet organization, pointed out that Gülen schools abroad offer instruction in four languages: the local language, the regional language, English, and Turkish. He suggested a similar policy in Turkey:

¹⁹ The meetings took place in Abant (Turkey) and in Erbil (Iraqi Kurdistan) in 2008 and 2009, respectively. Abant Platforms are annual intellectual meetings that gather the nation’s most prominent minds with sharply different ideological backgrounds. For an in-depth analysis of the meetings, see Etga Ugur, “Organizing Civil Society: The Gülen Movement’s Abant Platform,” in *The Muslim World and Politics in Transition: Creative Contributions of the Gülen Movement*, edited by Greg Barton, Paul Weller, and Ihsan Yilmaz (London: Bloomsbury, 2013) pp. 47-64.

²⁰ Mustafa Demir, “Evolution in Discourse: Turkey and the KRG,” *Turkish Review* (2012) vol. 2, no: 5, p. 95.

²¹ Although Gül later denied using the term “Kurdistan,” upon heavy criticism, he added: “What shall I say? We do not refuse to say Macedonia because Greece refuses to do so.” See *Ibid*, p. 95.

²² *Rudaw* also highlighted this point by using the following headline for the interview: “Dive Tirkkiye Bibe Parezvana Mafen Kurdan Li Seranserî Dinyaye,” [Turkey must be an advocate for Kurds’ rights around the world] *Rudaw*, June 30, 2013 <http://rudaw.net/kurmanci/interview/30062013>

When we previously proposed a constitutional model, we put forward the proposal that no constitutional restriction should exist on teaching the Kurdish language as a local language. In this regard, it is essential that the curriculum at such schools be redesigned in line with the local people's demands in the Southeast.²³

As soon as the government introduced the new reform packages, a private Gülen school in Şırnak announced that they were institutionally ready for full education in Kurdish.²⁴ Fethullah Gülen called on state officials to take serious, swift steps to train Kurdish language teachers in order to back reforms institutionally. He added, "These steps should not be taken in an offensive manner, as if they are a gift granted to them."²⁵ In a similar vein, as an indication of institutional adoption of pro-Kurdish cultural reforms, Hizmet volunteers were forerunners in establishing a private Kurdish TV channel, *Dunya TV*, as soon as the law passed in 2011.

Hizmet is well-known for organizing the annual Turkish Language Olympiads. Recently, Hizmet participants set up International Language and Culture Fests that put Kurdish and Arabic on equal footing with Turkish. At these events, Kurdish Hizmet activists from Gülen schools in Iraqi Kurdistan share their experiences with activists in Diyarbakır and Batman.

In Iraqi Kurdistan, education in Kurdish, Arabic, Turkish, and English is a signature feature of Hizmet schools that serve students from Kurdish, Turkmen, and Arab backgrounds. Hizmet volunteers established the first school in Erbil (Hewler) in 1994, at a time when Iraq was in turmoil after the Gulf War and neither Iraq nor Turkey recognized an autonomous Kurdish region. Teachers faced a number of difficulties, including public skepticism about whether they were working for Turkish intelligence (MIT) and skepticism from Turkish military side about a possible fundamentalist Islamist agenda.²⁶ Until 2001, despite an increase in the number of schools and overall expenses, there was no school fee in these facilities.²⁷

²³ "Will Gülen Movement Schools Offer Kurdish Medium Education?" *Hizmet Movement News Portal*, Oct 7, 2013, http://hizmetnews.com/6025/will-Gülen-movement-schools-offer-kurdish-medium-education/#.VMf8T_7F-o

²⁴ "İlk Hamle Gülen'den," *Milliyet*, Oct 3, 2013, <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/ilk-hamle-Gülen-den/siyaset/detay/1772104/default.htm>. See, also, "Hizmet School Ready to Pioneer Education in Kurdish," *Today's Zaman*, Oct 3, 2013, http://www.todayszaman.com/national_hizmet-school-ready-to-pioneer-education-in-kurdish_328007.html

²⁵ "Hocaefendi: Bir Kisi Duymadım ki Ciksin Bu Okullar Zararlıdır Desin" *Zaman*, March 20, 2014. http://www.zaman.com.tr/gundem_hocaefendi-bir-kisi-duymadim-ki-ciksin-bu-okullar-zararlidir-desin_2206014.html

²⁶ Rusen Cakir, "Gülen Cemaati 19 Yildir Irak Kurdistan'ina Hizmet Goturuyor," *Vatan* Jan 23, 2013. <http://www.gazetevatan.com/rusen-cakir-508450-yazar-yazisi-Gülen-cemaati-19-yildir-irak-kurdistanina-hizmet-goturuyor/> For an English translation of Cakir's interview with Talip Büyük, who coordinates Hizmet initiatives in the region, see <http://Gülenmovement.com/news/191-Gülen-movement-participants-have-been-serving-in-iraq-kurdistan-for-19-years>

²⁷ Harun Akyol, "An Alternative Approach to Preventing Ethnic Conflict: The Role of the Gülen Schools in Strengthening the Delicate Relations between Turkey and the Iraqi Kurds with Particular Reference to the 'Kirkuk Crisis.'" Conference Proceedings, Washington, DC, Nov 14, 2008 <http://en.fGülen.com/conference-papers/Gülen-conference-in-washington-dc/3126-an-alternative-approach-to-preventing-ethnic-conflict>



Figure 4. A flyer in Kurdish for an International Language and Culture Fest, organized by Kurdish Hizmet volunteers in the city of Batman. Photo by the author, Batman, (June 2013).

Hizmet initiatives were soon welcomed in the region. Currently, 17 private schools and a university, Ishik University, are affiliated with the movement. Radio *Dewran*, broadcasting in three languages (Kurdish, Arabic, and Turkish), is also run by Hizmet volunteers. Last year, the Kurdish Regional Government turned down then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's request to close Hizmet schools, claiming that the schools offer high-quality education and the country's elite send their children to these institutions.²⁸

Criticisms

Critics find the Hizmet movement's perspective on the Kurdish issue assimilationist. A leading expert, for example, points out that students attending Hizmet schools do not learn "Kurdish language, culture, history or politics, but rather risk being assimilated to a Turkish ethnic identity."²⁹ But it is sometime forgotten that Gülen schools in Kurdish-populated cities are no different from other domestic Gülen schools: They all follow the same curriculum as public schools in Turkey, which has been influenced by secular nationalism.

For most *Hizmet* volunteers, educating Kurdish youth and providing civic channels for economic development are seen as panacea for the root causes of ethnic tension. Pro-Kurdish nationalist organizations find this perspective problematic, and see it as reminiscent of the Turkish state's traditional underestimation of the significance of ethnic recognition.

The best examples of Hizmet discourse on Kurds are found in popular TV series in the movement's media outlets. Among them, *Tek Türkiye*, *One Turkey*, was the most influential. *One Turkey* tells the story of a young, idealistic doctor, Tarik, who travels to the Southeast from Istanbul. Planning to make a short trip, Tarik aims to help local people

²⁸ "Ankara Forces Arbil to Close Turkish Schools in KRG" *Today's Zaman*, March 11, 2014.

http://www.todayzaman.com/diplomacy_ankara-forces-arbil-to-close-turkish-schools-in-krq_341826.html

²⁹ David Romano, "When the Enemy of My Enemy Turn Out to Be... Also My Enemy," *Rudaw* Feb 6, 2014. <http://rudaw.net/english/opinion/06022014>

who are suffering from the war between the Turkish state and PKK rebels. Tarık's trip turns into a long journey when he learns that he was born in the village that he visited in the Southeast, so he is a Kurd, not a Turk. Although *One Turkey* does not mention the Gülen movement, Tarık's persona clearly represents a Hizmet activist in the region. Tarık is an observant Muslim Kurd who has a high level of education. His original Kurdish identity functions as a representation of the bona fide Kurdish-ness of Hizmet volunteers. Through Tarık's emphasis on his Islamic identity, recognition of his Kurdish-ness, unyielding defense of the land of Turkey against PKK guerillas, and community service as a doctor (and then local governor in later episodes), viewers get a concrete message: Separatism is not a solution for the problems in the region; instead, investing in the education of youth and Turkish-Kurdish unity around an Islamic identity could prepare a better future.



The most striking feature of *One Turkey* is its constant reminders of the deep state. The series depicts some powerful, ill-intentioned figures who employ covert operatives and are involved in provocative secret operations to incite hatred among local Kurds against the state. Their forum, called *Karanlık Kurul* (the Dark Committee), often collaborates with Kurdish guerilla leaders (representing the PKK), radical Islamic groups (representing Hizbullah), and high-level Turkish army officers who specialize in counterterrorism (representing the JITEM, Gendarmerie Intelligence and Anti-Terror Struggle). Thus, the show narrates how leaders of the PKK and Hizbullah collaborate with the deep state for their selfish interests and sell out the cause of Kurdish people's

well-being.

Series like *One Turkey* have drawn much criticism due to their Turkish nationalist nature. A prominent figure in Samanyolu TV told me that they are now trying to avoid “touching upon” the issue in any of their TV series, yet they suffer from continuous criticism even from Hizmet circles.³⁰ In fact, Hizmet-affiliated media experiences serious difficulties in speaking to both its Turkish and Kurdish constituencies. The Kurdish issue is potentially a divisive issue, not only for the country, but also within the movement itself.

One major challenge stems from strong support for the Hizmet movement among Turkish nationalists. The movement recruited a large number of youngsters from Turkish

³⁰ See, for example, Istanbul Enstitüsü, *Hizmet Gönüllüleri Perspektifinden Hizmet Medyasında Kurt Sorununun Görünümü*. Istanbul: Istanbul Enstitüsü Yayınları, 2014.

nationalist parties such as MHP after the 1980s. Although these recruits were transformed by the movement and became more global in perspective, some form of nationalism has always been in place. This reality was reinforced by Turkey's increasing integration with the global neoliberalist system, which has revived a heavy nationalist tone in Turkish politics, including secular nationalism (*ulusalcilik*) and religious nationalism (*neo-Ottomanism*).³¹ As they are frequently portrayed as “pro-American” and “pro-Israel,” Hizmet participants often find themselves in need of highlighting their patriotism.

In *One Turkey* and later series such as *Sefkattepe*, the very definition of the state remains a symbol of unity among its Turkish and Kurdish constituents; whereas the definition of the deep state refers to a dark relationship between some elements within the state and radical elements in society. Pro-Kurdish intellectuals criticize this narrative as an attempt to purify the Turkish nation-state. The 86th episode is remarkably illuminating. A young Kurdish girl tells a remorseful story to a gentle school teacher who was also previously a rebel in the mountains:

I made a lot of mistakes. I rebelled against my people and my state. But I now realize that the state is not only about those who do bad things to us. I supposed that they were the state. In fact, it turned out that they were some bandits who infiltrated the state. The real state, indeed, has been you and us.

The girl's account highlights the main idea in the *One Turkey* series: many Kurds who were ignorant about the deep state and its activities previously condemned the Turkish state; now it is time to realize that a bunch of criminals were acting in the name of the state.

For the Hizmet movement media, the challenge of having constituencies from diverse backgrounds is serious. In my fieldwork, for example, I observed Turkish Hizmet participants who spoke highly of the *One Turkey* drama series, whereas Kurdish participants were critical of the show. Feeling enlightened about the Kurdish issue, a Turkish activist asked Ismet Bey, a prominent Kurdish Hizmet member who was delivering a public lecture, in a curious tone: “Don't they [Kurds] watch *One Turkey* to realize what is going on behind the scenes? It should be nominated for the Oscars.” Although a Kurdish audience would find such a question orientalist and disturbing, his tone revealed more expression of his sympathy for Kurds. Through *One Turkey*, he recognized that some Kurds were “forced” to join the PKK because of outrageous attacks by the deep state during the martial law era.

As the Hizmet movement increasingly develops a multi-faceted identity with diverse participants, issues around ethnicity will remain a challenge. Having political dimensions, the Kurdish issue is more challenging for Hizmet. As one participant noted critically, “Our movement has become Russian in Russia and black in Africa; and yet, it could not achieve becoming Kurdish in Kurdistan.”³² When we consider the fact that globalization makes

³¹ On the revival of secular nationalism, see Esra Ozyurek, *Nostalgia for the Modern: State Secularism and Everyday Politics in Turkey*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006. For Muslim nationalism, see Jenny White, *Muslim Nationalism and the New Turks*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012.

³² Istanbul Enstitüsü, p. 14.

Hizmet participants less nationalist in tone,³³ the domestic politicization of the issue appears to be the main reason for such resistance.

The Peace Process

The recent rift between the AKP government and the Hizmet movement, once seen as a united camp in the eyes of Kurds, has paved the way for an interesting dynamic in the region. The government often blames Hizmet organizations for not only being hostile to the peace negotiations with the PKK, but also planning illegal operations to sabotage the talks. Yet, at the same time, AKP officials, including Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, claim that Hizmet and the PKK act together secretly in order to weaken the government.³⁴

The peace talks between the AKP government and the PKK go back to secret Oslo meetings in 2009, then popularly known as the “Oslo Process.” The meetings included PKK representatives, some members of Kurdish diaspora, and Turkish officials. The process did not last long, and the AKP and the PKK blamed each other for the collapse of the talks in mid-2011, when the meetings were revealed to the public. The outcome was bloody. The year 2012 was recorded as the most violent year since 1999 in the fighting between the Turkish state and the PKK.³⁵

The AKP government initiated a new campaign by reaching out jailed PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan. Kurdish Newroz (New Year celebrations) in March 2013 marked the beginning of a new era of yet another ceasefire, often referred as the “Solution Process” or the “Peace Process.” It was unprecedented this time, however, in the sense that a Turkish government openly declared official negotiations with a group that was officially designated as “terrorist.”³⁶

Soon after the peace process was publicly declared by the government, Fethullah Gülen expressed his full support. Gülen quoted the Quranic verse “there is benefit in peace” and stated that sometimes nations might need to accept bitter peace agreements.³⁷

³³ Recent studies, for example, indicate that stress over Turkish-ness is less visible among young, second generation Hizmet participants in France and Germany. See Sumeyye Ulu-Sametoglu, “European Turks in between Local and Transnational Islamic Networks: The Hizmet Movement as a Translocal Actor in the Religiosity of Turks in France and Germany,” in *The State as an Actor in Religion Policy: Policy Cycle and Governance Perspectives on Institutionalized Religion* edited by Maria G. Martino (New York: Springer, 2015) pp. 133-53.

³⁴ “Davutoğlu’ndan Sok: PKK ve Paralel Yapi Ortak Calisiyor,” Dec 9, 2014, <http://www.timeturk.com/tr/2014/12/09/Davutoğlu-ndan-sok-pkk-ve-paralel-yapi-ortak-calisiyor.html#.VMIVQWjF-o8>

³⁵ For comparative numbers, see Gunes M. Tezcur, “Prospects for Resolution of the Kurdish Question: A Realist Perspective,” *Insight Turkey*, vol. 15, no: 2 (Spring 2013), p. 70.

³⁶ Understanding emotional resentment in Turkish public at large, then Prime Minister Erdoğan had always denied the Oslo talks, even stated that those who claimed the existence of negotiation talks between AKP and PKK were “despicable” (*şerefsiz*) appealing to “mean slanders.” See, “CHP’li Ince: Kimin Şerefsiz Oldugu Ortaya Cikti,” *Milliyet*, Sep 16, 2011 <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/chp-li-ince-kimin-serefsiz-oldugu-ortaya-cikti/siyaset/siyasetdetay/16.09.2011/1439324/default.htm>

³⁷ “Islamic scholar Gülen backs peace talks between government and PKK,” *Today’s Zaman*, Jan 8, 2013, <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-303402-.html>

Gülen's statement was significant for easing tensions among the Turkish constituency of the Hizmet movement, who have traditionally been opposed to the state's open negotiation with an armed group. Thus, in liberal circles, it was largely interpreted as a positive move forward.

The Hizmet movement, however, has always been skeptical of the outcome, as the PKK did not have any incentive for disarmament in the short term.³⁸ In the words of a leading activist,

Hocaefendi ["the esteemed teacher," referring to Fethullah Gülen] said "there is benefit in peace" and he never backed down from that. That, in other words, is the cornerstone of our approach. But we also have reservations. Hocaefendi believes that while peace with the PKK is a good initiative, the state should also have plans B, C, D and even E. That is because he thinks the PKK is not that trustworthy, and there are ill-willed powers in the region which might interfere in the process.³⁹

Hizmet participants are also critical of the methods in the peace process. For Hizmet members, official talks with the PKK on disarmament are fine, but negotiating Kurdish cultural rights, referred to as "essential human rights" by Fethullah Gülen, should not be on the table. Such an attitude would make the PKK the sole representative of Kurds and the single defender of Kurdish rights, despite the existence of a variety of actors in Kurdish civil society who pursue non-violent means. For Hizmet activists, the PKK's claim that violence is needed to be heard by the Turkish state is not reassuring.

Fethullah Gülen was more explicit in his recent interview with BBC, where he stated that Abdullah Öcalan was uneasy with Hizmet's educational activism in the region: "They didn't want our activities to prevent young people from joining the militants in the mountains. Their politics is to keep enmity between Kurdish and Turkish people."⁴⁰

In Kurdish nationalist circles, initiatives by Hizmet activists in opening reading halls, i.e., free tutoring centers for poor students, has widely been interpreted as insidious efforts to diminish the PKK. The PKK has repeatedly warned that it would punish not only those who lease their homes and buildings to Hizmet organizations, but also those who send their children to Gülen schools.⁴¹ Some militants have openly attacked Hizmet institutions. The fire bombings of two reading halls in Bağlar - Diyarbakır (Mehmet Kayalar Okuma Salonu and Selahaddin Eyyubi Okuma Salonu), two university exam prep centers in Yenişehir - Diyarbakır, a private high-school in Hakkari (Hatice Avcı Koleji), and a private

³⁸ Impartial analyses in academic journals have long explained why it is unrealistic to expect PKK disarmament for the foreseeable future. See, for example, Tezcur, "Prospects for Resolution of the Kurdish Question."

³⁹ Mustafa Akyol's interview with an anonymous activist. See Mustafa Akyol, "Is Gülen Movement against Peace with PKK?" *Al-Monitor*, May 22, 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/05/Gülen-movement-peace-process-pkk.html>

⁴⁰ "Analysis: Power of Turkey's Fethullah Gülen," Jan 27, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-25910079>. See also, "Turkish Scholar Fethullah Gülen Speaks about PKK," Jan 29, 2014, <http://hizmetnews.com/9987/turkish-scholar-fethullah-gülen-speaks-pkk-2/#.VMu9CGijO7s>

⁴¹ ANF, Ajansa Nûçeyan a Firatê, "Halk İnisiyatifi'nden Gülen Cemaatine Sert Uyarı." April 18, 2009, <http://www.firatnews.tv/index.php?rupel=nuce&nucelD=6349> and "Halk İnisiyatifi'nden Gülen Tarikati'na Sert Uyarı." September 8, 2010, <http://www.firatnews.tv/index.php?rupel=nuce&nucelD=32626>

dorm for high-school students in Cizre were some of locations attacked before the 2011 general elections.⁴²

The AKP government's initiative to shut down Hizmet-affiliated prep schools (*dershane*) and tutoring centers has exacerbated the skepticism about the peace process among Hizmet volunteers.⁴³ There is a growing fear that the PKK will be further encouraged to resort to violence in suppressing civic actors, including Hizmet organizations, in the region.

As the rift between the AKP government and the Gülen movement has widened since the corruption scandal, vocal criticisms of the peace process in Hizmet circles have increased rapidly. Participants with Turkish nationalist leanings often accuse the government of selling out the country and cooperating with the PKK. Rumors that the country is on the brink of being divided are widespread. Such a strong nationalist tone, however, brings a challenge to the movement itself. A Kurdish member of the Gülen movement, for example, told me that Hizmet activists' current discourse on social media severely harms the reputation of the movement among Kurds. "It gives the mistaken impression that we do not want peace," he said. "I even struggle in convincing my own family."

On the other hand, however, Hizmet's skepticism is increasingly widely shared. As President Erdoğan and the AKP government increasingly reveal authoritarian tendencies, both pro-Kurdish organizations and Turkish nationalist parties make harsh claims that the peace process is a ruse to deceive the public in order to win the elections and secure the path for Erdoğan's dream of presidential system. Recently, pro-Kurdish party leader Selahattin Demirtas stated that it is not realistic to expect the conflict to be resolved with current AKP leadership, even if negotiations go on for 50 years.⁴⁴

Conclusion

The Gülen movement's stance toward the Kurdish issue has become ever more questioned since the Turkish government's recent targeting of the Hizmet movement. A close analysis, however, suggests a complex picture.

Since the late 1980s, movement participants have focused on educational activism, opening hundreds of private schools, prep centers, and reading halls in the Kurdish region. Lately, Hizmet participants have expanded their reach by establishing charity organizations and civic associations. In the past decade, they have also become very active in Iraqi Kurdistan.

⁴² Nicholas Birch, "Are PKK and Gülen Movement Burying Hatchet?" *Eurasianet*, December 16, 2010, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/62585>

⁴³ Mustafa Gurbuz, "KCK, Gülen, AKP: Shifting Alliances?" *Today's Zaman*, Nov 29, 2013, http://www.todayszaman.com/blog/mustafa-gurbuz/kck-gulen-akp-shifting-alliances_332691.html

⁴⁴ "Bu Hukümet ile 50 yıl Muzakere Edilse Bile Cozum Sonucu Almak Gercekci Degil" *Cumhuriyet* Jan 18, 2015, http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/siyaset/189097/_Bu_hukumet_ile_50_yil_muzakere_edilse_bile_cozum_sonucu_almak_gercekci_degil_.html

Critics find the Hizmet initiatives to be assimilationist, while Hizmet volunteers believe that they are addressing the root causes of ethnic conflict, such as prejudice and ignorance. Some TV series in Hizmet-affiliated media have drawn especially strong criticism. Nonetheless, the Hizmet movement's overall attitude regarding pro-Kurdish reforms has been progressive.

The Kurdish question in general, and the recent peace process in particular, have begun to pose challenges to the movement, which includes diverse participant backgrounds and a remarkable number of Kurdish members. As the non-violent competitors of the PKK in the region, most Hizmet participants are critical of the methods in the peace process. As long as the AKP government negotiates Kurdish rights solely with the PKK, refusing to consult other civil actors, including Hizmet organizations, the movement's constituency may remain skeptical about the future outcomes of the peace process.

Appendix: Rudaw Interview with Fethullah Gulen (2013)⁴⁵

By Rebwar Kerim

RUDAW: *In terms of preservation of the mother tongue and education in it, what would you recommend to the peoples and administrations of the region, expounding on Said Nursi's ideas?*

GULEN: As is well known, Bediuzzaman Said Nursi identified *ignorance, poverty, and disunity (inner conflicts)* as the major roots of problems in the Islamic world in general and Eastern and Southeastern Turkey in particular. When he mentioned ignorance, he referred not only to ignorance in religious matters but also in the sciences that explore the universe. Likewise, he explained disunity in a broader perspective, including rifts among the clans in the region. Considering the fact that problems such as poverty and conflict are rooted foremost in ignorance, Bediuzzaman spent enormous effort on establishing a university, which would be named Medresetuz Zehra, in the province of Van. Proposing a female name for the university reflected his expectations in terms of productivity. He was hoping that similar schools would be established in neighboring cities such as Bitlis, Urfa and Diyarbakir.

Bediuzzaman identified the foundation of this university as one of the main goals of his life. Two features of this university were of ultimate importance. The first was expressed succinctly in the following statement: “The light of conscience is religious knowledge. The glory of mind is modern science. When these two unify, the truth comes forth, and thus, the student’s passion is able to fly with these two wings. If they conflict, however, the first gives birth to fanaticism and the second leads to manipulation and suspicion.” Thus, Bediuzzaman considered education in both religion and sciences to be essential.

The second striking aspect in his Medresetuz-Zehra model was the multilingual character of the university. He suggested that Arabic be required (*vacip*), Kurdish endorsed (*caiz*), and Turkish necessary (*lazim*). As we all know, all great civilizations have a common language in science. For example, the scientific language for Christian civilization was Latin. We can also say that English is the common language – scientific and otherwise – in today’s modern world. For Islamic civilization and science, the lingua franca has been Arabic. Also considering that Arabic is essential for Quran and Hadith, Bediuzzaman mentioned Arabic as a mandatory instruction language in such a model university that can be replicated, attracting students around the Muslim world. He brought up Turkish for a variety of reasons, including wide usage in communication all over Turkey, endorsement by a large number of people, better development as a language compared to Kurdish because of historical circumstances, and the fact that the Ottoman elite who governed the country were of Turkish origin. Languages are God’s wisdom and a sign of His unity,

⁴⁵ This interview appeared in Rudaw, translated into Sorani, on June 29, 2013. For a translation to Kurmanci by Rudaw, see <http://rudaw.net/kurmanci/interview/30062013> For Turkish, despite not being the full interview, see http://www.zaman.com.tr/yorum_hak-ve-hurriyetler-pazarlik-konusu-olamaz_2103914.html

similar to races, colors, clans, and tribes; and thus, each nation has its own language. God did not make these differences as a reason to dispute one another; instead, these differences should bring recognition, assistance, and solidarity, similar to a system in which differences in occupation entail unity, assistance, and solidarity.

In addition to expressing such divine wisdom, Bediuzzaman put forward the significance of learning and teaching native language in his various writings. For example, he described how usage of the mother tongue is a natural method in education by saying, "As the mother tongue is so natural, words pour into one's mind, not needing an invitation." Learning and teaching native languages are among universal human rights. Putting a ban on vernacular languages is certainly a form of oppression, as it is against nature. And that's why such a ban would not persist for long. Such reasoning was the logic of Bediuzzaman when he put Kurdish as an endorsed language in Medresetuz-Zehra, in addition to Arabic and Turkish.

Certainly, all groups should be allowed to use their own languages. Yet, as divisions based on races, colors, tribes, and clans are wrong, and thus, cannot be accepted. And as racism is non-humane, and in fact, a crime against humanity, languages should not be a reason for deep divisions; instead, they should contribute to recognition, assistance, solidarity, and harmony.

Thus, education in the mother tongue is a right that any state must acknowledge in principle because a state has to be fair to all of its citizens. But the problems that may occur in practice deserve special treatment. For instance, to provide such an education, the state must have proficient teachers who are capable of teaching in that language in sufficient numbers. That's because if the cadre of teachers is not capable of providing education in that language, the outcome will be backlash, regardless of good intentions.

I must note that Kurdish parents should make sure that their children learn Turkish as well. Everywhere around the globe, communities that cannot speak the official language of their countries face significant problems. In general, they are left behind when compared to other communities in socioeconomic terms. Think about the first-generation of Turks in Germany who do not speak German well, or the Hispanic population in the United States who are struggling with English. If our Kurdish citizens taught English and Arabic to their children in addition to Turkish, this would be very beneficial for the future of their children.

On the other hand, differences in language and ethnicity as source of conflict have no place in our cultural history. The Noble Quran states, "O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you" (49: 13). Bediuzzaman interpreted this verse as, "That is, I created you as peoples, nations, and tribes, so that you should know one another and the relations between you in social life, and assist one another; not so that you would regard each other as strangers, refuse to acknowledge one another, and nurture hostility and enmity." (26th letter, Letters) Explaining the same verse in another place, he maintains, "Nationalist awakening can be positive if it is based on compassion for fellow human beings, and thus, facilitates mutual recognition and assistance. Such awakening, however, is destructive when it is based on racial greed, which causes obstinacy and denial of the other. Islam rejects the latter form."

Here, Bediuzzaman highlighted two essential characteristics, i.e., recognition and assistance. The reason for forming various nations should be seen as humanity's better knowledge of one another and collective assistance. Various nations in the Islamic world are like various organs of a human body. They all need one another and should know each other better in order to work together efficiently. The heart has direct relations with the brain, as the arms with the feet. If one organ fails, the whole body suffers. If God creates people divided into nations and wants them to recognize each other, endorsing a governing system in which one nation dominates others is a clear violation of Divine wisdom. Bediuzzaman's perspective on positive nationalism should be effectively promoted and explained to all segments of the society. What matters is brotherhood in Islam. In Bediuzzaman's words, positive nationalism may be a fortress, a shield for such a brotherhood, but "never a substitute." That is because being noble in God's perspective is about being righteous, not other differences.

In the year 2009, at a time when Turkey's relations with Iraqi Kurdistan were quite strained, you sent a message that was full of hope for the future to the Abant Platform conference in Erbil. When you look back on your hopeful remarks, where do we stand today? Could you please be specific?

Not only as Turkey, our Kurdish brothers, and Iraqi Kurdistan, but as the Islamic world in general, we experience the most anguished, painful times, which perhaps has been the case for the past few centuries. Everywhere the problems are same: ignorance, poverty, and inner conflicts. In addition, some other problems have long been persistent: hopelessness; deceit, fraud, and reciprocal distrust; enmity and fanatical opposition; oppression in freedom of thought as well as social, economic, and political life; tyranny and despotism, and accordingly, blockage of intellectual, scientific, social, economic, and political progress, obstruction of individual development, and prioritization of selfish interests. These problems are exacerbated by those who do not want to see a better developed Muslim world or want these nations to fight over their selfish interests. It is highly questionable whether we - as Arabs, Turks, Kurds, Persians, and others - recognize our problems at all, including the root causes and the path to solutions.

And yet, hopelessness blocks every positive action, for all sorts of development and progress. Therefore, we are certainly optimistic and hopeful about our future in the full sense. Empty hope would not mean anything but cold comfort. So, I pray that such a hope will be firm ground to strive for: (1) transforming our current ignorance into knowledge and scientific progress; (2) transforming our poverty into an ability to claim the full potential of both open and underground richness in our lands; (3) transforming our experience of oppression into freedom - which is based on a delicate balance between our rights and responsibilities - as well as an accepted social and political culture in which we become neither yes-men to tyrants nor despots toward the vulnerable; and finally, (4) making individual interests subservient to our collective happiness.

The message you mentioned was sent four years ago. I hope the Abant meeting has resulted in constructive outcomes; I personally can say that remarkable steps have been taken since then. Although many things still remain to be done, historical circumstances, God willing, show that we will develop brotherhood and neighborly relations in the region. As far as I can see, education centers, media activism, and academic/intellectual initiatives in Iraqi Kurdistan will carry our relations to a further stage. In realization of this

(close partnership), many significant duties fall on shoulders of education centers, businessman, and especially the media.

Moreover, I believe hard-work, honesty, reciprocal trust, morality in all its forms, love for love, enmity for enmity, consultation, collaboration, assistance, brotherhood and sisterhood, solidarity - yes, all of these characteristics: these are not solely essential foundations for our future as Kurds, Turks, Arabs, Persians, and other Muslims; rather, they are essential foundations for the future of all humanity in a globalized world.

Hizmet schools inspired by your ideals have been active in Iraq and Kurdistan since 1994, and are greatly appreciated by the local people. Recently, we have had some allegations that these schools are “making ideological propaganda.” Do you have any ideological agenda? What are your opinions on this?

If you look at history, there is no single humanitarian project that has not been accused of imposing a certain worldview. Even initiatives and projects that emphasized universal values such as hard-work, honesty, and altruism have been accused of being indoctrination by some people. For more than a half-century, I have been among my fellow citizens with my sermons, conversations, talks, writings, and personal visits. And for decades I've always experienced such accusations. On the other hand, partly at my suggestion, our fellow citizens have gone everywhere and established educational institutions in almost every corner of the world. Today, they say, the schools are active in more than 140 countries. These are countries with different languages, religions, worldviews, ideologies, histories, traditions, races and colors. Against some of these countries, we waged centuries-long wars. Moreover, most of the people who contributed to the opening of these schools (and those who work there) are Muslims, and they do not need to hide it. The countries are sensitive about these schools, monitoring them closely to make sure that they do not pursue ideological propaganda. This sensitivity is intensified by those radicals who exploit Islam and bring shame to it. If there has been any deviant ideology or propaganda, that couldn't possibly remain secret – especially under these sensitive circumstances, and especially in a world where individuals' private lives are monitored and intelligence services have extraordinary capabilities. If there is no shred of evidence in more than five decades to prove such accusations, what can I say? I accept your high intellect and conscience as the judge, you decide, please.

Moreover, the very term “ideological propaganda” does not exist in our conceptual repository. The Hizmet movement aims at moral improvement, building and maintaining peace, and providing world-class education to catch up with the developed world while respecting local customs. These goals are the same in Iraq and Kurdistan. The concept “ideological propaganda” is foreign to us; we do not know it. It is not very easy to juxtapose ideological propaganda with what we are doing in terms of conflict resolution, dialogue, consensus building, preparing the ground for scientific and technological innovations and promoting peace and security.

Hizmet schools have established close relationships with local authorities; their curriculums have been approved and they have carried out their activities under the inspection of both parents and the authorities and in a transparent fashion. Moreover, every state follows what goes on at these schools in legitimate ways. They would not tolerate anything that brought harm to their peoples. Therefore, baselessly accusing

these institutions, which have been established with the efforts and sacrifices of thousands of people, of conspiratorial approaches would be unfair and illegitimate.

To the best of my knowledge, Hizmet schools in Iraqi Kurdistan provide an education that combines preservation of local cultures with integration into the rest of the world. In this regard, activities like the Kurdish Festival show that the programs of these schools are far from following any kind of indoctrination and ideological imposition. The truth is that the friendliness and farsighted attitudes of local authorities have played an important role in the opening and maintenance of these schools. Our Kurdish friends, with whom we have been partners in faith, as well as in times of happiness and sorrow, have disregarded baseless rumors and embraced these schools, which came out of clean bosom of Anatolia and grew in the Kurdish territories. Once again, they proved our historic brotherhood.

Do you think that the growing friendship between Turks and Kurds is at the desired level? If not, what should be done to strengthen relations?

We have the same faith, we believe in the same God. Our food comes from the same ultimate Sustainer; we live on the same soil and under the same Sun. We breathe the same air. We have the same religion, the same destiny, and the same history. We exist in the same present time and most likely, we will have a common future. As Turks and Kurds, we are everywhere in Turkey, we have spread all over the country together. In a rapidly globalizing world of revolutionary advancements in transportation and communication, and in a world that is evolving into a great village, European countries that fought endless wars in the past have gotten together and even seek political unity. That is how the world is, and we know that we were born as Turks and Kurds regardless of our personal wishes. Given the fact that it is not in our hands to become a Turk or a Kurd, isn't it absurd to discriminate against people based on their Turkish or Kurdish identity or the language they speak? Isn't it to the detriment of all of us?

Our geography has always been one in which different religions and cultures have lived together in peace. Throughout history, Turks and Kurds have intertwined and experienced common happiness as well as sorrow. Scholars like Ahmed Khani, Mulla Jezeri, Mulla Khalid Bagdadi, Salahaddin, and Bediuzzaman Said Nursi contributed immensely to the peaceful coexistence of Turks, Kurds, Arabs and other peoples in the region. Mr. Masoud Barzani mentions the wishes of his father (Mulla Mustafa Barzani) from time to time, "Have good relationships with Turks, do not make trouble for them and be with them." These words that express the mutual feelings of both sides are remarkably important.

Being damaged in the last 100 or 150 years, the relations between the two peoples are still strong enough to endure such strains. The embrace of the Anatolian people during the great Peshmerga migration has accelerated normalization of our relationships. I myself shed painful tears for both Halabja and Al-Anfal; and I am not alone in this, the people of Anatolia felt the pain as if it were their own.

At a time when our relations have started to grow stronger, we should avoid adopting a solely security-oriented approach to existing problems. Instead, we should strengthen cultural and historical bonds to such an extent that they will never break. In this regard, Turkey should not only endow its own Kurdish citizens with their due rights and freedoms, but also extend a helping hand to Kurds who face problems in other parts of

the world. It should defend the rights of Kurds who face political, religious or ethnic problems, speaking up for them at various international organizations, especially at the United Nations, in the name of justice. I think that every single effort is significant and noteworthy in order to bring back our unity and avoid conflict.

The issues, however, should not be limited to the political sphere. Efforts toward solutions should not be confined to states and politicians. Instead, all entities and people, including NGOs, business people, educators, opinion leaders, the Directorate of Religious Affairs, and students, should do their best to consolidate our togetherness. We must build more bridges and stay away from any kind of antagonistic attitudes, which will create nothing but conflict. Turks must rush to find solutions for the issues of Kurds even before Kurds themselves, and Kurds must stand by their Turkish brothers. Our relations might be limited to education these days, but they have the capacity to improve on academic, cultural and economic grounds. Turkey might be the gate for Kurds to get connected with the world at large.

Recently, we see that the borders of Misak-i Milli (The National Pact) is on Turkey's agenda. What is your take on that? Whether it is something viable or not.

I am not a politician or a statesman or an expert on international relations. I am trying to walk together with my colleagues (and make my humble contributions) in a civic movement that emphasizes morality and common human values. So it would make more sense if the statesmen of the relevant countries talked about the borders in the region.

However, I must say that the steps Turkey has been taking in order to prevent bigger problems with neighbors, as well as the introverted foreign policy aimed just at strengthening relations with the West, has been interpreted falsely. The times when countries conquer other lands to extend their borders are past, and the borders have been determined by international law. In such circumstances, it does not seem logical for Turkey to consider extending its borders when the country needs to act collectively with its neighbors. For instance, the city of Batumi in Georgia was within the borders determined by the National Pact. Today, Turkey has good relations with Georgia. Citizens do not even need passports to cross the borders. In a situation like this, bringing the National Pact up on the agenda and aiming to annex Batumi only damages Turkish-Georgian relations. Those who bring up these issues should consider what kind of problems this rhetoric might cause among neighbors.

Ideals that don't take realities into account can go no further than being just fantasies and illusions. We are living in a globalizing world; the issues of any region are becoming more and more relevant to other countries around the globe and are being closely followed. The Middle East, where the heart of the planet beats, takes special caution and precision. In my humble opinion, unity of hearts, mutual love, goodwill and sincere brotherhood override the pacts of political ambition. So, first things first; we must focus on such unity. We must identify our goals within our own realities. We must be extraordinarily careful about leaning towards goals (or being channeled in that direction) that would eventually bring catastrophe to the peoples of the region. Such leanings have the potential to turn the region into a swamp of armed conflicts. In such a case, we will lose all that we have gained as the peoples of the region.

Thus, for about a century, the National Pact has been perceived as an ideal by some people and an unrealistic utopia by others. What really matters, however, is lifting the boundaries that separate our hearts and establishing direct links of communication among our hearts.

There is an ongoing peace process in Turkey. We see that both Kurds and Turks support this process. Would you share your thoughts on the efforts of these peoples to live together peacefully? How can the culture of peaceful coexistence be established in the Middle East at a time when we most need it?

It is impossible not to support efforts that aim to stop the tears and bloodshed of the region. It is crucial to be constructive and leave the pain of the past behind.

It is also crucial to refrain from being part of any type of conflict, fight, or provocation that is based on ethnic or sectarian grounds. People should be careful not to fuel hatred and provoke separatist ideologies. As I tried to answer in the fourth question, the factors that support unity and alliance among us must be promoted. Existing opportunities must be utilized and we must look for new ones. Any chance for solidarity, philanthropy and togetherness on a cultural and economic basis must be put into practice. Peoples as well as the institutions that represent them must promote and popularize projects and activities that strengthen unity and solidarity. Once such activities are carried out by civil society, they will guide the authorities in the region.

Specifically, educational institutions and civil society play an important role in the application of a unifying culture. Education has a specific role in generating social values that prevent material conflicts. Contrary to our experience in the modern day, the peoples of the region have a long and deeply rooted history and tradition of peaceful coexistence. The Kurds, Turks, Arabs, Christians, Muslims, and Jews used to live in together peace. We need educational models and a culture of civil society that will rediscover and put into practice the values that facilitated this togetherness. Peaceful coexistence will be more feasible if youth can find a satisfying educational system in which they would not appeal to violence, war, and terror; and thus, education will be a strong alternative to violence.

That being said, educational institutions established by the Hizmet movement adopt a model that provides examples of coexisting peacefully regardless of religion, language, race, sect, and ethnicity. In most cases the children of those who antagonize each other get educated at the same schools, in the same classes, in the same schoolyards and laboratories, thanks to those teachers who extend their merciful hands to them equally. At these schools, the students breathe the very atmosphere of peace. We hope that they will put the values they get at these schools into practice. The Hizmet movement promotes peaceful coexistence of different groups and individuals and supports consolidation of the values to carry this out.

As a reality of the day, modernity brings issues and problems in brotherhood of peoples. What can be done to minimize the damage and to improve already damaged brotherhood?

There might be some damage coming from modernity, but it probably puts many more opportunities in front of us. "People are the enemies of those they don't know." We used

to have problems before; Arabs didn't know Turks well enough, Turks didn't know Kurds well enough, etc. In the battle of Gallipoli, many Muslim soldiers fought against us without knowing who they were fighting against. This is a good example of how people may have animosities due to lack of knowledge. However, thanks to modernization, we know each other much better. It doesn't make sense to oppose modernity that bears no fruit. Scientific and technological advancements set the trends and bring a lot of opportunities in terms of building better relationships with each other and consolidating the grounds for solidarity and brotherhood. This may be the way to compensate for the damage modernity brings.

On the other hand, modernization promotes individualism and puts individual rights before duties. When there is a problem with regard to rights, modernization supports the idea of giving up on duties until the problem is solved. In practice, this leads to a kind of vicious circle. In our culture, we are taught to be easygoing. When such an attitude gets widespread in society, it creates fertile grounds, a bigger circle of kindness. The success of the Western world depends on competition, whereas Eastern cultures aim to reach the same goal by helping one another in tranquility, without conflicts. We must promote the revival of such attitudes in our societies.

What is the role of civic society in facilitating the ongoing Peace Process in Turkish and Kurdish societies? What are your recommendations?

I believe that sincerity and mutual respect are crucial, as well as a characteristic expressed in a Hadith of The Prophet (PBUH): wishing for others what we wish for ourselves and avoiding deeds that we wouldn't like to have happen to ourselves. Moreover, choosing other people over ourselves, a significant feature of the locals of Medina that is also praised in the Quran, will help us overcome hatred. Turkish and Kurdish civil society organizations can greatly contribute to peace by providing the grounds for the aforementioned values and facilitating people embracing them. On such grounds people can come together and form a kind of unity that will last. This is possible and efforts must be channeled in this direction.

Furthermore, avoiding offensive attitudes in both discourse and practice, embracing people in an all-inclusive manner, and being patient are of utmost importance. Everyone needs to act with caution and prudence and be on the alert against provocations. We must recognize that problems cannot be solved by shouting at each other or by slogans. Those who want to solve them and thus prevent conflicts should provide reports, declarations and well-thought-out texts. Issues should be handled with reason, perspicacity and clemency, not with rage or violent attacks.

Benefitting from slowly restoring the security atmosphere in the region, there needs to be improvement in economic, social, cultural and spiritual relations, particularly in education. To this end, joint projects must be promoted, especially those that are called The Bridges of Heart, extending from East to West and the other way around. The existing capacities and targets of these projects must be improved.

Also, it is of crucial importance to make Kurdish-dominated regions centers of attraction, with special emphasis on education. Indeed, solving education-related problems will help solve many other problems at the same time. Unemployed, dispossessed and uneducated people have always perceived themselves as second-class citizens. However, the people

of these regions are actually very clever, and their ancestors were founders of major civilizations in the past. We need to take them out of the negative psychological atmosphere and possible inferiority complex that some are trapped in. While working for this cause, we should refrain from hurting each other's feelings and pay respect to the principles of fraternity and equality.

In this regard, I would like to highlight the following: we must always remember that human rights and freedoms are gifts granted by God, and they cannot be taken away. It is not the people who granted us these things, so no one can take them away. People are all equals; everyone, even including the Prophets, is equal to each other in terms of human qualities and being created by God. Without recognizing this equality, no one can administer justice. We should not let our words, acts, and behavior give the impression of doing a favor. We should not see or use these basic rights and freedoms as the object of bargaining in the face of other values. Any other way that is outside the legal boundaries, anything that is not accepted by international law, and specifically violence, must be avoided at all costs.

About the Author

Mustafa Gurbuz is a residential research fellow at Rethink Institute. His areas of expertise are Turkish politics and society; Kurdish politics; the sociology of Islam; and Middle Eastern politics. He received his Ph.D. in sociology from the University of Connecticut and was a post-doctoral scholar at the University of South Florida. He is the author of *Transforming Ethnic Conflict: Rival Kurdish Movements in Turkey* (forthcoming, Amsterdam University Press). Dr. Gurbuz's publications have appeared in *Research in Social Movements, Conflict, and Change*, *Middle East Critique*, *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, *European Journal of Turkish Studies*, and *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility*. Dr. Gurbuz is associate editor of *Sociology of Islam* and a contributing editor of *Mobilizing Ideas*.

