



Disliked by Opposing Ends:

Understanding Shared Hostility Towards the Hizmet Movement
by Turkey's Secularists and Islamists

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Understanding Shared Hostility Towards the Hizmet Movement by Turkey's Secularists and Islamists

Anwar Alam, Ph.D.

Abstract

What causes both secularists and Islamists to converge in their animosity toward the Hizmet (also referred to as Gülen) movement in Turkey? This query, frequently posed by critics, sympathizers, and even volunteers of Hizmet, highlights the absence of widespread sympathy toward the Movement in Turkish society despite recognizing its positive contributions. The prevailing analyses have approached this inquiry from three main perspectives: (a) examining Turkey's historical 'center-periphery' dilemma, (b) exploring the ongoing conflict between 'civil Islam' and 'political Islam' traditions, and (c) scrutinizing the conspiracy-laden dynamics of the 'deep state'—a significant discourse within Turkey. However, this paper diverges from these perspectives and arguments. It contends that the mutual antipathy of secularists and Islamists toward Hizmet stems from a clash between the modernist vision (embraced by Kemalists, non-Kemalist secularists, Islamists, liberals, leftists, and communists) and the postmodern vision of Fethullah Gülen and the Hizmet movement. The modernist vision primarily revolves around nation-state-centered development aimed at homogenization. In contrast, the postmodern vision emphasizes civil society-centered discourse promoting a non-homogenizing developmental path and a better quality of life. While the former emphasizes 'centralizing authority,' 'system,' and 'control,' the latter advocates for the liberation of humanity from such 'systematic control.' In the context of Turkish Muslim society and broader Muslim society, secularists and Islamists have often been portrayed as inherently opposing discourses. However, they both uphold a similar vision of centralized statist governance and strongly oppose any challenge to this 'state' or 'executive authority' from civil society actors.

Keywords: *Hizmet Movement, Fethullah Gülen, Turkey, Islamists, Secularists, Postmodern.*

Introduction

A popular understanding portrayed the Hizmet (also referred to as Gülen) movement¹ and Erdoğan-led AKP regime as a close ally, fighting together to dismantle, discredit, delegitimize and liquidate the anti-religious Kemalists, secularists, and nationalist forces and ideas in modern Turkey.

The Ergenekon (2008-2015)² and Balyoz (2010-2013)³ conspiracy cases, and the Constitutional Referendum (2010) were considered the high-water mark of their close relationship against the Kemalists and other anti-religious secularist forces. The subsequent years, however, painted a different picture than such a trajectory suggested. The Erdoğan regime, in cooperation and with the active support of anti-religious Kemalists, secularists, and nationalists, embarked upon, at least since 2012, the liquidation of the Hizmet movement within and outside Turkey with such ferocity and scale, which is unparalleled in the history of modern Turkey.

¹ While “Gülen movement” is commonly used, I choose to adopt the movement's preferred terminology, “Hizmet movement” and “Hizmet,” which means “service” in Turkish, rather than “Gülen movement” and “Gülenist,” as the latter terms are not favored by those associated with it.

² The Ergenekon conspiracy case, in Hizmet and other non-Kemalist narratives, refers to an armed clandestine political group spread across various sectors of the government and society, including military officials, politicians, criminals, judges, prosecutors, journalists, academicians, industrialists, and ex-bureaucrats and others. Wedded to the ideology of a mixture of Kemalism, ultra-nationalism, and fascism, the group was historically considered to pursue criminal and terrorist activities to create civil unrest, destabilize and bring down the non-Kemalist constitutional order and government, terrorize the practicing religious Turks, and plunder the nation. It was alleged that the Kemalist-dominated military brutally used the Ergenekon network to create civil unrest and mobilize public opinion through Kemalist media before carrying out the military intervention against the non-Kemalist governments in the name of ‘protection of the Kemalist Secular Republic of Turkey.’ However, anti-religious secularists and Kemalists believe that Ergenekon was a fictitious entity primarily created by the Hizmet movement with the support of the AKP government to weaken the hold of Kemalist forces in the country. Turkey witnessed a controversial trial, during which more than 275 people, including high-level military officials, were convicted and jailed. However, in 2015, Erdoğan withdrew all charges related to Ergenekon, and the Court also pronounced that Ergenekon never existed.

³ The Balyoz (Sledgehammer) conspiracy case refers explicitly to a 2003 “coup plan” or the building of various “coup scenarios” by Kemalist military elements to destabilize and topple the Erdoğan regime. 331 retired and serving officers were convicted.

What accounts for the collective hatred of Turkish Islamists and anti-religious Kemalists or secularists against the Hizmet movement, as well as the latter's complete isolation in its own country? There is no one singular explanation for such complex questions. The explanatory framework that has been employed in this paper to reflect upon this set of questions operates on three interrelated bases:

1. The inherent conflict between 'modernist' and 'postmodernist' discourse;
2. The individual role of President Erdoğan himself;
3. The specific 'statist' tradition within Turkey.

However, reviewing some of the existing dominant approaches to this set of questions before exploring these three interrelated factors will help evolve a better perspective on this vexed question. One can discern four kinds of approaches, which have surfaced in the literature, to address the issue of conflict between the Erdoğan regime and the Hizmet movement: (i) the 'power struggle' theory, (ii) the 'center-periphery' theory, (iii) the 'civil Islam vs. political Islam' theory, and (iv) the 'deep state' theory. All these four theoretical frameworks are variants of hegemonic modernist discourse, as they mostly revolve around such factors as 'ideology,' 'state/nation-state,' 'power,' 'binary politics,' and 'conspiracy.'

The 'Power Struggle' Theory and Its Fallacies

The prevailing analysis predominantly revolves around the power discourse, a viewpoint primarily expressed by critics of the Hizmet movement. It saw the emerging conflict between the Hizmet movement and the Erdoğan regime as the manifestation of a 'power struggle' in the post-2010 Constitutional Referendum phase, which goes like this:

With the liquidation of their common enemy (the Kemalists), the Gülenists and the Erdoğanists turned against each other in pursuit of maximization of their share in state power. It was a fight for raw power.

In this field of 'power struggle,' the Hizmet movement was considered to organize and direct the following measures in order to unseat, weaken, or destabilize the Erdoğan regime: summoning the MIT (Turkish National Intelligence Organization) Chief, Hakan Fidan, to the Court of Law over secret Oslo talks with representatives of PKK (2010-2011), Mavi Marmara episode (2010), corruption exposé against the Erdoğan regime (December 17-25, 2013) and the disputed military coup (July 15, 2016).

In response, the Erdoğan regime aimed to secure his throne by finishing off the Movement, leading to the confiscation of almost all Hizmet-linked resources (including educational, banking, media, charity, and business assets, equivalent to 50 billion USD) and the mass summary dismissal from government jobs within a few days of the disputed military coup of July 15, 2016, alongside mass arrests and detentions. This event marked the most extensive ‘legalized theft’ in the history of Turkey.

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The ‘power struggle’ discourse, however, is too simplistic, too modernist, and too commonsensical to offer any meaningful insight into understanding the ‘shared hostility’ of Islamists and anti-religious secularists against the Hizmet movement. First, it only reiterates the ‘state-centric’ discourse, propaganda, and accusations against the Hizmet movement. These include politically motivated charges such as ‘infiltration,’ ‘parallel structure,’ and ‘state within a state.’ However, the Erdoğan regime and advocates of this approach did not produce any hard evidence or unearth any document to date that would have indicated that these alleged measures and actions by Hizmet volunteers were essentially aimed at ousting or weakening or destabilizing the constitutional order in Turkey. The Parliamentary Commission was set up to investigate the role of the Hizmet movement in the 2016 disputed military coup and whose findings were never disclosed to date in the public domain, never summoned those arrested and jailed Hizmet volunteers on the charge of coup to testify before the Commission to find out the truth!

Second, Hizmet never lobbied the Erdoğan regime for rapid Islamization of the Turkish state and society. Hence, the categorization of the Hizmet movement as ‘an Islamist

“ ...Hizmet never attempted to establish a *political party* to become a direct stakeholder in *state power*.

group’ vying for a share in state power lacks empirical evidence. Third, Hizmet never attempted to establish a political party to become a direct stakeholder in state power. Fourth, religio-socio movements participating in or directing military coups are unheard of. They, including the Hizmet movement, lack the hard power and the training to exercise ‘hard power’ (even if one presumed that the Movement had some hard power by having some presence in intelligence, military, judiciary, and police) to contemplate such actions.

The ‘Center-Periphery’ Theory and Its Fallacies

The ‘center-periphery’ theory has been another dominant framework for understanding the political conflicts in Turkey. It asserts that there has been perennial conflict dating back to Ottoman times between the ‘centralized state structure’ and ‘diversified social periphery.’ Unable to control the hinterland of the ‘diversified periphery,’ the ‘centralized state’ has relied more on force to subjugate the periphery. However, under the modern Kemalist Republican period, the theory has been popularly applied to understand the inherent conflict between anti-religious ideological Kemalist/secularist/nationalist-dominated state and majoritarian conservative or religious Muslim periphery as well as minority ethnic and linguistic groups (Alevi, Kurds, Armenians, etc). More specifically, in popular terms, the model stands for exposing inherent conflict between Kemalist, secularist, urban, ‘White’ Turks and conservative, religious, rural, Anatolian Muslim ‘Black’ Turks.

This model, however, is hardly applicable to explain the repressive policies of the Erdoğan regime against the Hizmet movement points due to three principle reasons: (a) It tends to assume both the ‘center’ and ‘periphery’ as a single monolithic, static entity, which lacks empirical validity. Despite the elite’s desire for the Turkish state and society to be a singular, organic, united, homogeneous, monolithic nation, the center and the periphery have historically been porous and fragmented. Both have constantly interacted with each other, influencing and impacting each other. (b) It tends to ‘lump’ all ‘Muslim’ public responses and expressions and upward mobility from the conservative Muslim periphery (including the Hizmet movement) to state body, politics, and policies as ‘Islamism,’ which hardly corresponds to the reality on the ground. (c) The so-called conflict between the Hizmet movement and the Erdoğan regime is essentially within conservative ‘Black’ Turks, unlike the previous era when the contradiction was very sharp between ‘White’ Turks dominated center (state) and ‘Black’ Turks dominated periphery (civil society).

“...the [*center-periphery*] model stands for exposing inherent conflict between Kemalist, secularist, urban, ‘White’ Turks and conservative, religious, rural, Anatolian Muslim ‘Black’ Turks.”

The ‘Civil Islam vs. Political Islam’ Theory and Its Fallacies

The perspective of ‘civil Islam vs. political Islam’ tends to see the ensuing conflict between the Erdoğan regime and the Hizmet movement as a reflection of perennial violent conflict between traditions of civil Islam and political Islam. This theoretical model suffers from the following limitations. First, it corresponds to the period of what has come to be known as Meccan Islam (*dawa*: the equivalent of dialogue and non-violent/passive resistance) and Madinan Islam (*Din wa-Dawlah*: prototype Islamic state). Such a binary classification of Islam is, at best, a ‘modern construct’ and hardly belongs to the genre of classical Islam. Second, all social movements carry a political vision and, therefore, contain elements of politics; hence, a strong demarcation between civil and political groups about a religion-socio group is problematic. Third, the Erdoğan regime significantly uses Islamic symbols for domestic and global politics and carries an Islamist aspiration of dominating the Muslim world; however, this does not translate him into an overt political Islamist actor. Unlike Islamist regimes in Iran, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Sudan, and Afghanistan, Erdoğan has refrained from indulging in an active program of ‘Islamization of Turkish society,’ nor has he declared Islam as the official religion of Turkey; neither has he changed the fundamental secular character of the Turkish constitution. Beyond strengthening and expanding the role of Diyanet⁴ and

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⁴ The Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet, in Turkish), a kind of reincarnation of the Ottoman *Shaykh al-Islām*, was established by the Kemalist regime to supervise and regulate all mosques, including Friday sermons (*Khutbahs*) as well as guide the government on Islamic matters. The central objective behind the creation of Diyanet was to align the interpretation of Islam with the ‘modernizing reforms’ of the Kemalist regime. During the Erdoğan-led AKP regime, particularly in the post-2010 phase, the institution of Diyanet has been deeply politicized, and its role in the ‘Islamization of Turkish society’ has been dramatically increased and strengthened. It now controls and runs chains of Islamic foundations and Quranic schools, solemnizes civil marriage, and provides ‘guidance service’ to the population through printing and publishing the vast Islamic literature in line with the political mandate of the Erdoğan regime. With the budgetary allocation of TL 16.1 billion (\$190 million) in 2022, a TL 3.2 billion increase over its 2021 budget, Diyanet has outstripped seven out of 17 ministries in the country, including the budgets of the Interior Ministry (TL 14.7 billion).

See, “*Religious Affairs’ 2022 budget outstrips 7 out of 17 Turkish ministries*”, Turkish Minute, September 15, 2022.

Imam Hatip schools⁵ (both have originated in the Kemalist secular governance) with expanded coverage of Islamic and Ottoman history in the textbook and reviving Ottoman-Arabic linguistic traditions, it is difficult to see any significant visible signs of Islamization such as obligatory veiling, mandatory zakat, or the implementation of *Sharia* law as the basis for legislation. The ‘symbolic and limited Islamisation’ of the Erdoğan regime, unlike the ‘hard Islamization’ of the listed Muslim countries, is partly due to two significant reasons:

1. Unlike other Muslim countries, Turkey has witnessed a long era of the process of secularization, which has dislodged Islam from the realm of public policies and governance and transformed it into a dominant source of Muslim personal identity.
2. The modern sensibilities of Turkish Muslims and heightened sense of differentiation vis a vis other Muslim societies, mainly the Arabs and Persians, keep them as practicing Muslims but without accepting any ‘non-Sunni Turkish version of *Sharia* law.’

Fourth, this framework implicitly legitimizes the illegal, repressive actions of the Erdoğan regime against the Hizmet movement by presenting it as ‘inherent’ and ‘natural’ to Islamic traditions and history. It further helps in concealing the fascist face of the Erdoğan regime under the garb of Islamic political tradition.

“...[‘civil Islam vs. political Islam’ framework] further helps in concealing the fascist face of the Erdoğan regime under the garb of Islamic political tradition.”

⁵ *Imam Hatip* schools are predominantly gender-segregated religious schools initially created by the Kemalist state with the social support of the Muslim community to allow Muslim religious functionaries to perform some mandatory Islamic functions related to worship and burials. However, secular components were later added to the religious curriculum, and students were allowed to secure admission to mainstream colleges and universities. It was the most significant educational route for many Anatolian Muslim children. Most of the buildings of *Imam Hatip* schools have been built by pooling community resources, while the state provides the teaching and non-teaching staff with salaries. The school has expanded enormously under the Erdoğan regime. According to one study, “In 2011–2012, there were about 600 such schools with a student population of well under 300,000 whereas, by 2016–2017, they numbered well over 1,400 and had more than 600,000 students” (Adnan Türegün, “The political ideology of Turkey’s Islamists wing under Erdoğan”, *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 2023). *Imam Hatip* schools have emerged as the most significant support base of the Erdoğan regime, with many of its alums serving in the higher echelon of state bureaucracy and the AKP party.

The ‘Deep State’ Theory and Its Fallacies

The last modernist framework, the theory of the ‘deep state,’ sees the repression of the Erdoğan regime against the Hizmet movement as principally a work of the invisible ‘deep state,’ which thrives on the criminal network of elements of bureaucratic, political, social, and economic class within and outside Turkey. The Ergenekon and Balyoz conspiracy cases and the recent Sedat Peker episode⁶ reflect the politics of the ‘deep state’ in Turkey. Though popular, it is conspiratorial and lacks credible empirical evidence. If numerous individuals within Hizmet and other Islamic movements regard Kemalists, leftists, nationalists, elements within the army and other state organs, business entities, and the media as components of the ‘deep state.’ many in Turkey also consider elements within the Hizmet movement as a part of the ‘deep state.’ The politics and discourse of the ‘deep state,’ therefore, becomes a conspiracy-stricken belief system that applies to any events, groups, and developments without any empirical evidence.

Modernist vs. Postmodernist Paradigm

Instead of the aforementioned approaches, the common antipathy of anti-religious secularists and Islamists towards the Hizmet movement within Turkey broadly reflects a conflict between the late nineteenth-century and mid-twentieth-century modernist nation-state vision and the late twentieth and twenty-first-century postmodern vision of Fethullah Gülen and the Hizmet movement. The modernist vision is primarily a centralized, unitary, monolithic, absolutist, ideologically driven nation-state-centered vision of homogenizing the development of society and nation. Its understanding of democracy is dominantly confined to the arena of electoral competition, often mediated through ‘exclusivist, partisan politics and discourse.’ Hence, ‘electoral democracy’ constitutes the essence of this discourse on modernity.

⁶ Following a fallout with the government, a gangster, once considered close to the Erdoğan regime, particularly its political ally MHP, moved to Dubai and began a series of YouTube videos “confessing” to his crimes and disclosing other state secrets. Among these revelations was the disbursement and distribution of guns and other weapons among a section of Erdoğan’s supporters prior to the July 15, 2016, disputed military coup.

See, “Turkey’s Süleyman Soylu ‘handed out AK-47s’ during the coup attempt, alleges mobster Sedat Peker,” Ahval News, July 09, 2021.

Erdoğan continues to rely upon election as ‘the source’ of the legitimacy of his rule and authority, which in its current form has assumed the ‘populist electoral authoritarianism.’ Presently, the late-nineteenth and mid-twentieth-century model of modernity is broadly represented by such political, economic, and societal forces (along with their respective media groups) within Turkey as Islamist-oriented political parties AKP (Justice and Development Party) and YRP (New Welfare Party), Kemalist-secularist parties like CHP (Republican People’s Party) and İP (Good Party), Kemalist-nationalist parties on the far-right like MHP (Nationalist Movement Party), and the far-left like Doğu Perinçek’s VP (Patriotic Party), Islamic social groups like *İskenderpaşa* and *Menzil* and business houses like TÜSİAD⁷ and MÜSİAD⁸. In its current form, *Erdoğanism* represents the nineteenth-century modernist vision of the ideologically driven Islamist-oriented nation-state that seeks to centralize all powers and control and regulate all aspects of individual lives, civil society institutions, and the organs of the government.

Hence, politically speaking, *Erdoğanism* represents a Kemalist authoritarian vision of a unitary, monolithic Turkish Republic, which CHP, MHP, and other anti-religious, secular political forces in the country share. Similarly, most non-Hizmet Islamic social and religious groups, including *Nurcus*, are more or less wedded to the idea of Islamist supremacism, which finds expression in *Erdoğanism*. In this context, what is interesting to note is that the anti-religious Kemalists, nationalists, and secularists, and various Islamist groups within the Turkish Muslim setting in particular, and Muslim society in general, have predominantly been theorized and discussed in terms of inherently binary or opposing discourses to each other; however, they share the similar vision of centralized statist governance and display strong opposition to any threat to this ‘unitary state or executive authority’ from civil society actors.

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⁷ TÜSİAD (Turkish Industry and Business Association) is a confederation of Kemalist and secular business groups that has remained the largest economic conglomerate in Turkey to date. It has hitherto enjoyed the direct patronage of the Kemalist state.

⁸ MÜSİAD (Independent Industrialists’ and Businessmen’s Association) is an economic association of conservative Muslim business houses, mostly belonging to small-scale and medium-scale enterprises.

On the other hand, Fethullah Gülen and the Hizmet movement, to a large extent, represents a postmodern trend, even though the bulk of writing on it has broadly operated within the late nineteenth-century framework of Islam and modernity, highlighting its contributions to shaping and strengthening political democracy with a view that Islam and political modernity are compatible, rather complementary, to each other. The postmodern vision is primarily plural, emphasizing a civil society-centred, non-homogenizing developmental path. It questions the foundational, unilinear principles and prescriptions of modernity for a better quality of life and seeks liberation of humanity from nation-state-centered ‘centralizing authority,’ ‘system,’ and ‘control’ mechanisms.

“...[Hizmet movement’s postmodern vision] questions the foundational, unilinear principles and prescriptions of modernity for a better quality of life and seeks liberation of humanity from nation-state-centered ‘centralizing authority,’ ‘system,’ and ‘control’ mechanisms.”

The postmodernity of the Hizmet movement, inspired by and grounded in Sunni, Sufist (closer to the pre-*tariqa* era of Islam’s first four centuries) *Tajdeed* (renewal)⁹ tradition of Islam and Prophetic model, is evident from its value matrix and everyday praxis. A prominent feature of the *Tajdeed* tradition is its emphasis on a balanced or holistic understanding of Islam, which combines the scholastic *Sharia* tradition of the Jurists with the spiritual *tasawwuf* tradition of Sufis. This approach strikes a harmonious balance between ‘theology’ and ‘philosophy,’ ‘revelation’ and ‘reason,’ ‘heart’ and ‘mind,’ ‘materialism’ and ‘spiritualism,’ and this world (*al-Dunya*) and the afterlife (*al-Akhira*). The integration of *Sharia* and Sufism activates the perfect harmony between intellect, spirit, and body, thus making human beings complete beings and enabling them to attain true humanity. Together, they have shaped the Movement’s high premium on the universal value system of ‘service ethics,’ ‘trust,’ and ‘social responsibility’ combined with localized, diversified, decentralized modes of actions in everyday human lives, though centrally coordinated, and guided through the instrumentality of dialogue, ‘principle of relative truth’ (subject to various dimensions of principles of *Tawhid*) and philosophy of ‘altruism.’

⁹ *Tajdeed* tradition derives from a famous Hadith saying that talks about the individual who applies that tradition, called *Mujaddid*: “God will send to this community on the eve of every century a man from the rank of ulema who will renew its deen with the inherent blessing of Allah and Prophet Muhammad.”

This combined value matrix and action produces two unintended consequences: (a) developing a civil society approach towards development and strengthening the plural fabric of society and (b) questioning the nation-state as ‘the’ instrument of ‘development’ as well as its ‘homogeneous vision of development.’

No wonder many scholars found it challenging to classify the Hizmet movement within the standard parameter of categorizing Islamic groups. The problem of categorizing the Hizmet movement in part lies in treating a “postmodern” Gülen phenomenon as a “modern” entity essentially and analyzing it within the modernist discourse. The “democratic journey” of the Hizmet movement since the early 1970s has been dominantly debated and analyzed within the discourse of ‘Islamic modernism, reformism, or liberalism’ and, hence, failed to capture Gülen’s Islamically grounded postmodern critique of modernity itself, particularly its violent legacy, the idea of unilinear progress, the notion of universal reason and cultural homogeneity. Owing to deep Sufistic values, Hizmet does not adhere to the modern discourse of state power; neither adopts its binary approach: ‘private vs. public,’ ‘religious vs. secular,’ ‘civil society vs. state,’ ‘individual vs. community,’ ‘people/community vs. nation-state,’ or ‘spiritual vs. material.’

The AKP (the ruling party of Turkey since 2002 under the leadership of Erdoğan), following the footsteps of *Milli Görüş* (National Outlook)¹⁰, represents a top-down Islamic modernism or reformism; the Hizmet movement represents the bottom-up *Tajdeed* (renewal) tradition of Islam. Thus, whereas the AKP’s engagement with modernity has been marked by the state-centered instrumentalist perspective, which explains its shifting position on democracy and relationship with the West (including the European Union or EU), the Hizmet movement’s engagement as a social actor with modernity has been consistent in terms of rejecting the discourse of ‘us vs. them’ at all levels of existing fault lines (*Islam vs. West, Turkish vs. Kurdish vs. Alevi, secular vs. religious, Central Anatolian vs. Coastal Turks, ‘White’ vs. ‘Black’ Turk*). For Erdoğan, the maximalist-instrumentalist understanding of democracy is ‘electoral democracy’; for Hizmet movement, democracy extends beyond the realm of election and primarily concerns the ‘realm of democratic governance’ in the post-election phase. Hence, the Hizmet movement has consistently championed universal democratic values, including the EU-democratization process, as foundational values of Islam, even though the movement has been facing a severe existential crisis since 2013.

¹⁰ It is an Islamist-oriented political movement initiated by former Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan in the late 1960s. It has shaped the ideology and practice of all center-right conservative Muslim political parties, including the AKP.

The Erdoğan regime deftly played the card of ‘democratic agenda’ with a pro-EU outlook, at least until 2012, primarily to ward off the threat of military intervention. Institutionalizing democracy was never a political goal for Erdoğan. For him, it was simply a survival strategy and a tool to acquire, consolidate, expand, and concentrate state power in his hands. It was to be abandoned once its purpose was achieved. Nothing signifies this outlook more than Erdoğan’s infamous statement: “*Democracy is like a streetcar. You get off when you have reached your destination.*”

On the other hand, for Gülen, democracy is a continuous civic value and process that creates conditions for individuals and citizens to live a moral, ethical, and spiritual life. Gülen's renowned assertion that there is "*no return from democracy*" is emblematic of this approach, suggesting that democracy is an ongoing journey rather than a static destination.

One of the implications of Gülen’s understanding of democracy as an endless civic value and process is that it shapes, contributes, and produces a generation of Muslims with high civic value, legal and ethical sensibilities, argumentative power, and a sense of social responsibility. Four factors accounted for a steady flow of ‘Black’ Turks, including Hizmet-inspired Muslim students, into the government services: (a) the decline of Kemalism and the development of ‘Muslim democracy,’ first under the Presidency of Turgut Özal (1980-1993) and later under the AKP leadership at least since 2002, a significant portion of conservative Muslims or ‘Black’ Turks started to perceive the Turkish state as belonging to them in a positive light. It is this growing sense of belongingness and identification with the Turkish state that a large number of religious-oriented Turkish students began to apply and appear in the government opportunity structure; (b) the success ratio of Hizmet-inspired educational institutions, mentoring institutes, and aspirants were high in the governmental jobs due to its high-quality secular education; (c) the need for ‘Muslim bureaucracy’ for the Erdoğan-led AKP regime, and (d) the non-hostile and non-discriminatory attitude of the AKP regime towards the Hizmet movement at least until 2010.

“It is this growing sense of belongingness and identification with the Turkish state that a large number of religious-oriented Turkish students began to apply and appear in the government opportunity structure.”

The presence of ethically oriented, Hizmet-inspired bureaucrats in sectors of the state administration, however, proved to be an obstacle for the Erdoğan regime, obstructing him from fully seizing power and using the apparatus of the state for his political agenda in the post-2010 Constitutional Referendum phase. The Erdoğan regime had tolerated the Hizmet movement for a decade for two specific reasons:

1. Until 2012, the notable presence of a relatively liberal Islamic faction within the AKP leadership prevented Erdoğan from taking action against the Movement, despite the National Security Council of Turkey's 2004 decision, signed by then Prime Minister Erdoğan and then Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül, officially designating the Hizmet movement as a 'security threat.'
2. An overall understanding within the AKP was that the 'soft power' of the Hizmet movement, its educational base, and its presence in the state institutions were instrumental for its political security as well as for the expansion of the regime's social base. The social base of the AKP and the Hizmet movement had converged, and Erdoğan himself graced some Hizmet events, including the Turkish Olympiads.

Erdoğan's Political Dreams and Hizmet as an Obstacle

The roots of Erdoğan's hatred towards Gülen and the Hizmet movement lie in the resurrection of his modernist Islamist desire. This encompasses his intense political desire to institutionalize himself as the founder of the "Second Republic," replacing Mustafa Kemal Atatürk as the central figure of the Turkish state or, at the very least, positioning himself as the 'Sole Spokesman' of a "Muslim Turkey"—akin to Atatürk's significance to 'Black' Turks—as well as the leader of the Muslim *umma*. With successive electoral victories since 2002 and the weakening of Kemalist-dominated military and judiciary and other anti-Islamic forces in state institutions, around 2010-2011, Erdoğan saw that the moment to shape Turkey in his vision had arrived, which birthed the idea of Executive Presidency in him. However, he saw that Hizmet was a significant obstacle to the realization of his idea of an Executive Presidency for the following reasons:

First, the discourse and actions of the Hizmet movement made Islam free of state control, which has significant implications for shaping Islam-mediated public opinion and subjecting governmental actions to democratic scrutiny. In the long run, this could lead to questions about the Islamic legitimacy of the Erdoğan regime. Second, Erdoğan deeply fears Gülen's Islamic pluralistic democratic idea as it was laying down the cultural foundation for the 'institutionalization of a framework for EU democracy in Turkey,' which, if it continued for a more extended period, would have threatened the idea of imagined unitary Turkish statism.

“... , around 2010-2011, Erdoğan saw that the moment to shape Turkey in his vision had arrived, which birthed the idea of *Executive Presidency* in him.

Third, the Hizmet movement has been advocating, at least since the mid-1980s, for liberalization of the Turkish government's control over all fields of human life: political, economic, educational, and cultural. This advocacy made the state feel insecure and fearful of losing control over civil society and the central governing institutions of the state. As civil society, democracy, and different governing bodies gained autonomy, the Turkish state grew increasingly alarmed and felt compelled to reaffirm its public dominance and regulate civil society movements and organizations, particularly evident during the 2013 Gezi Park protests and the subsequent corruption exposé.

Fourth, the issue of “elected vs. unelected” in Turkey has been one of the central contradictions in Turkish politics. In modern Turkey, unelected institutions such as the bureaucracy, military, and judiciary have traditionally enjoyed more power than the elected members of Parliament, the Prime Minister, and the President. This situation is partly due to the Kemalists working hard to strengthen the unelected institutions, given their inadequate electoral support. Moreover, the military and judiciary have too frequently intervened to either oust the religious-friendly elected government, ban political parties, or expel political leaders (mostly non-Kemalist, Muslim, or Kurdish), which sets a political tradition that what matters in Turkey is control over unelected institutions.

“...[the military and judiciary] sets a political tradition that what matters in Turkey is *control* over unelected institutions.

Hence, most social, religious, ethnic, ideological, and political groups in the Turkish setting have attempted to form their groupings within the state institutions to survive and wield societal influence. A section of the Hizmet movement attempted the same, too. The growing number of Hizmet sympathizers along with their presence in state institutions, sometimes exaggerated by detractors, proved counterproductive in the long run. It did arouse the distrust of the state vis a vis the Hizmet movement, besides helping the Erdoğan regime convince the people that a *parallel structure* existed, undermining the ‘loyalty to the Turkish state.’ Despite enjoying the support of over 50% of the population, the Erdoğan regime struggled hard to control the unelected bodies of the state.

Not surprisingly, Islamic parties and politicians, particularly Erdoğan, understand democracy in terms of the supremacy of “elected” over “unelected” bodies as well as the supremacy of the state over civil society. They have long sought to free themselves from Kemalist-dominated unelected bodies. The Erdoğan regime continues to derive its power from electoral legitimacy. Once the threat of the Kemalists, other non-religious secularists, and the military were diluted by the judicial trials of former Kemalist military officers and others in Ergenekon and Balyoz and the passing of the 2010 Constitutional Referendum, Erdoğan turned against the Hizmet movement, a faction that, in his view, had begun to behave like another “unelected” power. The more popular Erdoğan became, the more he resented Hizmet’s interference in the functioning of the government. The Erdoğan-led AKP faction felt the pressure of the “unelected” Hizmet movement over the elected AKP. Later, the ‘Gezi Park’ protests (May 2013) and the ‘corruption exposé’ (December 2013), along with the history of periodic military interventions in Turkey ousting the democratically elected government convinced him that ‘electoral security’ (even if it was close to or more than 50%, which Erdoğan was getting since 2007) does not guarantee ‘political security’ unless one concentrates all powers in one’s hand. The disputed military coup of July 2016 in Turkey and Erdoğan’s evolution into a ‘modern electoral Pharaoh’ largely stemmed from this shift in his political mindset and his endeavor to overcome his profound anxieties and insecurities in relation to others.

“The more popular Erdoğan became, the more he resented Hizmet’s interference in the functioning of the government.”

Last but not least, the Hizmet movement, with its ‘pluralistic democratic vision,’ has stood alone as a moral opposition to Erdoğan’s ‘Islam-nationalistic-majoritarian’ conception of democracy and his vision of an Executive Presidency. No other social or political entity has been able to present moral challenges to *Erdoğanism*.

The Modernist Extermination of the Hizmet Movement

It was these structural fears combined with Erdoğan’s control-freak nature and personalized understanding of politics that made him carry out a systematic elimination and complete delegitimization of the Hizmet movement, both as an “Islamic” and a “democratic” force. This political thinking warranted the physical elimination of the Movement from the public memory, in general, and from the memory of conservative practicing Turkish Muslims in particular. In other words, the emergence of *Erdoğanism* depended on the thorough delegitimization of the Hizmet movement as an Islamic democratic social movement. His vengeance against the Movement was also meant to *disempower* Muslim civil society to the extent that it should never dare to assert itself against the state again. In other words, he intended to finish the idea of Islamic democracy outside of elections. Muslim civil society would not question the Islamic or democratic legitimacy of a “Muslim” government. After 2012, the Erdoğan regime systematically planned, strategized, and clinically and methodologically moved against the Hizmet movement. It launched an aggressive smear campaign intending to delegitimize and tarnish the moral and ethical legitimacy of the Movement in the public perception. Calling Hizmet as a ‘parallel structure’¹¹, ‘Pennsylvania’¹², and ‘FETO’¹³, the

¹¹ Erdoğan targeted the Hizmet movement by labeling it a ‘parallel structure,’ which means that the Hizmet movement had established a governing structure parallel to the legitimate democratic state system headed by him, whose officials were loyal to Gülen rather than the Turkish state, which amounts to disloyalty to the Turkish Republic. Hence, for President Erdoğan, it became necessary to eliminate the ‘parallel structure’ to save the Turkish nation.

¹² A US state where Gülen resides. The frequent reference to Pennsylvania in Erdoğan’s speeches was meant to convey to the Turkish public that the USA, through Gülen, was trying to destabilize the Erdoğan government.

¹³ The term ‘FETO’ (Fethullah Terrorist Organization) is the official dysphemism for the Hizmet movement. While the Erdoğan regime frequently used the term FETO after the 2013 December Corruption exposé, the NSC officially declared FETO a terrorist outfit just two months before the July 2016 disputed military coup, empowering the state to arrest anyone by linking them to this fictitious entity.

regime projected the Movement as working against the ‘democratic, elected, legitimate Muslim government’ at the behest of the western powers.

“...structural fears combined with Erdoğan’s control-freak nature and personalized understanding of politics...made him carry out a systematic elimination and complete delegitimization of the Hizmet movement...”

Having succeeded in building a negative perception of the Hizmet movement in public perception, the Erdoğan regime resurrected the ‘Sèvres Syndrome’¹⁴ in Turkish national consciousness with various ‘controlled coup scenarios’, including the July 15, 2016 disputed military coup to project the Movement as ‘anti-national’, ‘traitor,’ and ‘terrorist’ in order to justify its illegal crackdown on the Hizmet movement. In this context, it may be noted that the Erdoğan regime even dropped the Ergenekon conspiracy-related charges in 2015 in an attempt to win over Kemalists, neo-nationalists, and other anti-religious forces. He even accepted the support of the ultra-right MHP and Perinçek’s ultra-left nationalist VP in his fight against the Hizmet movement. It is therefore not surprising that all other modernist, secular, and nationalist political outfits such as the CHP, MHP, and VP—as well as modernist Islamic and Islamist groups—have actively participated and cooperated with the government’s liquidation of the Hizmet movement, both socially and politically. Secularist and Islamist parties joined the National Unity Rally, held in the backdrop of the July 15, 2016 disputed military coup to ‘save’ Turkey and the Turkish state from ‘FETO.’ However, the government’s crackdown soon extended to all dissenting voices. The underlying reasons behind the active cooperation and support of the Erdoğan regime in liquidating the Hizmet movement were the shared vision and the complex, pragmatic interest.

¹⁴ It refers to collective Turkish trauma, which resulted from the defeat of Ottomans in the First World War, leading to the temporary occupation of many parts of Turkey by the European powers and the cessation of a vast amount of territories to European powers, principally France and Britain through the Sèvres Treaty of 1920. Though the Treaty of Lausanne (1923) replaced the Treaty of Sèvres under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, which established Turkey’s present geographical boundaries. The latter continues to haunt the Turkish memory in times of national crisis as most Turks believe that the globe, particularly the West, is conspiring to dismembered Turkey. According to research carried out in December 2016, 76% of Turks believe that outside powers, particularly the US, were ‘behind the terror of the PKK, ISIS, and FETO’ (Aydınlık, 2017).

See Hakkı Taş (2018), ‘The July 15 abortive coup and post-truth politics in Turkey’, Southeast European and Black Sea Studies, p. 8.

In terms of shared vision, they have had a similar modernist desire: reestablishing the supremacy of the Turkish state over civil society, which was, for them, appearing to be fading away under the spell of globalization, economic liberalization, and EU-directed democratization, sharing and accessing the state power and maintaining a ‘controlled’ civil society.

To this extent, the Kemalists and secularists welcomed the ‘authoritarian pushback’ of the Erdoğan regime. They feared that the institutionalization of EU-style democracy in Turkey, which was consistently championed by the Hizmet movement, would be detrimental to their ‘statist’ interests. With the liquidation of the Hizmet movement in 2012, democracy in Turkey could not return to its golden phase (2002-2012) of modern Turkish history—the very period when the Hizmet movement was considered by many including its critics as the most ‘dominant civil society actor’ in the Turkish public life. This circumstance, in part, explains why the ‘nation-state model of authoritarian governance,’ whose degree may vary from one period to another and from one regime to another, remained the most preferred mode of ruling in Turkey for most modernist elites—whether Kemalists, secularists, or Islamists.

“With the liquidation of the Hizmet movement in 2012, democracy in Turkey could not return to its *golden phase* (2002-2012) of modern Turkish history...”

Further, the anti-religious Kemalists and secularists joined the Erdoğan chorus against the Hizmet movement to secure three specific goals: (a) to wash away its legacy of military coups and to reinvent itself as representative of ‘real democracy’ before the Muslim masses; (b) it saw an opportunity to intensify the conflict between the two largest practicing Muslim communities and forces: the AKP and the Hizmet movement; thereby weakening the unity of conservative Muslim block (‘Black’ Turks), which might, in turn, bring them back in power; (c) it considered Hizmet movement more dangerous than the AKP for their survival. For them, Hizmet was primarily an intellectual force building an alternative vision of the nation and shaping people’s consciousness vis a vis the ‘Kemalist order’ through democratic means. This in part, explains why the secularists fully supported the ‘murder of democracy’ by the Erdoğan regime when the latter sought to criminalize and delegitimize the Hizmet movement and erase it from public memory. For them, it is easier to dislodge a political force, e.g., AKP in Turkey, from power either through a coup, election, or judiciary than dislodging an established idea and vision.

Besides, Perinçek's ultra-left nationalist group, VP, also targeted the Hizmet movement out of revenge feeling and hate discourse as the group held the Movement responsible for falsely implicating them in the Ergenekon and Balyoz cases and sending them to jail.

As with regard to non-AKP Islamists; they threw their complete support behind the Erdoğan regime's repressive measures against the Hizmet movement for five specific and pragmatic reasons:

1. The shared perspective in which Hizmet movement appeared for them primarily as Western or Israeli agent to weaken Turkey by spreading the modern Western ideas through their educational institutions;
2. They found 'soft Islamism' of Hizmet movement as the most critical obstacle for the creation of an imagined 'strong Islamic state or Islamist rule', which would make Turkey once again as the center of global power;
3. To demonstrate loyalty to the Erdoğan regime so as to win over the favor of the government and fill the economic, social and political space vacated due to the marginalization of Hizmet movement;
4. Due to the intense fear of reprisal and punitive action of the Erdoğan regime, if they were/are not being seen cooperating with government's pogrom against the Hizmet movement; and finally
5. With the decline and marginalization of liberal faction of AKP, the majority of staunch pro-Erdoğan AKP and other Islamist loyalists saw an excellent opportunity for their sons and daughters in taking up the lucrative jobs, which resulted from mass expulsion of Hizmet-inspired officials from all branches of Turkish state.

To facilitate this and to pack the bureaucracy with pro-Erdoğan loyalists, though not necessarily pro-AKP, the Erdoğan regime even removed the criterion of written examination. It filled up the resultant vacancies only through a dubious system of interviews.

“...it is easier to dislodge a political force, e.g., AKP in Turkey, from power either through a coup, election, or judiciary than dislodging an established idea and vision.”

The Isolation of the Hizmet Movement

What explains the complete isolation of the Hizmet movement in the post-2016 disputed military coup, from which it is yet to recover? Public sympathy towards the Movement remained at the lowest ebb to date despite its significant contribution to Turkish society. Several factors account for this isolation of the Hizmet movement in Turkey.


First, the Erdoğan regime is not only the heir of historically repressive state traditions, which enjoys a high degree of legitimacy among common Sunni Turkish Muslims; it is also endowed with popular, as well as Islamic, legitimacy (which Atatürk lacked). Moreover, his legacy of economic transformation of Turkey during the first decade of the twenty-first century continued to evoke a positive memory about him, particularly among the ‘Black’ Turks, a good number of whom witnessed ‘material prosperity’ along with ‘social justice’ vis a vis the ‘White’ Turks. The regime continued to be viewed as the protector of the ‘Black’ Turks’ interests against the domination of the ‘White’ Turks. Thus, whereas Atatürk’s repression against particular social, economic, or political groups lacked social support, Erdoğan’s repression against the Hizmet movement was also backed by popular support.

“The [Erdoğan] regime continued to be viewed as the protector of the ‘Black’ Turks’ interests against the domination of the ‘White’ Turks.”

Second, it was accurate that easy access to the corridors of state power gave some Hizmet members the idea that the Movement must “guide” the AKP on everyday governing affairs. Some of the Hizmet volunteers in the leadership role assumed the role of “vanguard.” They became too nationalist—or even neo-Ottomanist—as they hoped to protect the “Muslim government” from the Kemalist ‘deep state’ and make ‘Muslim Turkey’ a strong player in world affairs.

In this role, a faction within Hizmet, predominantly active within state institutions, expanded the scope of the Hizmet movement beyond its original role by applying Gülen’s concept of “Quranic Rationality Guidance” (*Kur’an-ı Makuliyet*) to the state domain, previously limited to civil society. This expansion resulted in two unintended consequences.

First, this development blurred the ideational distinction between the Erdoğan-led AKP regime and the Hizmet movement in the public imagination: both were seen as part of a singular discourse, sharing the discourse of Islam, modernity, and development with elements of Islamism, Ottomanism, patriotism, and nationalism. Second, the Hizmet movement was seen as a ‘social partner’ of the Erdoğan regime.

 ...the Hizmet movement was seen as a ‘social partner’ of the Erdoğan regime.

The failure to categorically separate its postmodern ideological leaning, identity, and discourse vis a vis the Erdoğan regime, on one hand, and its pro-state outlook, on the other hand, put the Hizmet movement in a ‘state of flux,’ wherein its ‘moral opposition’ and emerging differences with Erdoğan regime were seen as ‘great betrayal’ to the ‘Muslim government’ among common religious Turkish Muslim masses, which in turn allowed the Erdoğan regime to give a serious blow to the Hizmet movement without inviting any significant opposition or even criticism from the Turkish society.

Given the tradition of ‘hero worship’ or ‘strongman syndrome’ and the state being the most dominant identity of Turkish people, rather constitutive of Turkish life and in combination with Erdoğan’s charisma, at least among the ‘Black’ Turks, it is not difficult to visualize that the Erdoğan regime ‘temporarily’ succeeded in transforming the image of Hizmet movement from a ‘modern, Islamic, educational, and social reformist-nationalist movement’ to one of a discrete organization working against to weaken the Turkish state, community, society, and nation from within on behest of the West, which deserve no place in the society. The significant lack of transparency in the decision-making structure of the Hizmet movement that developed under Turkey’s surveillance-state also contributed to its ‘discrete image.’ As the Erdoğan regime gradually filled the critical positions in the bureaucracy, police, judiciary, intelligence, military, and other departments of the state with his loyalists—the process of which significantly increased in the post-2010 Constitutional Amendment—there were enough ‘blind’ state officials and ‘yes-men’ to execute the draconian measures and actions of the Erdoğan regime against the Hizmet movement.

Can the Hizmet Movement be revived in Turkey?

Even though the Hizmet movement is currently experiencing a high degree of isolation in Turkish society, if not abroad, it may not last long. The Erdogan regime has intent but lacks capacity to completely wipe out the Movement. Hizmet has huge social capital to connect with conservative Turkish Muslims and other social groups with President Erdoğan's and AKP's political decline. AKP may not survive for long as its political existence is tied to a patron-client relationship that can only be sustained through continuous monopolization of the state power—a feat that is impossible to achieve permanently. On the other hand, Hizmet, being a faith-inspired movement, operates on the principle of 'altruistic bonds' and can revive or reinvent itself with or without the state support.

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