



Education as Nonviolent Resistance: Oral Histories from the Hizmet Movement

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Oral Histories from the Hizmet Movement

Kari L. O'Rourke

Abstract

This paper presents an oral history of Hizmet educators and students, whose professional and personal lives were profoundly disrupted by the post-2016 political repression in Turkey. Drawing on first-person testimonies, the research illuminates the lived experiences of individuals who endured imprisonment, exile, dismissal, and social ostracism—what has been described as a form of civil death. Through narratives of resilience, vocational devotion, and ethical commitment, the study examines how educators maintained their pedagogical and spiritual mission amid systemic repression. The research situates these personal accounts within the broader historical and cultural context of Turkish education, highlighting the intersection of faith, civic engagement, and pedagogy. By documenting counter-narratives to state-sponsored erasure, the study highlights the transformative power of storytelling as both a form of resistance and a moral witness. These oral histories provide critical insight into the consequences of authoritarianism on education, the fragility of academic freedom, and the enduring human capacity for resilience and advocacy.

Keywords: *Fethullah Gülen, Hizmet Movement, nonviolent resistance, civil death, political repression, oral history, education*

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1. Introduction: Listening with the Ear of the Heart

When I was growing up in my Irish Catholic family, we had a saint and a proverb for every occasion. My Confirmation saint is *Brigid of Kildare*, known as the patroness of learning. I often recalled her guiding light when I struggled to follow directions or complete an assigned task as I struggled through school.

My grandmother would remind me, “Kari Lynn, you know, the second kick of the mule is never educational,” when I would stubbornly refuse to accept the lessons life dealt me. Her wisdom, framed in humor, cautioned me against repeating my mistakes—and, in a broader sense, against ignoring the moral lessons embedded in experience.

As a historian and educator, I cannot separate these early lessons from the work I undertake now. My cultural heritage, religious background, and moral formation shape how I approach history and how I listen to the voices of others. The process of writing, as I have come to understand it, is not merely a technical act of scholarship but an ethical one. It requires, as the Prologue to the *Rule of Saint Benedict* teaches, that we “listen with the ear of the heart.”¹

This commitment to moral listening underpins my research on the Hizmet Movement (also known as the Gülen Movement) and the lived experiences of its educators and students, who have endured what can be described as a form of *civil death* imposed by the state upon a faith-inspired community of educators and learners. In seeking to amplify their voices, I am also engaging with the echoes of history—how patterns of repression and resistance repeat across generations. My grandmother’s words come to mind again: the second kick of the mule. Have we learned from our past, or are we condemned to repeat it under new names and flags?

“...the *Hizmet Movement* (also known as the *Gülen Movement*) and the lived experiences of its educators and students,...have endured what can be described as a form of *civil death* imposed by the [*Turkish*] state...”

¹ Saint Benedict (Abbot of Monte Cassino), and Timothy Fry, RB 1980: *The Rule of St. Benedict in English* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1982).

1.1 A Moral and Scholarly Commitment

My motivation for this research stems from a life shaped by faith and advocacy—from my Roman Catholic upbringing to my time in the *Catholic Worker Movement*, and now as a member of the Episcopal Church. Each of these communities impressed upon me the responsibility to stand with the marginalized and to seek truth even when truth is inconvenient to power.

The Hizmet educators and students whose stories appear in this work have lived through immense injustice: the closure of schools and universities, mass arrests, exile, and the silencing of their moral and professional identities. In some instances, family members have shared their stories because their struggle was so great that survival was not possible. Their experiences echo historical patterns of repression where education becomes a battleground for ideology and control. However, their resilience—the way they have rebuilt schools abroad, continued to teach, and carried their vocation into new lands—reveals an extraordinary testament to the enduring spirit of service (*hizmet* in Turkish).

“...[*Hizmet educators’ and students*] resilience—the way they have rebuilt schools abroad, continued to teach, and carried their vocation into new lands—reveals an extraordinary testament to the enduring spirit of service (*hizmet* in Turkish).”

This oral history is therefore both scholarly and testimonial. It seeks to illuminate how the ideals of education, compassion, and civic engagement—central to the Hizmet Movement—have endured and evolved under conditions of exile. It also invites reflection on how education itself can become a form of nonviolent resistance, a means of sustaining identity, dignity, and peace.

1.2 Purpose and Scope

The purpose of this research is to illuminate the stories of Hizmet educators and students within the historical context of Turkish education and the ongoing *civil death* of the Hizmet community.

The *Hizmet People* are followers of the Hizmet Movement, founded by the late Fethullah Gülen, a Turkish Islamic scholar whose teachings emphasized moral education, dialogue, and service to humanity.²

In this context, *civil death* refers to the political and social eradication of a community based on its religious and civic affiliations. Thousands of educators, students, and professionals have been dismissed, imprisoned, or forced into exile since 2016, with profound consequences for education in Turkey and beyond. The loss of these teachers and institutions represents not only a national but also a global tragedy, diminishing the intellectual and ethical capital that sustains societies.

Yunus Yıldız and Serdar Dayan describe Hizmet teachers as “working like diplomats overseas”—building peace bridges through education while embodying the best of Turkic/Turkish culture.³ Their stories affirm that education, when grounded in ethical purpose, transcends political boundaries.

In the next chapter, this study, therefore, aims to:

1. Illuminate the evolution of Hizmet pedagogical practice within the historical framework of Turkish education,
2. Examine how Gülen’s educational philosophy has shaped the practice and identity of Hizmet educators, and
3. Connect the stories of Hizmet educators to broader pedagogical traditions within Turkic/Turkish culture and global educational thought.⁴

“Thousands of educators, students, and professionals have been dismissed, imprisoned, or forced into exile since 2016...”

² Sabine Dreher, “What Is the Hizmet Movement? Contending Approaches to the Analysis of Religious Activists in World Politics,” *Sociology of Islam* 1, no. 3-4 (2014): 257-275; Helen Rose Ebaugh, *The Gülen Movement: A Sociological Analysis of a Civic Movement Rooted in Moderate Islam*, Springer Science & Business Media (2009).

Fethullah Gülen passed away on October 20, 2024, in Pennsylvania, USA, at age 83.

³ Yunus Yıldız and Serdar Dayan, “A Tiny Look at Hizmet (Service) Movement Teachers’ Diplomatic Mission,” *International Journal of Social Science Research and Review* 5, no. 6 (2022): 188.

⁴ Thomas Michel, *Peace and Dialogue in a Plural Society: Contributions of the Hizmet Movement at a Time of Global Tensions* (Clifton, NJ: Blue Dome Press, 2014); Muhammed M. Akdag, “The Roots of Fethullah Gülen’s Theory of Education and the Role of the Educator,” *Hizmet Studies Review* 2, no. 3 (Spring 2015): 55-70.

1.3 Methodology, Testimony, and the Human Cost of Repression

The aftermath of the July 15, 2016, coup attempt in Turkey unleashed a profound wave of political repression, targeting not only those accused of participation but also a broad spectrum of educators, civil servants, journalists, and ordinary citizens affiliated with the Hizmet Movement. This research draws on both narrative inquiry and visual ethnography, combining first-person testimonies with curated artifacts to document the human stories that state narratives sought to erase.

1.3.1 Methodology and Ethical Positionality

The methodology employed integrates ethnographic documentation, oral history, and curatorial practice. Material artifacts—letters, drawings, and personal belongings—were gathered through trusted networks, including diaspora communities and organizations such as *Advocates of Silenced Turkey* (AST). These items, curated in the *Un-Muted* exhibit, serve as both research materials and moral archives, transforming private grief into public testimony that bears witness to the human stories of Hizmet sympathizers.

As a researcher-curator, I navigate the dual responsibilities of ethical documentation and empathetic representation. Reflexivity is crucial: engaging with survivors' narratives requires recognizing both the proximity and the potential power imbalance inherent in recording trauma. Consent, anonymization where necessary, and the protection of vulnerable participants guide all interactions, ensuring that testimony amplifies voices without further exposing them to harm.

“The aftermath of the July 15, 2016, coup attempt in Turkey unleashed a profound wave of *political repression*, targeting...a broad spectrum of *educators, civil servants, journalists*, and *ordinary citizens* affiliated with the *Hizmet Movement*.”

1.3.2 Narratives of Survival and Sacrifice

The stories collected illuminate the human cost of authoritarian policies and the courage required to resist being silenced.

Melek and Furkan Çetinkaya: Furkan, a young cadet, was wrongfully imprisoned after the alleged coup. His mother, Melek, became a tireless advocate, enduring repeated arrests to fight for his release. Even in exile, she continues to speak out, embodying resilience and moral courage.

Mina Leyla: An exiled journalist, Leyla documents the stories of those silenced in Turkey and preserves collective memory through her writing. Her work transforms narrative into resistance, giving voice to the voiceless.

Gökhan Açikkollu: A history teacher tortured to death in detention, Açikkollu's story exemplifies the lethal consequences of state repression. His life and death serve as a moral and historical testament against injustice.

Ub: A historian dismissed and prosecuted after the 2016 purges, *Ub* lost his career and livelihood, but not his conviction. Awaiting justice, he continues to find meaning in history itself—his perseverance a quiet defiance against enforced silence.

Ha: A university instructor imprisoned for over five years, *Ha* turned her creativity into a means of survival, crafting jewelry from discarded materials. Her post-release work continues to reflect her endurance, agency, and dignity in the face of oppression.

Bre: Forced into exile after her university's closure, *Bre* rebuilt her life through education, turning loss into purpose. Now a psychotherapist, she channels her experience into helping others heal from trauma and displacement.

1.3.3 Exhibit as Ethical and Narrative Framework

The *Un-Muted* exhibit integrates these testimonies and artifacts into a curated space of witness. Each object—be it a cadet's uniform, a handwritten letter, or a piece of handmade jewelry—serves as an ethical medium through which the lives of victims are preserved and communicated. By combining oral histories with visual and material documentation, the exhibit transcends conventional academic methods, positioning the audience as witness and participant in the stories of survival, sacrifice, and resistance.

 **The *Un-Muted* exhibit integrates these testimonies and artifacts into a curated space of witness.**

1.3.4 Testimony as Resistance

Across narratives, a recurring theme emerges: testimony is itself an act of moral resistance. From mothers advocating for imprisoned children to journalists preserving collective memory, from teachers who survive torture to educators crafting beauty from despair, each story asserts human dignity against systemic efforts to erase identity. These accounts do more than illuminate the human cost of political persecution—they provide a roadmap for understanding resilience, ethical agency, and the power of witness in contexts of extreme repression.

In some cases, these accounts were translated from Turkish to English by bilingual members of the Hizmet community and corroborated by professional interpreters. Additional documentation, including archival materials, provides contextual support. The process of gathering oral history is, by nature, an act of moral interpretation. “Memory,” as Toni Morrison observed, “is a form of willed creation.”⁵ To listen to memory is to acknowledge that truth is lived and experienced, not merely recorded.⁶ The oral historian, then, transforms spoken truth into written word “with a measure of integrity,” honoring both the storyteller’s experience and the scholar’s responsibility to context.⁷

1.4 Historical Research and the Question of Truth

History, as many scholars have noted, is not a neutral record of facts but an interpretive narrative shaped by perspective and power. Carl Becker wrote that “the event itself, the facts, do not say anything...it is the historian who speaks, who imposes a meaning.”⁸ Kate Rousmaniere adds that historians inevitably write from within their own subjectivity—selecting, omitting, and interpreting based on values and purpose.⁹

⁵ Toni Morrison, “Memory, Creation, and Writing,” *Thought* 59, no. 235 (1984): 385-390.

⁶ Alessandro Portelli, “Living Voices: The Oral History Interview as Dialogue and Experience,” *The Oral History Review* (2019): 239-248.

⁷ Linda Shopes, “Editing Oral History for Publication,” *Oral History Forum d’histoire orale*, 31 (2011): 3.

⁸ Carl L. Becker, “What Are Historical Facts?” *The Western Political Quarterly* 8, no. 3 (1955): 335.

⁹ Kate Rousmaniere, “Historical Research,” in *Foundations for Research: Methods of Inquiry in Education and the Social Sciences*, Eds. Kathleen B. deMarrais and Stephen D. Lapan (Routledge, 2003): 32.

In Turkey, the positionality of dominance—whether political, religious, or nationalistic—has long influenced the construction of educational history. The curriculum of the Republic, secular in principle yet ideological in practice, has alternated between Westernization and religious control, often silencing dissent and erasing alternative narratives.¹⁰ The repression of the Hizmet Movement is thus not an anomaly but part of a broader historical pattern where power seeks to define what counts as truth.^{11 12}

 **Additional documentation, including archival materials, provides contextual support.**

1.5 Research Question and Rationale

The central question guides this inquiry:

What shaped the evolution of Gülen-inspired educational philosophy and practice in Turkey and its transnational contexts between 1970 and 2023?

This question anchors the analysis in both historical evolution and lived experience. It enables an examination of how political repression influenced the Movement's global expansion and how displaced educators have reimagined Gülen-inspired pedagogy in new cultural contexts.¹³

The rationale for this research lies in its potential to offer a counter-narrative. This morally grounded account restores dignity to those whose voices were previously silenced and deepens our understanding of the complex relationship between education, power, and conscience.

¹⁰ E. Fuat Keyman, "Modernity, Secularism and Islam: The Case of Turkey," *Theory, Culture & Society* 24, no. 2 (2007): 215-234.

¹¹ Dilaver Arıkan Açar, and İnan Rüma. "External Pressure and Turkish Discourse on 'Recognition of the Armenian Genocide'," *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 7, no. 3 (2007): 449-465.

¹² James L. Crawford, "The Continued Persecution of the Kurdish People in Turkey," *American Indian Law Review* 45, no. 2 (2020).

¹³ Volkan Cicek, Riza Ulker, and Bulent Tarman, "Comparison of Character Education in US and Turkish Educational Systems: Globalizing American Education System," *Energy Education Science and Technology Part B: Social and Educational Studies* 4, no. 3 (2012): 1311-1322.

“The repression of the Hizmet Movement is thus *not an anomaly* but part of a *broader historical pattern* where power seeks to *define* what counts as *truth*.”

1.6 The Case for Historical Research

“To the victor belong the spoils of the enemy.”¹⁴ This adage encapsulates the dilemma of history as written by dominance. For much of modern history, the victors have defined truth and silenced the defeated. However, digital media, oral testimony, and independent scholarship now enable the democratization of memory—spaces where silenced voices can finally be heard.

Historical research, when grounded in ethics and empathy, becomes a form of justice. It allows us to reassemble fragments of memory into coherent witness and to resist the erasure of entire communities from the human story. In this spirit, the following chapters weave together personal testimonies, historical context, and moral reflection to illuminate not only what happened to Hizmet educators but what their endurance reveals about the universal struggle for truth, education, and peace.

1.7 Overview of the Chapters

The next chapter traces the intellectual and spiritual roots of the Hizmet Movement, exploring how its educational philosophy evolved within and beyond Turkey. It examines the synthesis of Islamic ethics, modern science, and civic engagement that has defined Hizmet education globally.

Subsequent chapters bring forward the lived experiences of educators, students, and families—stories of courage, exile, and the unwavering belief that education remains one of the most potent forms of nonviolent resistance.

¹⁴ This quote is attributed to William Marcy, a New York politician, who was speaking in the Senate in 1832 regarding Martin Van Buren’s appointment as Minister to England. However, it is likely he was repeating a colloquial idiom of the day derived from a Latin phrase *victori sunt spolia* which was common among Roman soldiers. It was later depicted in a political cartoon in Harper’s Weekly as In Memoriam—Our Civil Service as It Was, April, 28, 1877, page 325, LC-USZ62-89864.

2. The Gülen Movement in Turkey and Abroad

2.1 The Gülen Movement

The Gülen Movement, also known as the Hizmet Movement¹⁵, is a faith-inspired civil society that lacks a central structure, meaning it exists but cannot be recognized through the typical characteristics of a not-for-profit organization or business.¹⁶ Its members follow the teachings of a Turkish Islamic scholar and educator, Fethullah Gülen, who lived as a reclusive exile in the United States from 1999 until his passing on October 20, 2024.¹⁷

In the Prologue to her book, Helen Rose Ebaugh described the Gülen Movement as a place “where the moderate Muslim voice could be heard to counter the radical Islam that is continuously presented in the U.S. media. The Gülen Movement is one example of modern Islam that stands in opposition to much of what is presented in the media.”¹⁸ The publication date, 2009, of the Ebaugh book is significant because it was released before the collapse of the relationship between the Hizmet sympathizers and the Erdoğan regime in Turkey. The date also has relevance in the U.S. because of the trend in Islamophobic rhetoric with post-9/11 media representations of extremists as the face of all Muslims.¹⁹ In this current Islamophobic milieu, it is often difficult for the moderate Muslim voice to be heard over the clamor of extremism; however, as Ebaugh points out, the Hizmet sympathizers are steadfast.

“In this current *Islamophobic milieu*, it is often difficult for the *moderate Muslim voice* to be heard over the *clamor of extremism*; however,... the *Hizmet sympathizers* are *steadfast*.”

¹⁵ The terms Gülen Movement and the Hizmet Movement are used interchangeably in this document.

¹⁶ Jenny Norton and Cagil Kasapoglu, “Turkey’s Post-Coup Crackdown Hits’ Gülen Schools’ Worldwide,” BBC, September 23, 2016.

¹⁷ Tim Franks, “Fethullah Gülen: Powerful but Reclusive Turkish Cleric,” BBC, January 27, 2014.

¹⁸ Helen Rose Ebaugh, *The Gülen Movement: A Sociological Analysis of a Civic Movement Rooted in Moderate Islam* (Springer Science & Business Media, 2009), xi.

¹⁹ Christine Ogan, Lars Willnat, Rosemary Pennington, & Manaf Bashir, “The Rise of Anti-Muslim Prejudice: Media and Islamophobia in Europe and the United States,” *International Communication Gazette*, 76 no. 1 (2014): 27–46.

It is likely true that Fethullah Gülen was initially unaware of what his ideas and ideals would become when he entered religious ministry. As a humble man, he most certainly rejects the notion that he is a modern-day prophet, even though he speaks the truth that the dominant political leaders do not want to hear and calls ordinary people to fully live an authentic expression of faith, which is precisely what prophets do. In retrospect, it is evident that Gülen was destined for this role, unaware of his future significance. He was, essentially, home-schooled after his third year of elementary school. His father was an Imam and a Qur'anic scholar, and his mother was a community service volunteer. His parents frequently invited people into their home for discussions and debates on religious philosophy and political ideology. He was immersed in service-oriented theology at a very early age. He became an Imam, a preacher, who theorized that the world could be a better place if we invested in education, healthcare, and social services. In other words, he built the Movement by preaching and practicing a message that calls for a life committed to the common good of all humanity.²⁰

The Gülen Movement, as a civil societal foundation, aims to challenge the discourse of conflict and embody the idea of dialogue as a means to embrace social and cultural diversity, thereby achieving harmony in the world.²¹ Scholars and observers must view the significance of the Gülen Movement in the context of its existence. Fethullah Gülen began his work in the 1960s at a time when Western culture was embroiled in the *Civil Rights Movement* and contemporary modern culture was awakening to issues of justice in the pursuit of peace. Gülen's civil society seeks to foster a world in which diverse cultures coexist harmoniously through dialogue and mutual understanding. A summation of this philosophy is woven into the Journalists and Writers Foundation's mission statement, which was organized around the leadership of Gülen:

“The Gülen Movement, as a *civil societal foundation*, aims to challenge the discourse of *conflict* and embody the idea of *dialogue* as a means to embrace *social* and *cultural diversity*, thereby achieving *harmony* in the world.”

²⁰ Muhammed Çetin, “Reductionist Approaches to the Rise and Aims of the Gülen Movement,” *Islam in the Age of Global Challenges: Alternative Perspectives of the Gülen Movement* (Washington, DC: Rumi Forum, 2008), 73-113.

²¹ Talip Kucukcan, “Social and Spiritual Capital of the Gülen Movement,” *Muslim World in Transition: Contributions of the Gülen Movement* (International Gülen Conference Proceedings, London, 2007), 25-27.

The modern world will be shaped by systems and approaches which cherish universal values which consider affection, tolerance, understanding and unification as basics; which consider Man (Humanity) as a universe and cherish Him (Humanity) accordingly; which see life only as a race of merits; which prefer to overcome all hostilities, hatred and wrath by friendship, tolerance and reconciliation; which undertake the mission of delivering culture and knowledge for the benefit of humanity; which can create a balance between the individual and the society without sacrificing one for the other; which have a great vision without falling into the trap of utopias and without leaving realities aside; which believe in the merit of keeping determinant factors such as religion, language, and race free from any compulsory pressure; and which evaluate superiority as a sublimation to human merit... Ours is only a modest contribution, but the peace of our hearts and consciences depends on it.

— The Journalists and Writers Foundation’s Mission Statement, formulated from an address given by Fethullah Gülen in 1997.²²

The Journalists and Writers Foundation (JWF) organization continues to operate as an independent 501(c) (3) entity in the United States and Europe. Its stated purpose is “Working for Universal Peace,” and its honorary president is Fethullah Gülen. Its vision statement continues to include a dedication to developing a culture of peace and to respecting human rights through sustainable development. JWF continues to promote diversity and inclusion through social engagement, knowledge sharing, and building partnerships focused on driving positive social change.²³

2.2 The Philosophy of Nursi

Spirituality is not a common element in the narrative of Islamic beliefs, except for Sufism, which is the mystical tradition within Islam. When one reads any of Gülen’s philosophical teachings, the Sufic influence of Said Nursi is clearly evident in his writings.²⁴

²² Mucahit Bilici, “The Fethullah Gülen Movement and its Politics of Representation in Turkey,” *The Muslim World* 96, no. 1 (2006): 2.

²³ “About JWF,” Journalists and Writers Foundation website, <https://jwf.org/about-jwf/>

²⁴ Thomas Michel, “Sufism and Modernity in the Thought of Fethullah Gülen,” *The Muslim World* 95, no. 3 (2005): 341.

The influence of the Said Nursi appears throughout Gülen’s teachings and is a synthesis of Islam and science; an acceptance of democracy as the best form of government within the rule of law; raising the level of Islamic consciousness by indicating the connection between reason and revelation; and achieving this-worldly and other-worldly salvation within a free market and through quality education.²⁵ In the case of Nursi reading circles, the core topic of discussion was how to respond to the demands of the modern world with Islamic knowledge, thereby making Islam compatible with modernity.²⁶ Nursi’s philosophy conflicted with Turkey’s efforts to present itself as a modern, Western-style nation, since those efforts often required suppressing visible expressions of Islam in public life. This philosophical conflict has waxed and waned, first with movement toward secularization and then away from it. These secularization efforts minimized Islam in the public sphere as a means of appearing to be a modernized nation.²⁷ With the Erdoğan regime, Islam has re-entered the social agenda and now permeates Turkic polity and culture; but, in so doing, the nation has lost its identity as the embodiment of moderate Islam with the rise of authoritarianism.²⁸

“When one reads any of *Gülen’s philosophical teachings, the Sufic influence of Said Nursi is clearly evident in his writings.*”

2.3 The Poetry of Rumi

An influence on Gülen’s spiritual development is the poetry of Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Rūmī (1207–1273), which is grounded in a worldview centered on a profound vision of the universe emanating from love. “Rumi listens to the praise uttered by the flowers and all other creatures but also visualizes them in the various positions of prayer.”²⁹

²⁵ Helen Rose Ebaugh, *The Gülen Movement: A Sociological Analysis of a Civic Movement Rooted in Moderate Islam* (Springer Science & Business Media, 2009), 25.

²⁶ Mustafa Tuna, “At the Vanguard of Contemporary Muslim Thought: Reading Said Nursi into the Islamic Tradition,” *Journal of Islamic Studies* 28, no. 3 (2017): 311-340.

²⁷ Suleyman Celenk, “Secularization Process in the History of Turkish Education,” *Journal of Social Sciences* 19, no. 2 (2009): 101-108.

²⁸ Cengiz Aktar, “Turkish Political Islam’s Failure,” *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 45, no. 4 (2019): 493-502; Ergun Özbudun, “Turkey’s Judiciary and the Drift Toward Competitive Authoritarianism,” *The International Spectator* 50, no. 2 (2015): 42-55.

²⁹ Ibrahim Ozdemir, “Creative Love and Nature, Mevlana Jalal al-Din Rumi,” *Interreligious Insight* 4, no. 2 (2006): 3.

This intense respect for creation is the cornerstone of Gülen's belief in peaceful coexistence that leads to the continuous improvement of a better world. This strong belief is a core value in Hizmet education practices.³⁰ In the face of the secularization movement within Turkey, Gülen seemingly overcame the push for modernity and reconciled the conflict it created within his core beliefs. His followers remained true to their strong Islamic roots with an overlay of love in response to the world's issues. Gülen combined his understanding and embodiment of Nursi's philosophy with Rumi's poetry, and what emerged was an Islamic spirituality that generated a worldwide movement.

In Rumi's philosophy, human dignity and social justice are central to a worldview in which human rights are defended for all people and humanity works in harmony for prosperity and equity in governance.³¹ This philosophy of Rumi is the quintessential essence of Gülen's ideology, passed through his teachings to the followers of Hizmet. Rumi's writings, together with the works of other Islamic luminaries, influenced Gülen and the Movement's vision and priorities, setting a high standard for followers and expecting them to live it out because it is the right thing to do.³² The Gülen Movement conveys a message of tolerance and kindness that envisions change, with a ripple effect felt worldwide. The Gülen Movement has established a vast network of connections worldwide, with schools and institutions in at least 72 countries, making its global presence undeniable.³³ The author, Ian Williams, refers to the influence of the Gülen Movement beyond the borders of Turkey as "global ummah," which is an Arabic concept for the global community.³⁴

“Rumi’s writings, ..., influenced Gülen and the Movement’s vision and priorities, setting a high standard for followers and expecting them to live it out because it is the right thing to do.”

³⁰ Muhammed M. Akdag, "The Roots of Fethullah Gülen's Theory of Education and the Role of the Educator," *Hizmet Studies Review* 2, no. 3 (Spring 2015): 55-70.

³¹ Ergin Ergül, "Rumi and His Holistic Human Rights Theory," *Daily Sabah*, December 11, 2018.

³² Loye Ashton and Tamer Balci, "A Contextual Analysis of the Supporters and Critics of the Gülen/Hizmet Movement," *Islam in the Age of Global Challenges: Alternative Perspectives of the Gülen Movement* (Washington, DC: Rumi Forum, 2008), 73-113.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Ian Williams, "A Movement in Counter-Point: The Significance of the Fethullah Gülen Movement as a Global Educational and Inter-Religious Model of Social and Religious Change - a UK Perspective," *Islam in the Age of Global Challenges: Alternative Perspectives of the Gülen Movement* (Washington DC: Rumi Forum, November 2008), 782-806.

2.4 Gülen's Philosophy and Pedagogy

A top priority of the Gülen Movement is education as a means of liberation from poverty and global conflicts of culture and civilization. Hizmet educators employ a curriculum designed to lead students to higher functioning in modern society, in balance with a moral code that promotes peaceful conflict resolution, interfaith dialogue, and cooperation.³⁵ In his own words, Gülen describes what he believes is the difference between an educator, which he refers to as a “true teacher,” and a teacher:

“Education is different from teaching. Most people can teach, but only a very few can educate... True teachers sow the pure seed and preserve it. They occupy themselves with what is good and wholesome, and lead and guide the children through life and whatever events they may encounter.” For Hizmet educators, teaching is a sacred activity, and working to help students experience positive change is a teacher's “foremost duty.”³⁶

“*Education* is different from *teaching*. Most people can teach, but only a very few can educate... *True teachers* sow the pure seed and preserve it.”

Through the workings of the *Hizmet People*, Gülen seeks to build a more peaceful and tolerant world through education and dialogue. The cornerstone of Hizmet pedagogy is respect for the value and dignity of human persons.³⁷ This is the quintessential embodiment of culturally responsive teaching practice in Hizmet-led classrooms because they believe God created each student for a purpose, and it is the teacher's responsibility to unveil the mystery of that purpose to the child. The pedagogy of the Hizmet educators is expressed in Gülen's philosophy:³⁸

³⁵ Inez Schippers, “Connecting Civilizations? The Gülen Movement in the United States,” (Master's thesis, Utrecht University, 2009).

³⁶ Fethullah Gülen, *Toward a Global Civilization of Love and Tolerance* (New Jersey: The Light Inc., 2004), 208.

³⁷ Kaya Ibrahim, “Hizmet Educational Philosophy in the Example of a Hizmet-Inspired School; Hayskolen: Could Hizmet Educational Philosophy Be an Alternative Solution to Criminality and Radicalism Among Immigrant-Origin Youths?” Master's thesis (Uppsala University, 2016).

³⁸ Fethullah Gülen, “Our Philosophy of Education (I),” in *A Fethullah Gülen Reader So That Others May Live*, 1979, 117-118.

For a school is a vital laboratory of the future, its courses are the portions of life, and its teachers are the heroic masters of healing...A good school is like a pavilion full of angels: It develops individual virtues and guides its students toward the dignity of their spirit. At a good school, children learn the mysteries of the self and realize their potential...The true teacher cultivates and sows the seeds of virtue. S/He is attentive to that which is good and wholesome. S/He sets goals for students and offers them direction amid life's vicissitudes...School introduces us to a lifetime of study. In this respect, our education influences every part of our lives.

“[The true teacher] is attentive to that which is good and wholesome, [who] sets goals for the students and offers them direction in the face of life’s vicissitudes.”

This philosophy, under Gülen’s leadership, has led the Hizmet Movement to develop a vast network of schools worldwide.³⁹ This network of schools is now under serious threat of collapse. All schools in Turkey affiliated with Hizmet have been closed. In 2015, the Turkish government hired London-based Amsterdam and Partners, LLP, “to expose allegedly unlawful conduct by the Gülen network worldwide.”⁴⁰ In the Reuters article, Robert Amsterdam, the founding partner of the law firm, stated “We’re going to look into their activities throughout the United States, Africa and other regions where the network is active.”⁴¹ These investigations have been very effective in closing international schools and aiding the Turkish Intelligence Organization (MIT) in the return (abduction and kidnapping) of Hizmet educators and administrators to Turkey to face charges and be detained in Turkish prisons.⁴²

³⁹ Ahmet Erdi Öztürk, “The Repertoire of Extraterritorial Repression: Diasporas and Home States,” *Migration Letters* 17, no. 1 (2020): 59-69.

⁴⁰ Humeyra Pamuk, “Turkish Government Hires UK Law Firm to Probe Cleric’s Global Network,” *Reuters*. (October 26, 2015).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Advocates of Silenced Turkey*, “Beyond Turkey’s Borders: Unveiling Global Purge, Translational Repression, Abductions,” ed./trans. by Youssef Harvey. 2023.

2.5 Who are the “Hizmet People?”

The word “hizmet” in Turkish means “service” and carries deep meaning in Turkish Islamic vernacular. Bilici describes the term as having a “sacred aura in Turkish culture.”⁴³ Those who subscribe to the teachings of Gülen are what I will refer to in this study as the “Hizmet People.” The people themselves do not refer to themselves as Hizmet, as it is a way of life and an expression of faith, rather than a title or a formal organizational membership. For these people, the word Hizmet is a verb and a way of life, embodying their understanding of a more authentic approach to following Islam.⁴⁴ Nonetheless, this group of people has been branded as terrorists in their homeland by the Erdoğan regime and are experiencing the severest of penalties for their religious expression and political way of life.⁴⁵

“The word “hizmet” in Turkish means “service” and carries deep meaning in Turkish Islamic vernacular...[described] as having a ‘sacred aura in Turkish culture.’ ”

The *Hizmet People* are predominantly Sunni Muslims who follow the teachings of Fethullah Gülen.⁴⁶ They are part of a peaceful, faith-inspired movement wherein the “Islamic group is willing to coexist peacefully with people of other faiths, supports democracy, cherishes freedom of thought and educational pursuits while recognizing the role of faith and religion, and condemns the use of violence in the name of Islam.”⁴⁷

⁴³ Mucahit Bilici, “The Fethullah Gülen Movement and its Politics of Representation in Turkey,” *The Muslim World* 96, no. 1 (2006).

⁴⁴ Sabine Dreher, “What Is the Hizmet Movement? Contending Approaches to the Analysis of Religious Activists in World Politics,” *Sociology of Islam* 1, no. 3-4 (2014): 257-275.

⁴⁵ Hasan Aydın, Viktor Mak, and Kristina Andrews, “Academic Freedom and Living in Exile: Experiences of Academics in Turkey,” in *Human Rights in Turkey: Assaults on Human Dignity* (Springer, 2021), 339-363.

⁴⁶ “Who Is Fethullah Gülen, the Man Erdoğan Blames for the Coup Attempt in Turkey?” CBC, July 21, 2016, accessed December 9, 2019,

⁴⁷ Helen Rose Ebaugh, *The Gülen Movement: A Sociological Analysis of a Civic Movement Rooted in Moderate Islam* (Springer Science & Business Media, 2009), 2.

Root paradigms are clusters of meanings that serve as “cultural maps” to guide groups toward a common purpose. Hizmet is a “durable root paradigm that frames (one aspect of) the cultural map of Turkish-Muslim society.”⁴⁸ It provides a counter-narrative to Western media portrayals that often conflate Islam with violence and extremism. Its message is a peaceful coexistence that leads to respect and harmony. However, since 2016, the *Hizmet People*, branded as “terrorists” by the Erdoğan regime, have been the subject of religious persecution and imprisonment.⁴⁹ The *Hizmet People* have been labeled as terrorists in their homeland, and have suffered persecution, torture, and imprisonment at the hands of a political regime committed to the preservation of power through a perversion of Islamic law.⁵⁰ Those who have fled Turkey are a part of a refugee diaspora now living in several host countries, including the US.⁵¹ These individuals face indefinite imprisonment if they were to return to their home country. Any individuals who associate with them are at risk of arrest.⁵²

“[*Hizmet*] provides a counter-narrative to Western media portrayals that often conflate Islam with violence and extremism.”

Initially, in the early days of the Erdoğan regime, Fethullah Gülen and the Hizmet Movement were welcomed and appointed to numerous high positions in the government, including judgeships, military leadership, and trusted advisory roles.⁵³ The relationship eroded when the Hizmet leaders in these positions began to insist that the regime act responsibly and provide care to marginalized and vulnerable citizens. This led to a seemingly irreparable rift between the regime and the *Hizmet People*, which has led to the unjust imprisonment of men, women, and their infants.

⁴⁸ Mucahit Bilici, “The Fethullah Gülen Movement and Its Politics of Representation in Turkey,” *The Muslim World* 96, no. 1 (2006): 5.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Advocates of Silenced Turkey Publishing*, ed. Y. Harvey, 2023.

⁵¹ Ahmet Erdi Öztürk, “The Repertoire of Extraterritorial Repression: Diasporas and Home States,” *Migration Letters* 17, no. 1 (2020): 59-69.

⁵² Fevzi Sarac, *The Differences Between Political Islam and the Hizmet Movement in Turkey* (Louisiana State University and Agricultural & Mechanical College, 2020).

⁵³ Fait Muedini, “The Politics Between the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the Gülen Movement in Turkey: Issues of Human Rights and Rising Authoritarianism,” *Muslim World Journal of Human Rights*, 12, no. 1 (2015): 99-122.

The pain and suffering individuals have experienced as a result of this situation are immeasurable. Individuals and families are now living abroad with little hope of ever returning home. The impact on education has been far-reaching. Not only have teachers and educators been summarily dismissed from their positions, but virtually all the Hizmet schools and universities have been closed, and their records of existence have been erased. This means individuals no longer have valid degrees previously earned from these institutions.⁵⁴ The loss of the degrees is but one significant example of the impact of the loss of the schools within Turkey; the greater long-term consequence is less tangible in measuring what is no longer available in the communities the schools served. Keles et al. describe Hizmet schools as those that support upward social mobility and confidence, in addition to providing the skills that empower students to change their own lives.⁵⁵ Hizmet schools also provide financial assistance and supplementary education to students in need, which aligns with the Gülen ethos of building a more equitable and just world. In this way, Hizmet schools fit Kohn's definition of "good schools." Instead of solely focusing on a market-driven education, Kohn (2015) eloquently states that educators must ask themselves what makes good schools:

“Individuals and families are now living abroad with little hope of ever returning home.”

As I see it, the best kind of schooling is organized around problems, projects, and questions—rather than facts, skills, and disciplines. Knowledge is acquired, of course, but in a context and for a purpose. The emphasis is not only on depth rather than breadth, but also on discovering ideas rather than on covering a prescribed curriculum. Teachers are generalists first and specialists (in a given subject matter) second; they commonly collaborate to offer interdisciplinary courses that students play an active role in designing. All of this happens in small, democratic schools that are experienced as caring communities.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Fait Muedini, "The Politics Between the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the Gülen Movement in Turkey: Issues of Human Rights and Rising Authoritarianism," *Muslim World Journal of Human Rights*, 12, no. 1 (2015): 99-122.

⁵⁵ Ozcan Keles, Ismail Mesut Sezgin, and Ihsan Yilmaz, *Tackling the Twin Threats of Islamophobia and Puritanical Islamist Extremism: Case Study of the Hizmet Movement* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 265-283.

⁵⁶ Alfie Kohn, *What Does It Mean to Be Well Educated?: And More Essays on Standards, Grading, and Other Follies* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004).

This perspective established a philosophy and pedagogy attuned to helping students become their best future selves through democratic schools, aiming to create a world free from religious oppression. Gülen specifically refers to this process as global peacebuilding; the work is intentional and flows from a disciplined faith-based approach of inclusion.⁵⁷ This approach to education transcends economic barriers and ethnic and cultural differences to form partnerships within communities that lead to opportunities students would otherwise not be able to access. Gülen refers to this partnership as the “human agency bridging theory and practice.”

4. The Erdoğan Era in Turkey

4.1 The Rise of the AKP

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is the face of the Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP), “Justice and Development Party,” in Turkey.⁵⁸ Party founders formed the AKP in 2001 after they split ideologically from the Refah Partisi (RP), “Welfare Party,” which Turkish authorities had banned from Parliament in 1997 because of its Islam-based activities and involvement.⁵⁹ In the years leading up to 2002, Turkey had evolved into a somewhat functioning secular electoral democracy to the extent that public displays of Islam were forbidden.⁶⁰

In the years leading up to 2002, Turkey had evolved into a somewhat functioning *secular electoral democracy* to the extent that *public displays of Islam* were forbidden.

⁵⁷ Zeynep Sahin, “Interfaith Dialogue Organizations as Actors of Peace Building: Case of Rumi Forum,” in Proceedings of the Conference Islam in the Age of Global Challenges: Alternative Perspectives of the Gülen Movement (Washington, DC: Rumi Forum, 2008), 694-710.

⁵⁸ Sefa Şimşek, “New Social Movements in Turkey Since 1980,” Turkish Studies 5, no. 2 (2004): 111-139.

⁵⁹ Soner Cagaptay, “The November 2002 Elections and Turkey’s New Political Era,” Middle East 6, no. 4 (2002): 43.

⁶⁰ Khash Hemmati, “Turkey Post 1980 Coup D’État: The Rise, the Fall, and the Emergence of Political Islam,” Illumine: Journal of the Centre for Studies in Religion and Society 12, no. 1 (2013): 58-73.

The AKP's rise to power represented a potentially significant shift in leadership ideology because party members openly espoused conservative Islamist views.⁶¹ This tension carried over into public sentiment, and the election favored a moderate viewpoint that included public expressions of Islam; hence, the AKP party won control of the Turkish government in 2002.⁶² Erdoğan's rise to power and appointment as Prime Minister, however, did not immediately follow the 2002 election and was not without its challenges. In 1998, while Erdoğan was the Mayor of Istanbul, he was convicted of inciting religious hatred. He was charged and convicted of a crime for reciting a religious poem on a public platform, which was a violation of Turkish law.⁶³

Erdoğan, then the Mayor of Istanbul, served four months of a ten-month prison sentence in Turkey. This conviction made Erdoğan, the Chair of the AKP party, ineligible for membership in Parliament under Article 109 of the Turkish Constitution, thereby preventing him from being appointed Prime Minister. Membership in Parliament was required for Erdoğan to be seated as Prime Minister. In 2003, after a series of political maneuvers focused on grooming Turkey for the European Union (EU) accession process, Article 76 of the Turkish Constitution was amended, and unanimously passed, which "rehabilitated all people stripped of their political rights."⁶⁴ This act cleared the conviction from Erdoğan's record and paved the way for him to officially ascend to the position of Prime Minister as the one who had been duly elected as the head of the AKP Party. At that time, Erdoğan publicly stated that he would lead the country toward a European-style democracy, emphasizing inclusivity and the decentralization of power.⁶⁵

"In 2003, ..., Article 76 of the Turkish Constitution was amended, and unanimously passed, which 'rehabilitated all people stripped of their political rights.' "

⁶¹ Fait Muedini, "The Politics Between the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the Gülen Movement in Turkey: Issues of Human Rights and Rising Authoritarianism," *Muslim World Journal of Human Rights*, 12, no. 1 (2015): 99-122.

⁶² Julius Motal, "Recep Tayyip Erdoğan: More Than a Lame Duck," *CUNY Academic Works/ Capstones*, 2014.

⁶³ James Ryan, "A Poetic Conviction? Turkish Courts Sentence Istanbul Mayor for Speech Crime," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, December 19, 2022; Hakkı Taş, "The Chronopolitics of National Populism," *Identities* 29, no. 2 (2022): 127-145.

⁶⁴ Soner Cagaptay, "The November 2002 Elections and Turkey's New Political Era," *Middle East* 6, no. 4 (2002): 44.

⁶⁵ Caroline Lancaster, "The Iron Law of Erdoğan: The Decay from Intra-Party Democracy to Personalistic Rule," *Third World Quarterly* 35, no. 9 (2014): 1672-1690.

Caroline Lancaster described the early years of the AKP party as “fully committed to intra-party democracy,” reflecting respect for the democratic process.⁶⁶ However, what Erdoğan said publicly perhaps did not reflect his inner beliefs and motivations. Erdoğan is quoted as once having said, “Democracy is like a train. We shall get out when we arrive at the station we want.”⁶⁷

This quote revealed his internal desire to lead the country with an appearance of democracy for as long as it took the country in the direction he and the AKP wanted it to go. Over the course of the fifteen to twenty years following his rise to power, Erdoğan appears to have transitioned from a democratic to an oligarchic or authoritarian leader, as foretold by Robert Michels in the early 1900s, potentially granting unchecked powers to the leadership. Michels asserted that, given the opportunity, all who begin with the ideal of democratic leadership naturally succumb to the transition to oligarchic rule over the course of time:

The most restricted form of oligarchy, absolute monarchy, is founded upon the will of a single individual... One commands, all others obey. The will of one single individual can countervail the will of the nation... At the antipodes of the monarchical principle, in theory, stands democracy, denying the right of one over others. It makes all citizens equal before the law... a social group which had secured control of the instruments of collective power would do all that was possible to retain that control. Theophrastus noted long ago that the strongest desire of men who have attained leadership in a popularly governed state is not so much the acquisition of personal wealth as the gradual establishment of their own sovereignty at the expense of popular sovereignty... the formation of oligarchies within the various forms of democracy is the outcome of organic necessity...⁶⁸

“[Robert] Michels asserted that, given the opportunity, all who begin with the ideal of *democratic leadership* naturally succumb to the transition to *oligarchic rule* over the course of time.”

⁶⁶ Ibid., 1673.

⁶⁷ Aram Bakshian, “Erdoğan, the Anti-Ataturk,” *The National Interest* 127 (2013): 63.

⁶⁸ Robert Michels, *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy*, tr. Eden and Cedar Paul. (New York, Hearst's International Library Co. 1915), 1, 385, 402.

Erdoğan is a charismatic leader who presents himself as a patriarchal figure representing the idyllic face of Turkic Islamic nationalism, which is popular among mainstream Turkic culture.⁶⁹ In truth, Erdoğan is the embodiment of Michels' theory, contrived nearly 100 years prior to the events unfolding.

Jenny White described Erdoğan as “a pious Muslim Turk whose subjectivity and vision for the future is shaped by an imperial Ottoman past overlaid into a republican framework, but divorced from the Kemalist project.”⁷⁰ Erdoğan is a man raised in a traditional Islamic family who grew into a leader immersed in Ottoman culture and history and who committed his entire life's work to leading the Republic of Turkey. He is quoted as having said:

During my primary school years, I was not in politics. All I did was build a substructure for politics in the future. When I started high school, I began to participate in more of these activities. I took part in all of the school's cultural and sports activities. When I finished high school, I found myself active in politics.⁷¹

“Jenny White described Erdoğan as ‘a pious Muslim Turk whose subjectivity and vision for the future is shaped by an imperial Ottoman past overlaid into a republican framework, but divorced from the Kemalist project.’ ”

In 2017, fifteen years after the AKP party won a democratic election to rule the Turkish Parliament, the AKP proposed a referendum to revise the Constitution, a clear indication of an impending shift from democracy to authoritarian rule. One of the revisions eliminated the role of Prime Minister and established the Presidency, thereby elevating Erdoğan's power and authority to that of the President.⁷²

⁶⁹ Howard Eissenstat, “Recep Tayyip Erdoğan: From ‘Illiberal Democracy’ to Electoral Authoritarianism,” in *Dictators and Autocrats* (Routledge, 2021), 367-383.

⁷⁰ Jenny White, *Muslim Nationalism and the New Turks* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 9.

⁷¹ Giray Saynur Derman, and O. B. A. Hande, “Making a Determination from the Operational Code of a New and Influential Actor: President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdoğan,” *Bilig* 79 (2016): 53.

⁷² Amelia Sullivan, “Unconditional Surrender: The Rise of President Erdoğan and the End of Kemalist Turkey,” *History in the Making* 11, no. 1 (2018): 1-36.

This meant that, although still formally elected, Erdoğan's power and control over the country were greatly expanded in his role as President, and his ruling authority remained unchecked.

3.2 Rising Authoritarianism: 21st Century Politics in Turkey

Erdoğan's leadership in the AKP since the elections of 2002 in the Turkish political realm has been described as overt "rising authoritarianism."⁷³ At the turn of the 21st Century, Turkey was considered a model for Middle Eastern/Islamic democracy because it espoused a desire to assimilate into Western and European expectations of political processes.⁷⁴ Howard Eissenstat describes the shift from a simply flawed democracy to "outright authoritarianism" as having occurred with "shocking speed."⁷⁵ Beken Saatçioğlu referred to this process as the "de-Europeanisation of Turkey;" more specifically a series of legislative shifts and judicial reforms introduced by the Erdoğan regime leading the country away from democracy toward authoritarian rule and distancing Turkey from alignment with European values.⁷⁶ Perhaps the most dangerous component of this movement toward authoritarian leadership was the consequence for the voices of dissent.

3.3 Events Leading up to the Alleged Coup Attempt

Although initially, in the 1990s and early 2000s, the AKP and the Gülen Movement had differing motivations and agendas, they shared a synergistic vision for building a thriving nation. The vision was that of a democratic country, one that was embraced and perceived by the "West" as modern, which for Turkey meant inclusion in the European Union and recognition on the world stage as a democratic Muslim-majority nation.

⁷³ Fait Muedini, "The Politics Between the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the Gülen Movement in Turkey: Issues of Human Rights and Rising Authoritarianism," *Muslim World Journal of Human Rights*, 12, no. 1 (2015): 100.

⁷⁴ In my opinion, the terms "Middle East" and "Middle Eastern" are often used as pejorative terms to mean countries with Islamic-based legal systems and governments, and have become a form of deficit language. The term carries a negative connotation of a rule of law lacking a democratic voice.

⁷⁵ Howard Eissenstat, "Recep Tayyip Erdoğan: From 'Illiberal Democracy' to Electoral Authoritarianism (Born, 1953)," in *Dictators and Autocrats*, p. 367.

⁷⁶ Beken Saatçioğlu, "De-Europeanisation in Turkey: The Case of the Rule of Law," *South European Society and Politics* 21, no. 1 (2016): 133-146.

This modern vision of political democracy, aligned with the Gülen Movement's desire to develop a civil society bolstered by a strong sense of moral character and enriched by an ethical code rooted in Islam, enriched this vision. The enthusiastic hope was that the world would see that Islam and democracy were not mutually exclusive.⁷⁷

“The vision was that of a *democratic country*, ..., which for Turkey meant inclusion in the *European Union* and recognition on the world stage as a *democratic Muslim-majority nation*.”

Differences between members of the AKP and the Gülen Movement were often indistinguishable, as both groups came from Turkey's socially conservative rural periphery. However, the two groups had solidly different understandings of society and politics that became evident in the years that followed. The alignment of the AKP and Gülen Movement demonstrated a commitment to a moderate form of Islam that would lead the country to a modernity recognized by Europe as a beacon of Islamic democracy and justice.⁷⁸ In the early years of the Erdoğan era, the government appointed many followers of the Gülen Movement, the Hizmet sympathizers, to state agencies and ranking military and judicial positions.⁷⁹ Although suspicious of the Hizmet sympathizers, the AKP adopted Hizmet concepts and collaborated to advance humanitarian causes and counter extremist opposition in a mutually beneficial relationship.⁸⁰

The Hizmet sympathizers were known to challenge policies that were unfair and unjust from the lens of universal democratic values, such as issues related to the fair treatment of minorities, including the treatment of Kurdish people.⁸¹

⁷⁷ Reuven Firestone, “Conspiracy to Prove a Conspiracy: My Meeting with Fethullah Gülen,” *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 37, no. 2 (2017): 49-53.

⁷⁸ Howard Eissenstat, “Uneasy Rests the Crown: Erdoğan and ‘Revolutionary Security’ In Turkey,” *Project on Middle East Democracy*, December 2017.

⁷⁹ Murat Somer, “Turkey: The Slippery Slope from Reformist to Revolutionary Polarization and Democratic Breakdown,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 681, no. 1 (2019): 42-61.

⁸⁰ Hakkı Taş, “A History of Turkey’s AKP-Gülen Conflict,” *Mediterranean Politics* 23, no. 3 (2018): 395-402.

⁸¹ James L. Crawford, “The Continued Persecution of the Kurdish People in Turkey,” *American Indian Law Review* 45, no. 2 (2020): 327-359.

As the Erdoğan regime moved toward authoritarian rule, its motives and intentions tended toward perpendicular purposes with the Hizmet-inspired philosophy and commitment to a moral compass governed by a fair and equitable legal system within a democratic society. The issue was evident in the legal policies and treatment of the Kurdish people living in the southeastern and south-central regions of the country.

Several outlets reported that authorities often escalated violence in the form of “torture, beatings, disappearances, extra-judicial killings, deaths in custody, indiscriminate or arbitrary murders, detentions, and arrests” against the Kurdish people living in Turkey.⁸² Members of the Gülen Movement consistently spoke out against this injustice while maintaining their commitment to non-violence in responding to these issues.

The Kurdish people are the fourth largest ethnic group in the Middle East and the largest minority group in Turkey.⁸³ The PKK (*Partiya Karkeran Kurdista*), Kurdistan Workers’ Party, was a Marxist-Leninist armed insurgency group of Kurdish people from Turkey, Iran, Syria, and Iraq that had emerged in the 1980s as a response to disturbing and threatening regional conflicts.⁸⁴ This coalition was designated as a terrorist organization by several countries, including the US, because of its tactics in responding to acts of violence perpetrated by government forces and military combatants against the Kurdish people.

“The *PKK*, ..., was a Marxist-Leninist *armed insurgency group* of Kurdish people from Turkey, Iran, Syria, and Iraq that had emerged in the 1980s as a response to *disturbing and threatening regional conflicts*.”

3.4 2013 Corruption Scandal

In December 2013, a major criminal investigation by Istanbul district prosecutors culminated in the arrest and detention of some 50 individuals closely tied to high-level government positions in Turkey.

⁸² Christopher Houston, *Islam, Kurds and the Turkish Nation State* (Routledge, 2020).

⁸³ Callimanopulos Dominique, “Kurdish Repression in Turkey,” *Cultural Survival*, February 9, 2010.

⁸⁴ Taha Özhan and Hatem Ete, “A New Agenda for the Kurdish Question,” *Insight Turkey* (2009): 97-114.

The investigation involved construction and real estate dealings tied to alleged money laundering that extended beyond the borders of Turkey to other Arab and Muslim nations, including Iran, Iraq, and India.⁸⁵ The AKP leadership quickly reacted to the disclosure of the investigation and the subsequent arrests by describing this as an attempt by outside forces, including the United States and Israel, in collusion with “Turkish collaborators,” also known as members of the Gülen Movement, to overthrow and oust the AKP.⁸⁶ The Istanbul-based Journalists and Writers Foundation⁸⁷ said in a statement that:

“Claims that our honorary president, Fethullah Gülen, and the Hizmet Movement are ‘linked to the prosecutors’ conducting the graft probe or that they made the prosecutors launch the investigations because they are the cat’s paws of external powers are heinous slander.” The statement also challenged the government, stating that “a parallel state is unacceptable in a democratic country. If there really is such a parallel network, the government must produce evidence of it.”⁸⁸

Gülen frequently called for the cleansing of systemic corruption, which led Erdoğan and the AKP to interpret these actions as competitive threats. In a BBC interview at the home of Gülen in Pennsylvania, BBC Newshour correspondent Tim Franks referred to this phenomenon as an “overlap of ambitions” between the two men.⁸⁹ The outcome of this corruption scandal is immaterial to this research, except that it signified the tip of the iceberg that sank the relationship between the Hizmet sympathizers and the Erdoğan regime. There did not appear to be a means of repairing the relationship going forward, and the Erdoğan regime’s response foreshadowed a much greater assertion of power aimed at preserving the AKP’s authoritarian grip on the country’s narrative.

⁸⁵ Fevzi Bilgin, “Turkey Brief: Corruption Scandal and Ensuing Political Crisis,” Washington, DC: Rethink Institute (2014): 1-4.

⁸⁶ Ergun Özbudun, “AKP at the Crossroads: Erdoğan’s Majoritarian Drift,” *South European Society and Politics* 19, no. 2 (2014): 155-167.

⁸⁷ The Journalists and Writers Foundation originated in Turkey but is no longer based in Turkey because the Erdoğan regime considers it a terrorist threat due to its positions of dissent to the current administration. It is now based in New York, NY, USA, and continues its work.

⁸⁸ Fevzi Bilgin, “Turkey Brief: Corruption Scandal and Ensuing Political Crisis,” Washington, DC: Rethink Institute (2014): 3.

⁸⁹ Tim Franks, “Fethullah Gülen: Powerful but Reclusive Turkish Cleric,” BBC, January 27, 2014,

4. Watershed Moments

Most Americans, who were living at the time, can tell you exactly where they were and what they were doing when the planes struck the buildings on 9-11 (September 11, 2001). My grandparents talked about hearing Franklin D. Roosevelt declare December 7, 1941, “a date which will live in infamy” when the Empire of Japan attacked Pearl Harbor. These are historic moments we will never forget. The same is true for the *Hizmet People*; their day of infamy is July 15, 2016, a date they all know, but few like to discuss. It is the date of the alleged coup in Turkey, and, in one interviewee’s words, on that day, all of their lives “turned inside out.”

4.1 Events Leading Up to the Pinch-Point

The term “pinch-point” can describe situations in which multiple forces converge at a single location, such as traffic bottlenecks or physical spaces where a person or body part can become trapped between two hard surfaces, leading to injury. In a political context, the ambitions of the Erdoğan regime and the ethical and moral principles of the Gülen Movement converge, creating a pinch point in which the Hizmet community becomes trapped, exposed to pressure and harm from both sides. As previously mentioned, the political tensions began with healthy, rigorous debate over reform movements oriented toward the common good of Turkish society. In the 2000s, the AKP introduced political reforms that included a slight shift from staunch secularism toward recognition of moderate Islamic roots within the government’s structure. The Gülenists initially aligned themselves conceptually with the AKP, and members of the Hizmet movement filled many judicial and state-level positions.⁹⁰

“...the *political tensions [between the Erdoğan regime and the Gülen Movement]* began with healthy, rigorous debate over *reform movements oriented toward the common good of Turkish society.*”

⁹⁰ M. Hakan Yavuz, "A Framework for Understanding the Intra-Islamist Conflict Between the AK Party and the Gülen Movement," *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 19, no. 1 (2018): 11-32.

What evolved over the course of the next 10 to 15 years was what Ergun Özbudun describes as a “cleavage between the secular center and the religious conservative periphery.”⁹¹ The AKP government removed the undemocratic powers of the secular military elites through a series of reforms. However, Erdoğan refused to establish a system with checks and balances, instead replacing the old military tutelage with his own personal cult of authority. As Erdoğan and the AKP have introduced a series of legal referendums, power has been centralized around the President’s seat.⁹² This consolidation of power and alleged abuses pointed toward the July 15, 2016, event as the pinch-point that forever changed the course of history for Turkey.

4.2 July 15, 2016: The Night of the Alleged Coup Attempt

What really happened on the night of July 15, 2016, in Turkey may never be known. The answer depends on who you ask and which source of information you believe. In the United States, our legal system uses the term “preponderance of the evidence,” which means that something has been proven to be more likely true than not.⁹³ In legal terms, we systematically examine the evidence to determine which story makes more sense, especially when the “facts” set before us seem at odds. The perspectives of the storytellers at the July 2016 Bosphorus Bridge event are at odds, and it is our responsibility as neutral jurists to determine which story makes more sense. Coup d’état mentality is nothing unusual in the Turkish narrative. The political history of Turkey has endured three military “interventions” since the inception of the Republic: 1960, 1971, and 1980.⁹⁴ In 1960, the military uprising and subsequent coup were written into the history books as a “revolution” because, in simplistic terms, the political parties in power had attempted to diminish the role of the military in Turkish society.⁹⁵

⁹¹ Ergun Özbudun, "AKP at the Crossroads: Erdoğan's Majoritarian Drift," *South European Society and Politics* 19, no. 2 (2014): 155.

⁹² Cezarina Chirica, "Turkey's Secularism after the 2016 Failed Military Coup and the State's Degülenization," *Studium-Revista Studenților, Masteranzilor Si Doctoranzilor în Istorie* 10 (2017): 107-115.

⁹³ “Burden of proof” and “preponderance of evidence,” US District Court, Vermont.

⁹⁴ Idil Gögüs and Sabine Mannitz, "'The World Culture Entered Turkey: New Conflict Lines and the Challenges for Democratic Consolidation in Turkey," (Frankfurt: Peace Research Institute 2016): 1-36.

⁹⁵ Kemal H. Karpat, "The Military and Politics in Turkey, 1960-64: A Socio-Cultural Analysis of a Revolution," *The American Historical Review* 75, no. 6 (1970): 1654-1683.

The military is a remaining vestige of the Ottoman Empire in Turkish society and persists as the means by which modern political discourse finds its source. Therefore, in July 2016, when the news media reported that an attempted coup had occurred, it was not an unlikely scenario given Turkish history and was quite believable at the outset. On the one hand, the Turkish government claimed that it had thwarted a coup d'état on the night of July 15, 2016, and vowed to hold those responsible accountable through the court system. Initial reports by Turkish Intelligence officials indicated that members of an organization the government named as *FETÖ*⁹⁶ had plotted and organized the attacks.⁹⁷ On the other hand, many observers believe the coup attempt was staged as a means for the government to enact various articles within their laws to increase the power of the government to quash opposition and dissent, and to solidify the authoritarian leadership of Erdoğan. A third belief is that the events were a choreographed plan devised by the Erdoğan regime, directly targeting the perceived threat of the Gülen Movement and the *Hizmet People*.⁹⁸ No matter which story is true, the events of the evening of July 15, 2016, appeared to have started with the blocking of the bridge over the Bosphorus by military troops.⁹⁹

The official story of what occurred on that night is as follows:

The Bosphorus Bridge and the Fatih Sultan Mehmet Bridge, which link Istanbul's Asian and European parts, were blocked by the army. The army halted activity at both Istanbul airports, and residents in Istanbul and Ankara heard gunfire and explosions. The TRT¹⁰⁰ public television station was besieged and occupied by the same army, and a state of general chaos quickly encompassed Turkey. The Chief of the General Staff was taken hostage, as were the public television reporters who were detained by the military. The army announced the takeover of power and the imposition of martial law, while promising a new Constitution.¹⁰¹

⁹⁶ FETÖ, Fethullahçı Terör Örgütü translated from Turkish as Fethullah (Gülen) Terrorist Organization so dubbed by the Erdoğan government.

⁹⁷ Ibrahim Kalin, "After the Coup Attempt, Turkey's Success Story Continues," *Insight Turkey* 18, no. 3 (2016): 11-17.

⁹⁸ Ayla Gol, "Turkey's Clash of Islamists: Erdogan vs Gülen," *OpenDemocracy*, August 3, 2016.

⁹⁹ Ateş Altınordu, "A Midsummer Night's Coup: Performance and Power in Turkey's July 15 Coup Attempt," *Qualitative Sociology* 40 (2017): 139-164.

¹⁰⁰ TRT is Turkish Radio and Television Corporation and is the national broadcaster of Turkey.

¹⁰¹ Cezarina Chirica, "Turkey's Secularism after the 2016 Failed Military Coup and the State's Degülenization," (2017).

The above quote refers to TRT, widely believed to be the AKP's voice in Turkey rather than an independent news source. The TRT was intended to be an international news source; however, media freedom in Turkey is restricted and controlled by the government.¹⁰² The journalists walk a fine line and must always report from the perspective that portrays the government in a positive light. The general details of the official story are not in dispute; military troops were blocking the Bosphorus Bridge. The government and military leaders have obscured how the troops got there, who gave the orders, why military cadets were sent on an exercise disguised as military training with live ammunition, and what those cadets were told was happening.

Before we start with the story, it is important to know a little about the significance of the Bosphorus Bridge¹⁰³ as an iconic symbol of modernity and progress in Turkey, which is, perhaps, why it was chosen as the launch point for the events that unfolded on the evening of July 15, 2016. The Bosphorus Strait is a natural waterway connecting the Black Sea to the Sea of Marmara and serving as a crucial trade route in the region. The Sea of Marmara empties into the Aegean Sea and eventually opens into the Mediterranean Sea, which has been an invaluable trade route since ancient times. There are three bridges spanning the Bosphorus Strait: the Boğaziçi (Bosphorus Bridge), now known as the 15th July Martyrs' Bridge, the Fatih Sultan Mehmet Bridge, and the Yavuz Sultan Selim Bridge. These bridges connect the Asian side of Turkey to the European continent. The bridges spanning the Bosphorus are famous Turkish landmarks and key tourist attractions, particularly for their Christian history and the fall of the Roman Empire.¹⁰⁴ The obvious Bosphorus Bridge is an ideal photo opportunity for every occasion, which makes it the perfect location to orchestrate the events of this particular evening.

“...*Bosphorus Bridge* [is] an iconic symbol of *modernity* and *progress* in Turkey, which is, perhaps, why it was chosen as the launch point for the events that unfolded on the evening of July 15, 2016.”

¹⁰² Mona Elswah and Philip N. Howard, "Where News Could Not Inspire Change: TRT World as a Party Broadcaster," *Journalism* 23, no. 10 (2022): 2079-2095.

¹⁰³ Bosphorus and Bosphorus are both legitimate English spellings of the translated word Boğaziçi which is the name of the waterway that separates the European and Asian continents in Istanbul.

¹⁰⁴ Cameron Deggin, "Famous Bosphorus Bridges of Istanbul," *Property Turkey Blog*, March 2023.

5. Testimonies of Survival and Sacrifice

The events following the July 15, 2016, alleged coup attempt in Turkey triggered a profound wave of political repression, targeting not only those accused of participating in the coup but also a broad swath of educators, civil servants, journalists, and ordinary citizens associated with the Hizmet Movement. In this chapter, we turn from abstract analysis to the lived experiences of those caught in the machinery of state persecution. Each story illuminates the human cost of authoritarian policies, demonstrating how ordinary individuals—students, teachers, journalists, and parents—became entangled in a system designed to punish, intimidate, and erase dissent.

These testimonies reveal more than personal suffering; they illustrate the moral and civic courage of those who resisted being silenced. From the mothers advocating tirelessly for their imprisoned children to journalists chronicling the injustices from exile, from students unjustly criminalized to educators tortured for their beliefs, the narratives collected here offer a window into the resilience of a community under siege. By documenting these experiences, this chapter situates individual lives within the broader context of systemic oppression, providing both a record of injustice and a testament to human endurance and ethical resistance.

“...documenting these experiences...[provide] both a record of *injustice* and a testament to *human endurance* and *ethical resistance*.”

5.1 Melek and Furkan Çetinkaya: A Mother’s Relentless Freedom Fight

The story of Melek and Furkan Çetinkaya has come to symbolize the profound human cost of the political aftermath of the July 15, 2016, events in Turkey. For Melek, as for many other parents, that night marked the beginning of a nightmare that defied imagination. Her 19-year-old son, Furkan, a cadet at the Turkish Air Force Academy, was among a group of students who believed they were participating in a routine military training exercise. Unbeknownst to them, they were transported under orders to the Bosphorus Bridge in Istanbul, where they suddenly found themselves entangled in what would later be described as a coup attempt.

Furkan had been enrolled in a five-year officer-training program similar to the U.S. Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC), designed to prepare young cadets for leadership roles in the military. According to court documents and corroborating statements from other cadets, the students were instructed by their commanders to board buses for what they believed was a nighttime exercise.¹⁰⁵ Upon arrival at the bridge, the cadets were ordered to hold their positions, some armed with live ammunition and others with minimal or no weaponry. Confused and fearful, they followed military commands in an unfolding situation whose true nature they could not comprehend.

In the violent confrontation that ensued, dozens—perhaps hundreds—of civilians and military personnel were killed. The precise number of casualties remains contested, with initial reports citing 42 deaths and later estimates ranging from 250 to 290.¹⁰⁶ What is undisputed, however, is that the cadets, including Furkan, became scapegoats in the political narrative that followed. Portrayed as conspirators in an attempted coup rather than as students obeying orders, many were arrested, tried, and sentenced to life imprisonment.

Melek Çetinkaya refused to accept the official account of her son's actions. Her conviction rested on both maternal intuition and the implausibility of the prosecution's claims. As she often emphasized, it defied logic to suggest that a group of teenagers could independently coordinate military transportation, access weaponry, and stage an assault on civilians—all without authorization or detection by superior officers. Her reasoning pointed instead to the systemic manipulation of events by those in command, for whom the cadets served as convenient instruments in a much larger power struggle.

Rather than succumbing to despair, Melek transformed her grief into sustained activism. She became one of the most visible figures among the families of imprisoned cadets, leading public demonstrations, organizing solidarity campaigns, and using social media to challenge official narratives. Her courage came at immense personal cost.

¹⁰⁵ Abdullah Ayasun, "After Six Years in Prison, Turkish Military Academy Trainees Released Pending Trial," Medium, June 24, 2022.

¹⁰⁶ For early numbers: Fulya Ozerkan, Stuart Williams and Caroline Henshaw, "Chaos Reigns in Turkey as Military Attempts Coup," *The Times of Israel*, July 16, 2016. For later numbers: "Turkey Renames Bosphorus Bridge after Failed Coup Victims," *The New Arab*, July 26, 2016.

“[Melek Çetinkaya] became one of the most visible figures among the families of imprisoned cadets, leading *public demonstrations, organizing solidarity campaigns, and using social media to challenge official narratives.*”

Melek was arrested numerous times—over thirty, by some accounts—on charges including “disseminating terrorist propaganda.”¹⁰⁷ Each arrest, rather than silencing her, deepened her determination to advocate for justice and for the release of her son and his peers.

After years of persistent advocacy, Melek’s efforts were partially vindicated. On June 21, 2022, the Turkish Supreme Court of Appeals overturned the convictions of Furkan Çetinkaya and 65 other trainees at the Air Force Academy, ordering their release. (4) For Melek, the decision represented both personal vindication and symbolic resistance against a judicial system widely criticized for its politicization. However, her struggle did not end there. Facing renewed threats of persecution, Melek and Furkan fled Turkey and now live in exile as refugees in an undisclosed country. Even in exile, Melek continues to speak out on behalf of families whose sons remain imprisoned, embodying the moral resilience that characterizes much of the post-2016 Hizmet community.

Melek Çetinkaya’s story encapsulates the intersection of maternal devotion, moral courage, and civic resistance. Her transformation from a grieving mother to a public advocate reflects the broader dynamics of how ordinary citizens, confronted with state repression, reassert agency through acts of witness and persistence. Her narrative not only personalizes the abstract statistics of Turkey’s mass incarcerations but also challenges the legitimacy of narratives that conflate dissent with disloyalty. In doing so, Melek Çetinkaya stands as both a symbol of individual resistance and a moral voice for a community seeking justice in exile.

“[Melek’s] transformation from a *grieving mother to a public advocate* reflects the broader dynamics of how ordinary citizens, confronted with *state repression*, reassert agency through acts of *witness and persistence.*”

¹⁰⁷ “Human Rights Activist and Mother of Jailed Cadet Arrested for Terrorist Propaganda,” Stockholm Center for Freedom, March 29, 2020.

5.2 Mina Leyla: Journalism as a Form of Resistance

The impulse that drives Melek’s activism—the refusal to allow truth to be buried beneath state-sanctioned silence—also animates the work of exiled journalists and writers who document these injustices from afar. Among them, Mina Leyla has emerged as a compelling voice of conscience. Through her writing and investigative storytelling, Leyla transforms journalism into a form of moral resistance, preserving the memory of those silenced and holding space for collective healing within the Turkish diaspora.

Mina Leyla is the pseudonym of a highly regarded and well-known female journalist, screenwriter, and media personality in Turkey prior to the alleged coup attempt in 2016. Currently living in exile in the United States, she continues her work as a writer and human rights advocate, publishing numerous books and articles through the Advocates of Silenced Turkey (AST) organization. Her literary style is marked by vivid storytelling and emotional depth, bringing to life the human cost of repression and exile. Among her many works translated from Turkish to English, several stand out for their narrative power and historical significance, including “Silent Scream” (2021), “Broken Lives” (2022), and “The Life and Legacy of Gökhan Açikkollu” (2022).

As part of this research, I had the opportunity to interview Mina Leyla. Although she is not an educator in the formal sense, she views her role as a journalist as inherently pedagogical. Through her writing, she seeks to inform the public, raise awareness of social injustice, and amplify the voices of those who cannot speak for themselves. In doing so, she becomes a *de facto* educator, using narrative and analysis to teach empathy, critical thinking, and civic responsibility.

The use of a pseudonym remains essential for her safety. Leyla’s investigative work and outspoken criticism of the Erdoğan regime have made her a target of political retaliation. She fears that revealing her identity could lead to harassment or imprisonment of her family members, who remain in Turkey. Through her continued involvement with *Advocates of Silenced Turkey* (AST), she channels her professional expertise and personal conviction into advocacy efforts that aim to “un-silence” the victims of what she and others describe as a *civil death* against the Hizmet Movement.

In the foreword to *Silent Scream*, Mina Leyla is characterized as someone who “took sides with the oppressed in the battle between the oppressor and the oppressed.”¹⁰⁸ This description aptly captures both the moral foundation and the emotional tenor of Leyla’s work. Her writing consistently centers on the experiences of those marginalized and silenced under Turkey’s post-2016 political climate, particularly individuals associated with the Hizmet movement.

“...Mina Leyla... ‘took sides with the *oppressed* in the battle between the *oppressor* and the *oppressed*.’ ”

In *Silent Scream*, Leyla recounts an interview with a man who fled Turkey and was granted asylum in the United States. When asked whether he regretted his affiliation with the Gülen Movement or blamed it for his persecution, his response reflected a profound sense of faith, loyalty, and moral conviction. He stated:

“I have never blamed the Hizmet Movement for any persecution, hardship, or trial I have experienced. I am sure of my innocence, and I am sure of the innocence of Fethullah Gülen and my brothers and sisters who have been slandered as terrorists. I have never witnessed Fethullah Gülen saying anything that could incite any form of terrorism. Hizmet is my way of life, and I don’t regret anything I have ever done in this way.”¹⁰⁹

This statement encapsulates the shared sentiment among many of those interviewed for this research—an enduring belief in the ethical and spiritual foundations of Hizmet, despite personal suffering and state-led persecution. Their testimonies reveal not only the resilience of faith in the face of oppression but also a collective determination to preserve human dignity and moral integrity amid systemic injustice.

“[*The Hizmet People’s*] testimonies reveal...a collective determination to preserve *human dignity and moral integrity* amid *systemic injustice*.”

¹⁰⁸ Mina Leyla, *Silent Scream: True Stories of Oppression in Turkey* (AST Publishing, 2021), 3.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 55.

When I asked Mina how she managed to continue writing such profoundly tragic stories, she responded with a quiet resolve that underscores the moral purpose behind her work. “It is the only way we can find hope,” she explained. “If they die and no one ever tells their story, then what did their life mean? ...and if just one story helps someone have hope or feel better about their situation—even if it simply tells the family that someone is listening and someone cares—then it is worth every bit of effort. And really, it is not me who is suffering; I was able to get out and continue to live my life.”

Her words reflect a philosophy of testimony as both a moral duty and an emotional survival mechanism. Through her writing, Leyla transforms grief into witness, ensuring that the experiences of those silenced are recorded, remembered, and humanized. In this sense, her work not only documents trauma but also reclaims agency for those rendered voiceless by state power.

5.3 Gökhan Açıkkollu: The First Martyr of the Civil Death

Among the many lives Leyla has sought to preserve, one stands out for its profound resonance within the Hizmet community: the story of Gökhan Açıkkollu. As a high school history teacher, Açıkkollu’s life and untimely death under torture became a stark embodiment of the post-coup purges, illustrating how state repression reaches into the everyday lives of educators and the communities they serve.

His story, meticulously documented by Leyla in *The Life and Legacy of Gökhan Açıkkollu: A Teacher Tortured to Death* (2022), stands as both a personal tragedy and a powerful indictment of state-sponsored violence under the post-coup purges.¹¹⁰ Leyla’s careful chronicling transforms his personal tragedy into a collective testament, making the abstract horrors of political persecution vividly tangible.

For the Açıkkollu family, July 15 had previously been an annual day of celebration; their son was born on July 15, 1999. However, in 2016, that special day lost its celebratory value, becoming like a switch that dimmed the light in the family’s life. The father, who was an educator, was taken into custody, tortured, and died thirteen days later. At 17, the son was thrust to the head of the family as they grieved the loss of their patriarch.

¹¹⁰ Mina Leyla, *The Life and Legacy of Gökhan Açıkkollu: A Teacher Tortured to Death*, ed./trans. Hafza Girdap (AST Publishing, 2022).

In the preface to her book, Leyla recounts the moment she first viewed the CCTV footage of Açıkkollu's final hours in police custody. She wrote, "Oh no! I wish his family won't see this!" Only later did she learn, through her interview with Açıkkollu's wife, Mümine Tulay Açıkkollu, that it was in fact she who had submitted the footage to BOLD Media for publication. Tulay had obtained the video from her late husband's court file, though she could not bring herself to watch it for a long time.¹¹¹ This moment of revelation underscores the emotional and moral burden borne by the families of those who perished in detention, many of whom were forced to transform personal grief into public testimony.

"...the emotional and moral burden borne by the families of those who perished in detention,...[forces them] to transform personal grief into public testimony."

Gökhan Açıkkollu was arrested one week after the alleged coup attempt, accused—without formal charge—of affiliation with the Gülen or Hizmet Movement. Within thirteen days of his detention, he died under torture at the hands of police and military personnel. Surveillance footage, court documents, and independent investigations confirmed that Açıkkollu was held in an overcrowded cell—five detainees in a space designed for one—where he endured severe physical abuse and neglect before succumbing to a heart attack. Despite the abundance of evidence, no charges were ever brought against the officers responsible for the incident.

In a cruel act of posthumous irony, the Turkish government reinstated Açıkkollu to his position as a history teacher eighteen months after his death, implicitly acknowledging his innocence. This reinstatement, however, offered no justice to his family. As documented in a 2017 report by the Stockholm Center for Freedom, his case exemplified the systematic torture, arbitrary detention, and legal impunity that characterized the state's response to the alleged coup attempt.¹¹²

¹¹¹ Mina Leyla, *The Life and Legacy of Gökhan Açıkkollu*, 2022.

¹¹² *Tortured to Death: Holding Gökhan Açıkkollu's Killers to Account*, Stockholm Center for Freedom, 2017, 2-61.

Refusing to accept the state’s silence, Mümine Tulay Açikkollu filed a complaint with the United Nations Human Rights Committee (UNHRC), seeking international accountability.¹¹³ The UN’s findings validated her claims, concluding that the Turkish government had failed to protect Açikkollu’s life, to conduct a proper investigation into his death, and to meet the standards of reasonableness and necessity in detaining him. However, the Committee ultimately dismissed the case on procedural grounds, citing the requirement that all domestic legal remedies be exhausted before an international complaint can proceed. This decision, while procedurally justified, highlighted the structural barriers faced by victims’ families in authoritarian contexts where domestic remedies are illusory at best.

“The UN’s findings validated [*Mümine Tulay Açikkollu’s*] claims, concluding that the Turkish government had *failed to protect [Gökhan] Açikkollu’s* life, to conduct a *proper investigation* into his death, and to meet the standards of *reasonableness and necessity* in detaining him.”

Through her writing, Mina Leyla ensured that Gökhan Açikkollu’s story would not fade into obscurity. By chronicling his life, his commitment to education, and his death under torture, she framed his memory as both personal testimony and collective symbol—a reminder of the countless educators, civil servants, and citizens who perished under the weight of state repression. The image of Açikkollu’s overcrowded cell, where he drew his final breath, endures as a haunting representation of the collapse of justice and humanity in the wake of Turkey’s post-coup purges.

In remembering Gökhan Açikkollu, the discourse on the Hizmet persecution acquires a profoundly moral dimension. His story challenges scholars, policymakers, and human rights advocates alike to confront the human toll of state violence and to reconsider how concepts like “security,” “terrorism,” and “justice” are weaponized to justify the suppression of dissent. Thanks to the enduring efforts of Leyla and Tulay Açikkollu, Gökhan’s life continues to speak—bearing witness not only to personal suffering but also to the resilience of truth in the face of systematic denial.

¹¹³ Gökhan Günes, “United Nations Committee on Human Rights Decision about Gökhan Açikkollu,” JusticeSquare.

“[Gökhan Açikkollu’s] story challenges scholars, policymakers, and human rights advocates alike to confront the human toll of *state violence* and to reconsider how concepts like ‘security,’ ‘terrorism,’ and ‘justice’ are weaponized to justify the *suppression of dissent*.”

5.4 *Ub*: A Historian’s Resilience Under Repression

While Gökhan Açikkollu’s story reveals the devastating consequences of state violence on educators and their communities, it is far from an isolated case. Across Turkey, countless other teachers and intellectuals have faced incarceration, torture, and social erasure in the aftermath of the 2016 purges.

Ub—a pseudonym used at his request—is a historian and educator whose life and career have been profoundly disrupted by state persecution. He currently lives in Turkey, awaiting a final decision on his case from the Supreme Court, and has asked that his identity not be revealed in this document for his and his family’s safety. Prior to these events, *Ub* was an Associate Professor at a prestigious public university, specializing in the late Ottoman Empire and early Turkish Republic. His passion for history—described in his own words as “you can’t commit your life’s work to something you don’t feel passion about... it makes everything make so much more sense”—shaped both his teaching and research.

Following the July 2016 coup attempt, *Ub*’s dedication to teaching history ironically became the source of his persecution. Detained briefly and accused of affiliation with the Hizmet movement, he described the ordeal as “tagging by the university administration—or maybe I should say by the Director himself.” In his view, this “tagging” was part of a systematic process used to identify and remove educators suspected of sympathy toward Hizmet. The evidence against him centered on claims that he had infused his lectures with the teachings of the Gülen Movement. His defense, however, demonstrated that his treatment of the movement was strictly academic—positioning it within broader intellectual traditions such as Marxism, socialism, and fascism.

“In [*Ub*’s] view,... ‘tagging’ was part of a *systematic process* used to *identify* and *remove* educators suspected of *sympathy* toward Hizmet.”

Although a trial judge ultimately ruled in his favor, the moment of relief was fleeting. “I heard the judge say the words that I was innocent and free of the charges... my heart was racing, and I almost couldn’t believe it,” *Ub* recalled. “I thought maybe my life would return to normal.” Within days, the prosecutor appealed the acquittal, plunging him back into uncertainty. Since then, he has awaited a final ruling from Turkey’s Supreme Court, living in a state of indefinite limbo.

The Turkish state dealt *Ub* immediate and devastating professional and personal losses: it dismissed him from his university post, seized his home and assets, and revoked his pension and healthcare. Under the state decree, the authorities continue to bar him from teaching at any public or private institution, noting that in Turkey, even private universities fall under the authority of the Higher Education Council (Yüksek Öğretim Kurulu, YÖK).¹¹⁴ Unable to work in academia, *Ub* has taken “menial jobs,” as he described them, to support his wife and two daughters. “It has had a dramatic effect on all of our lives,” he admitted, reflecting on the indignity of being severed from his life’s work.

Ub’s historical insight deepens his understanding of his own persecution. He suggested that the state’s targeting of intellectuals affiliated with Hizmet should be situated within a longer historical continuum of repression in Turkish political life. “It is no coincidence,” he observed, “that (state-sponsored repression) has always been the tool of choice for those in power—it has been this way for many, many years... many centuries, really.”

Ub’s story evokes the image of a phoenix—an academic life reduced to ashes by political fire, yet sustained by an unextinguished belief in the redemptive power of history. His enduring passion, even as he awaits justice, stands as both testimony and warning: that the suppression of knowledge is never merely about silencing individuals, but about controlling the collective memory of a nation.

“ ‘It has had a dramatic effect on all of our lives,’ [*Ub*] admitted, reflecting on the *indignity* of being severed from his life’s work.”

¹¹⁴ YÖK – Council of Higher Education, Yüksek Öğretim Kurulu. Established in 1981 by Turgut Ozal, the then-leader of the Turkish Republic. Gülden Özcan, “Neoliberalism, National Security and Academic Knowledge Production in Turkey,” *The University and Social Justice: Struggles Across the Globe* (2020): 61.

5.5 *Ha*: An Educator's Resilience in Imprisonment

Ha—a pseudonym chosen to protect her identity—was a university history instructor and among the first women in Turkey detained for an extended period following the alleged coup attempt. She endured five and a half years of incarceration under conditions of overcrowding, scarcity, and systemic humiliation. Her story, like *Ub*'s, highlights the gendered and systemic dimensions of this repression, illustrating both the human cost of political persecution and the extraordinary resilience of those determined to survive, create, and bear witness under relentless pressure.

During her imprisonment, *Ha* transformed fragments of waste into fragments of hope. Deprived of teaching materials, professional identity, and basic human dignity, she began collecting discarded scrap metal and fashioning it into handmade jewelry. In her own words, she explained:

“I am a history teacher. I attended courses to improve myself in the field of handicrafts that I am engaged in as a hobby, and I wanted to share the beautiful jewelry I made.”¹¹⁵

This seemingly modest act carries profound symbolic weight. Through crafting beauty from refuse, *Ha* not only resisted psychological erosion but also enacted a quiet form of defiance—reclaiming agency through creativity in a system designed to erase individuality. *Ha*'s improvised artistry served both as a coping mechanism and as a communal gesture, bringing moments of dignity and shared humanity to the women imprisoned alongside her.

Since her release, *Ha* has faced the same institutional barriers that confront countless former prisoners in Turkey. Her teaching credentials were revoked, and her name remains blacklisted, preventing her from re-entering the academic field. In the absence of professional reintegration, she has turned her prison-made skill into a livelihood by selling her handcrafted jewelry online. Her story reached me through mutual friends, one of whom gifted a bracelet and necklace made by *Ha* to my partner and me.

“Deprived of *teaching materials, professional identity, and basic human dignity*, she began collecting discarded scrap metal and fashioning it into handmade jewelry.”

¹¹⁵ Description from the “About” link on *Ha*'s website.

My partner later reflected on the complex emotions these items evoke—awe at their intricate beauty, and grief at the suffering from which they emerged. “It would be so much better for everyone,” she said, “if *Ha* were still teaching at the university and none of this had ever happened—maybe in her free time she really would have taken up jewelry making as a hobby instead of a means of survival.”

Ha's story exemplifies a broader pattern among educators and intellectuals ensnared in the post-2016 purges—those who, once engaged in shaping minds, were forced to navigate a moral and existential struggle for survival. Like Melek and Furkan Çetinkaya, Mina Leyla, and Gökhan Açikkollu, *Ha* represents both the suffering and the enduring strength of a community targeted for its association with ideas of dialogue, service (*hizmet*), and education. Together, these narratives illuminate the human cost of political persecution while affirming the indomitable spirit of those who refuse to let oppression define their identity.

5.6 *Bre*: A Scholar's Pursuit of Education in Exile

Bre—a pseudonym used to safeguard her identity—was a student who had just completed her junior year at Suleyman Sah University and was home on summer break visiting her parents when the events of July 15, 2016, unfolded. At the time, her parents were working abroad at an international school in Pakistan—her father as principal and her mother in teaching and administrative roles.

In November 2016, the Pakistani government ordered all Turkish teachers associated with the PakTurk school system to leave the country. According to *Bre*, her parents were given one week to evacuate. She recalled:

“The Pakistani authorities wanted to make sure Turkey would be satisfied that they were not harboring the Hizmet people, who had already been labeled as ‘terrorists’ by Erdoğan’s regime. I truly believe that if we had not left quickly, my parents would have been abducted by Turkish security forces and sent back to Turkey to face charges and detention.”

Bre witnessed the fate of other families, such as the Kaçmaz family, who were abducted in the middle of the night, restrained, blindfolded, and forcibly flown to Turkey. The parents were held for months while the daughters were released after a day. Reflecting on these events, she said: “We knew our time in Pakistan could end the same way. It was a matter of acting fast, of survival.”

“Bre witnessed the fate of other families, ..., who were *abducted in the middle of the night, restrained, blindfolded, and forcibly flown to Turkey.*”

After learning that her university would close—the fifteenth and final institution to be shuttered—Bre traveled to the U.S. to stay with friends. She described the experience as surreal: “It felt like a movie on television that I couldn’t turn off. I was far away, in Pakistan, and yet I could see my parents facing a reality I never imagined... Every day it kept getting worse... In Turkish, there is a saying, ‘every mountain gets as much snow as it can hold.’ I am grateful my family has survived thus far, and I pray for those still in the midst of their winter.”

Bre sought admission to several U.S. universities, including George Mason University, but her applications were initially denied due to a lack of official transcripts. With Süleyman Şah University effectively erased by the Turkish government, all records had vanished. Fortunately, she had unofficial copies of transcripts, grade reports, and syllabi, which she used to gain admission to the University of the District of Columbia, where she completed her degree in Psychology. She later earned a Master’s in Counseling at George Washington University in 2021. Bre now works as a psychotherapist, often supporting immigrants navigating trauma and displacement. She reflected: “I feel lucky, but many others had to start all over because their academic records were destroyed. Education, which we had dedicated our lives to, was taken from us in an instant.”

Bre’s story underscores the human and educational costs of political repression, the resilience required to navigate sudden exile, and the moral and emotional labor of preserving one’s academic and personal identity amid systemic erasure.

6. Un-Muted:

Bearing Witness to the Human Stories of Hizmet Symphatizers

“Un-Muted” is an exhibit I curated in the Kansas City metropolitan area in September 2022, in conjunction with my work on the Advisory Board of *Advocates of Silenced Turkey* (AST), a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization dedicated to defending human and civil rights.

The exhibit documents the lives of victims of the *civil death* targeting the Hizmet community in Turkey since 2016, preserving their stories as told by family members and close friends. The *Un-Muted* exhibit displayed over 40 artifacts—personal belongings, letters, photographs, and other items—submitted by families who have lost loved ones either to torture, imprisonment, or deadly attempts to flee and seek asylum. At significant personal risk, volunteers and activists smuggled these artifacts out of Turkey to expose the reality of this ongoing persecution.

Activists such as Aslihan Kas and Hafza Girdap, both educators, have been instrumental in gathering these artifacts and amplifying the voices of those who have been silenced. Through their tireless advocacy, they confront the systematic efforts to erase the experiences of the Hizmet community, ensuring that the personal stories of suffering, resilience, and survival are heard and remembered.

Since its debut, *Un-Muted* has toured across multiple cities in the United States and Canada, creating a platform that makes the human cost of state repression tangible. By honoring the victims respectfully and sharing their narratives, the exhibit not only preserves memory but also challenges viewers to recognize the ongoing injustice, demanding accountability and solidarity with those affected.

6.1 The Akçabay Family: A Flight for Survival That Ended in Tragedy

While the *Un-Muted* exhibit sheds light on a multitude of personal narratives, some stories highlight the acute vulnerability faced by families attempting to escape persecution. The tragic fate of the Akçabay family exemplifies this reality. Murat and Hatice Akçabay, both devoted educators at a Hizmet-affiliated school, were forced into hiding for nearly two years as the state increasingly targeted them for their affiliation with the Movement.

As described in the *Un-Muted* exhibit placard,

“The educational institution where Murat Akçabay and Hatice Akçabay worked was closed because it was related to the Hizmet Movement. They went into hiding for 23 months after authorities issued a call record against them because of their connection to the Hizmet Movement. Fearing that the government would arrest them and leave their three children behind, they decided to flee Turkey.

Unemployment, not being able to have children treated when they are sick, and being deprived of all social rights, led the couple to leave Turkey when those conditions reached an unbearable point. While trying to cross the Maritsa River to Greece at midnight on July 18, 2018, their boat overturned. Hatice Akçabay(36) and her three sons, Ahmet Esat(6), Mesut(5), and Bekir Aras(1), died in the waters of Maritsa due to the accident. Only her husband, Murat Akçabay, remained from the family.”¹¹⁶

This harrowing account, preserved through artifacts and narrative testimony, illustrates the extreme risks faced by those seeking safety and the devastating human cost of systemic persecution. It is through the tireless work of advocates such as Aslihan Kas and Hafza Girdap, as well as the broader Advocates of Silenced Turkey network, that these stories of sacrifice, grief, and resilience are documented, ensuring they are brought to light for public understanding and historical record.

6.2 Ragıp Enes Katran: A Young Life Cut Short on the Bosphorus Bridge

While the tragedy of the Akçabay family highlights the mortal dangers faced by those attempting to escape persecution, other victims of the post-2016 purges lost their lives under circumstances equally harrowing but marked by sudden violence. Some on the Bosphorus Bridge, for example, were not so fortunate as Furkan Çetinkaya. Among them was Ragıp Enes Katran, whose family submitted his story and artifacts to *Advocates of Silenced Turkey* (AST), ensuring that his voice and sacrifice would not be forgotten.

This is the story of Ragıp Enes Katran, as told by his family:

“Ragıp Enes was born in 1996 in Gaziantep. He finished middle school and high school in first place. He qualified to enter the Air Force Academy, which was his dream since boyhood. He wanted to continue his successful education there and become a pilot. Ragıp Enes, a third-year air force academy student, went to Yalova for summer gliding training on July 12, 2016. After assembly at 22.30 on the night of July 15, he went to his ward to sleep. Their commanders sent them off to Istanbul with emergency sirens, issuing the order, ‘There is a drill, be ready.’

¹¹⁶ Artifacts from the *Un-Muted* Exhibit provided by the Akçabay family. The text in the quote is the indecipherable print from the placard in the photo with the description of the family. It was also printed in a booklet that was distributed at the event, which was prepared and reprinted by AST Publishing.

Students who came to the Bosphorus Bridge in Istanbul at 02:00 in the morning were met with an angry crowd who opposed the planned coup. The crowd first set fire to the bus that included Ragıp and broke its windows, then Ragıp Enes was killed by cutting his throat with a sharp object by an unidentified person. The families were allowed to go to the Forensic Medicine Institute 11 days after the attempted coup to identify the bodies of their children. Ragıp Enes, who was slandered and branded a traitor by the so-called ‘coup plotter’, was not even given a hearse; the family carried his own body and buried it.”¹¹⁷

Among the artifacts he left behind was a handwritten note in Turkish, which translates as:

“To give our lives for the sake of independence feels sweeter than drinking
ice-cold water in the August heat.
May the souls of all our martyrs who rushed to death without a moment’s
hesitation rest in peace.”¹¹⁸

Revisiting these words, AST activist Aslihan Kas reflected on the profound emotional weight of Ragıp Enes’s youth and the life he was denied, thinking of her own children and the fragile boundaries between safety and the violence that engulfed so many. The events on the Bosphorus Bridge marked the beginning of what state-controlled media described as a “crackdown on corruption,” but which others recognize as part of a systematic effort by the Erdoğan regime to eliminate Hizmet-affiliated individuals. The ripple effects of that night irrevocably altered countless lives, and the loss, both personal and societal, is immense.

“The events on the Bosphorus Bridge marked the beginning of...a *systematic effort* by the Erdoğan regime to *eliminate* Hizmet-affiliated individuals.”

¹¹⁷ Ragıp Enes Katran’s story was placed on a placard given to Aslihan Kas at AST by his family. *Un-Muted* Exhibit booklet text translated to English, June 10 2022.

¹¹⁸ Ragıp Enes Katran’s handwritten note given to Aslihan Kas at AST by his family. *Un-Muted* Exhibit booklet text translated to English, June 10, 2022.

6.3 Zabit Kişi: Abduction, Torture, and the Struggle for Justice

While Ragıp Enes Katran’s story reflects the sudden and violent loss of life during the Bosphorus Bridge events, other victims of the post-2016 purges endured prolonged and deliberate forms of persecution. Zabit Kişi’s experience exemplifies this systematic targeting, in which state power extended beyond Turkey’s borders to abduct and torture individuals for their affiliation with the Hizmet Movement.

Unlike Ragıp Enes, whose death was immediate and public, Zabit’s ordeal unfolded over months of enforced disappearance, clandestine detention, and documented torture, highlighting the multiple dimensions of repression—both lethal and psychological—faced by educators and activists.

Zabit Kişi was born in the Göksun district of Kahramanmaraş, Turkey, and pursued a career as an educator in Kazakhstan. In 2017, while awaiting an intercity flight at a Kazakh airport, he was forcibly abducted by unidentified persons on a private jet. For months, his family received no information about his whereabouts, prompting a social media campaign to locate him. Their efforts eventually revealed that Zabit was being held in a specially prepared torture center in Ankara, Turkey—specifically by the Kocaeli Police Department—for 108 days before he was released to appear in court.¹¹⁹

When his family finally saw him, the physical evidence of his ordeal was stark: he had lost 99 pounds, his eye twitched due to exposure to high-grade lights, his fingers bore burn marks from electrocution, and his body was scarred from multiple forms of torture. Among the abuses he endured, Zabit was stripped naked and sodomized with an electrocution device resembling a cattle prod. In court, he courageously described the torture inflicted upon him. At the same time, the only evidence used against him was possession of a phone application, ByLock, deemed by Turkish courts as sufficient proof of Gülen Movement affiliation and grounds for being labeled a terrorist.¹²⁰ Ultimately, Zabit was sentenced to 13 years and six months for the crime of being a Hizmet member in Kazakhstan, a conviction compounded by the extraordinary violation of being kidnapped from a sovereign nation.

¹¹⁹ Cevheri Güven, “Zabit Kişi Who Was Tortured for 108 Days: I No Longer Find Odd the Ones Who Committed Suicide,” BOLD Medya, January 7, 2019

¹²⁰ Paul B. Osterlund, “How a Secretive, Unknown Smartphone App Became the Center of Turkey’s Post-Coup Crackdown,” The Verge, February 28, 2018.

Zabit Kişi's letters to his lawyer and family describing his kidnapping and torture, along with his formal court statement, were among the more than 40 artifacts displayed in the *Un-Muted* exhibit I coordinated in the Kansas City metropolitan area in June 2022. Curated by members of *Advocates of Silenced Turkey* (AST), the exhibit provides a tangible record of the physical and emotional costs of state-sponsored violence, preserving the testimonies of both living and deceased victims of the *civil death* against the Hizmet community.¹²¹ Through these artifacts, *Un-Muted* honors individual experiences, confronts the mechanisms of systemic repression, and continues its mission to ensure that the voices of the persecuted are neither silenced nor forgotten.

“...the [*Un-Muted*] exhibit provides a *tangible record* of the *physical and emotional costs of state-sponsored violence*, preserving the testimonies of both living and deceased victims of the *civil death* against the Hizmet community.”

Conclusion

The stories collected in this research illuminate the human consequences of state repression against the Hizmet movement, offering a counter-narrative to the dominant political discourse in Turkey. Through oral histories, the lived experiences of survivors—educators, students, and families—come into sharp relief, revealing the profound personal, professional, and social losses inflicted by the post-2016 crackdown. *Ub*, stripped of his professorship and barred from teaching, exemplifies the erosion of academic freedom; Melek and Furkan Çetinkaya endured imprisonment and exile; *Ha* survived prolonged incarceration while finding resilience through creative expression; *Bre* navigated abrupt displacement and the erasure of her educational record; Mina Leyla continues to document and preserve the stories of the silenced; Ragip Enes Katran and Hatice Akçabay and her sons suffered loss and death in incomprehensible circumstances; and countless others, like Gökhan Açikkollu and Zabit Kişi, endured torture or imprisonment.

¹²¹ *Advocates of Silenced Turkey* (AST) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit charitable and educational organization based in NJ, USA, exclusively for the purpose of defending human and civil rights.

These narratives highlight the resilience, moral courage, and vocational devotion of individuals who refused to abandon their principles in the face of persecution. Their stories reveal how the commitment of Hizmet educators to service, grounded in faith, persisted despite systemic attempts to silence them. While explicit pedagogical practices were often left unarticulated—conditioned by fear and repression—their lived example demonstrates a pedagogy inseparable from ethical and spiritual vocation. Storytelling itself became a tool of resistance and empowerment, enabling survivors to reclaim voice, meaning, and agency.

The broader implications of these events extend beyond Turkey. The closure of schools, loss of academic positions, and persecution of students disrupted the educational trajectories of tens of thousands, highlighting the fragility of institutional and civic freedoms even in a modern, NATO-aligned nation. However, these oral histories also point to the enduring power of local knowledge, critical pedagogy, and authentic testimony in shaping civic imagination, fostering empathy, and advocating for justice.

Ultimately, this research affirms that every voice matters. By recording the experiences of those caught in the machinery of political repression, we preserve the dignity of human lives, illuminate systemic injustice, and provide a resource for education and advocacy. The narratives of Hizmet educators and students—though often silenced in official accounts—serve as both testimony and moral compass, offering insight into the resilience of the human spirit and the ongoing struggle for freedom, equity, and the right to bear witness.

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About CFG

The Center for Faith, Identity, and Globalization (CFG) is the interdisciplinary research and publication unit of Rumi Forum. CFG contributes to the knowledge and research at the intersection of faith, identity, and globalization by generating academically-informed analyses and facilitating scholarly exchanges. CFG's spectrum of themes will cover contemporary subjects that are relevant to our understanding of the connection between faith, identity, and globalization, such as interfaith engagement, religious nationalism, conflict resolution, globalization, religious freedom, and spirituality.

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