Enduring Persecution:

A Theo-Ethical Framework in Fethullah Gülen's Post-2016 Discourse

Semih Kiyma
Hizmet Scholar

Center for Faith Identity & Globalization

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rumiforum.org/cfig

The Center for Faith, Identity, and Globalization
1050 Connecticut Ave., NW, Suite 500, Washington, DC 20036
T (202) 429-1690
E cfig@rumiforum.org

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Abstract

Following the failed coup attempt of July 15, 2016, the Hizmet Movement became the target of an extensive campaign of state repression that led to the closure of its institutions, the displacement of its participants, and the criminalization of its public presence. In this context, Fethullah Gülen's post-2016 *Bamteli Sohbets* became an important means of interpreting persecution and shaping moral response. This article examines 160 talks delivered between 2016 and 2022 and argues that they articulate a sustained framework of endurance for a community living under repression. Across the corpus, Gülen interprets suffering through theological categories, calls for spiritual discipline against despair and inward collapse, strengthens communal solidarity amid dispersal and suspicion, places moral limits on response through non-retaliation and restraint, and encourages lawful advocacy alongside continued action under pressure. The talks thus present a religiously grounded ethic of endurance aimed at preserving moral discipline and communal cohesion under persecution.

Keywords: *Islamic Ethics*, *Hizmet Movement*, *Fethullah Gülen*, *Endurance*, *Nonviolent Resistance*

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1. Introduction

After Turkey's failed coup attempt on July 15, 2016, the Hizmet Movement,[1] a faith-inspired civil society network associated with Islamic scholar Fethullah Gülen,[2] became the target of an extensive campaign of state repression under the Erdoğan administration.

Hundreds of thousands were detained, arrested, investigated, dismissed from public service by governmental decree, or subjected to judicial restrictions for alleged affiliation with the Movement.[3] The government seized or shut down schools, universities, hospitals, charities, media outlets, and businesses.[4] Before 2016, the Movement was widely known for its activities in education, dialogue, and philanthropy.

For many participants, these activities were understood as expressions of religious commitment and service. After the coup attempt, however, the Turkish government labeled the Movement as a terrorist organization. The combined effect of these measures left a dispersed community in a state of legal insecurity and social exclusion. This crisis raised urgent questions about how suffering was to be interpreted and what kind of response it called for.

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[1] "Hizmet" means "service" in Turkish; the Movement is also widely referred to as the Gülen Movement.

[2] Fethullah Gülen lived in self-exile at *Chestnut Retreat Center* in Saylorsburg, Pennsylvania, from 1999 until his death on October 20, 2024.

[3] Human Rights Watch, "Türkiye," World Report 2026, accessed March 31, 2026. Citing a July 2025 statement by Turkey's Justice Minister, Human Rights Watch notes that investigations against 58,000 people and trials of 24,000 were ongoing, and that 11,640 remanded or convicted persons alleged to be linked to the Gülen Movement remained in prison.

[4] Turkey Rights Monitor, "Closed Institutions," accessed March 31, 2026; Turkey Rights Monitor, 2025 Almanac, accessed March 31, 2026. Turkey Rights Monitor documents the closure of a wide range of institutions after 2016, including 1,410 associations, 1,034 private schools, 835 student hostels, 109 foundations, 53 newspapers, 47 health facilities, 19 TV channels, and 15 universities; the 2025 Almanac also reproduces broader cumulative post-2016 figures on detentions, arrests, and judicial-control measures.

As R. Scott Appleby has argued, religion cannot be understood as inherently violent or inherently peaceable; its sacred resources are "ambivalent," capable of being mobilized toward sharply different ends depending on how they are interpreted and embodied in moments of upheaval.[5] This insight is especially relevant under severe repression, where religious leadership may shape whether suffering is interpreted as grounds for retaliation or as a call to moral restraint and endurance.

In the case of the Hizmet Movement, this helps explain why Gülen's post-2016 discourse was especially consequential: he was seen as the Movement's principal religious inspiration. Although Gülen consistently rejected being described as the Movement's "leader" and presented it as a voluntary civil society initiative,[6] his moral and theological authority was central to shaping its ethical orientation.

After July 2016, that authority took on renewed significance, as the Turkish government alleged he had orchestrated the coup attempt. Gülen denied the accusation in statements and interviews with international outlets. At the same time, he continued to address his audience through public statements, interviews, and written reflections.[7]

1.1. Method and Scope

Among these forms of communication, the *Bamteli Sohbets*,[8] a series of Turkish-language talks in which Gülen offered religious interpretation and spiritual guidance, occupy a particularly important place.[9] Delivered regularly, often weekly, they became one of his primary means of addressing his audience after 2016. Although these talks were delivered before an in-person audience, they reached much wider audiences through digital circulation, on the official website *Herkul* and affiliated media channels. As a result, they provide a publicly accessible record of his post-2016 response to the crisis.

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[5] R. Scott Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000), 54–56.

[6] Fethullah Gülen, "Vefat Sonrası Sevk ve İdare," *Kırık Testi*, May 11, 2003.

[7] For a collected volume of Gülen's written reflections from this period, see Fethullah Gülen, *Devoted to the Truth* (Clifton, NJ: Tughra Books, 2023).

[8] *Bamteli* is the title of the series; *sohbet* (pl. *sohbets*) refers here to a spoken religious talk or reflection, often lasting around 45 minutes.

[9] "Bamteli Arşiv," Herkul, accessed April 13, 2026.

For that reason, this study focuses on the full corpus of Gülen's post-2016 *Bamteli Sohbets*, from the failed July 15, 2016 coup attempt to his final recorded talk on October 22, 2022. While his interviews, public statements, and writings from this period also offer relevant material, this study treats these talks as its central body of evidence.

Existing scholarship has not systematically examined this post-2016 material. To address that gap, this study adopts a discourse-analytical approach attentive to recurring themes and to the role of discourse in shaping communal identity and resilience over time. The corpus includes 160 talks, which were transcribed and thematically coded with *ATLAS.ti* through close reading and systematic identification of recurring themes. These themes concern Gülen's interpretation of persecution, the individual and collective responses he encouraged, and the spiritual and ethical resources he mobilized to sustain his audience under repression.

What emerges from this corpus is a theo-ethical framework of endurance, one that addresses how persecution is interpreted, how spiritual and moral discipline are sustained, and how communal life is preserved under conditions of repression.

"While his interviews, public statements, and writings from [*July 15, 2016 to October 22, 2022*] also offer relevant material, this study treats these talks as its *central body of evidence*."

2. The Contours of Gülen's Post-2016 Discourse

2.1 Theological Framing and the Formation of Endurance

2.1.1. Reframing Persecution

Gülen's post-2016 talks repeatedly interpret repression through a religious lens. He describes the crackdown as "a profound ordeal" for the Movement and frames it in ways that make suffering intelligible and endurable. Several recurring themes structure this interpretation, especially religious and historical examples, divine testing, hypocrisy and betrayal from within, and divine justice.

Gülen situates the post-2016 ordeal within a broader lineage of tyranny. This extends from sacred narratives to modern political examples. In his talks, he refers to figures such as *Pharaoh*, *Nimrod*, *Abū Jahl*, and *Yazid*[10] alongside modern examples such as *Lenin*, *Stalin*, and *Hitler*.[11] Through these comparisons, the current crisis appears as part of a broader pattern in which faithfulness is tested and the moral contours of the moment become clearer.

“Oppressors fall into a familiar lineage, while the *persecuted* are associated with models of *steadfastness* and *endurance*.

Oppressors fall into a familiar lineage, while the persecuted are associated with models of steadfastness and endurance. He aligns sufferers with Prophet *Mūsā* (Moses), Prophet *Yūsuf* (Joseph) in wrongful imprisonment, and early martyrs like *Yāsir* and *Sumayya*.[12] Seen alongside such figures, the persecuted undergo a test, and their endurance becomes a sign of moral and religious steadfastness. The power of persecutors, by contrast, is short-lived and ends in disgrace.[13]

Within this line of interpretation, Gülen also turns to what affliction means for the believer. In one talk, he likens God’s testing to the work of a goldsmith who places gold in the furnace, an image that presents affliction as “a process through which a person’s true moral and spiritual character is revealed and refined.”[14] In another, suffering is presented more directly as expiation, through which sins are cleansed, and the believer is prepared for divine presence.[15]

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[10] *Pharaoh* and *Nimrod* are well-known figures of tyranny in Abrahamic tradition; *Abū Jahl* was an early opponent of the Prophet *Muhammad*, and *Yazid* is commonly associated in Islamic history with oppression and unjust rule.

[11] Fethullah Gülen, “İrtidat, Din Şûrası (!) ve Hizmet Hareketi,” *Bamteli Sohbeti*, October 24, 2016.

[12] *Yāsir* and *Sumayya* were among the earliest followers of Islam in 7th-century *Mecca*. They were subjected to severe persecution for their beliefs, and *Sumayya* is widely regarded in Islamic tradition as the first martyr, while *Yāsir* also died as a result of the mistreatment they endured.

[13] Gülen, “İftiracı Kılıklı Müfteriler ve Medrese-i Yusufiye”; “Halimiz, Yolumuz ve Duamız.”

[14] Gülen, “İbret, Garipler ve Korku.”

[15] Gülen, “Mevsim Hazan Değil.”

Elsewhere, he refers to a *hadith* stating that "the most intense trials fall upon the Prophets, then upon those closest to them in rank."[16] Together, these statements frame affliction as a divine testing that gives suffering meaning and makes it endurable without surrender to despair or resentment.

At the same time, he insists that the present ordeal has a distinctive gravity, arising both from the moral language used to justify the campaign and from the scale on which it is enacted. What deepens the crisis, in his account, is the use of religious and moral justifications to place Islamic values in the service of worldly power, especially when repression is carried out by those presenting themselves in conservative and religious terms.[17] For that reason, he often presents the persecutors through the figure of the *munāfiq*, the hypocrite within the community itself. Betrayal through the language of piety poses a deeper danger because it twists moral and religious values to serve political and self-interested ends. This is why figures such as *Ibn Salūl*, remembered in Islamic tradition as the emblematic hypocrite in the early Muslim community, appear in his rhetoric as more dangerous than overt enemies such as *Abū Jahl*, an archetypal external opponent of the Prophet.[18]

Gülen also stresses the scale and collective character of the crackdown. He presents the campaign as extending beyond individuals to institutions, reaching across an entire civil-society network through a state-backed process of repression. Individuals were imprisoned, dismissed from public service, exiled, or publicly stigmatized, while institutions were shuttered or seized, assets confiscated, social trust damaged, and families fractured under pressure. In his account, the campaign aimed to dismantle an institutional and social network associated with education, dialogue, philanthropy, and service.[19] This collective and systemic dimension means that the persecution exceeds the suffering of particular individuals, even though it was experienced through innumerable personal tragedies.

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[16] Fethullah Gülen, "Uhud mu, Taif mi?" *Bamteli Sohbeti*, October 9, 2017. For the *hadith*, see Abū ʿĪsā Muḥammad ibn ʿĪsā al-Tirmidhī, *Jāmiʿ al-Tirmidhī*, Kitāb al-Zuhd, no. 2398.

[17] Gülen, "Dikenliğe Düşen Güller ve İnleyen Bülbüller."

[18] Gülen, "Hüve Perspektifi ve Mukaddesatla Aldatanlar."

[19] Gülen, "Karanlıkların Suikast Planları ve Hizmete Komplo."

Gülen's theological understanding of justice also informs how persecution is interpreted. Across these talks, suffering does not escape divine reckoning, and ultimate justice belongs to God.[20] Mercy, and at times forgiveness, are therefore presented as signs of a prophetic[21] moral posture.[22] Yet this stance does not preclude lawful and civic response, which he elsewhere encourages in the face of injustice. The point is that justice is not to be sought through retaliation. In this way, persecution is framed as a trial that demands endurance while also placing ethical limits on one's response. This theological reframing also grounds the spiritual disciplines Gülen describes as necessary for enduring persecution, since suffering must be met with practices that sustain the believer under pressure.

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2.1.2. Spiritual Disciplines of Endurance

A central axis of Gülen's post-2016 discourse is the effort to resist despair and sustain moral and spiritual steadiness amid conditions of persecution. At the forefront is active patience (*sabr-ı müsbet*), which he presents as a disciplined form of perseverance under constraint.[23] This kind of patience means "bearing hardship without lapsing into stagnation and continuing on one's path" despite pressure from all sides.[24] It enables the believer to endure affliction without inward disintegration and to pursue constructive action under constraint.

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[20] Fethullah Gülen, "İrtidat, Din Şûrası (!) ve Hizmet Hareketi," *Bamteli Sohbeti*, October 24, 2016.

[21] Here "prophetic" refers, in the Islamic sense, to a moral stance modeled on the prophets as divinely sent figures whose lives serve as exemplary guides for believers.

[22] Gülen, "Allah'a Sığınıyoruz."

[23] Gülen, "İçerideki Mazlumlar ve Cebrî Muhacirler."

[24] Gülen, "İftiracı Kılıklı Müfteriler ve Medrese-i Yusufiye."

He also grounds this understanding of patience in Qur'anic language, repeatedly drawing on assurances such as "Indeed, with hardship comes ease" (Qur'an, 94:6) to frame suffering within a horizon of divine promise. Yet patience in these sermons is not reducible to adaptive action alone. It also includes the discipline of remaining composed when affliction first strikes[25] and of turning to God in what Gülen explicitly calls "not complaint, but laying one's condition before God" (*şikâyet değil…arz-ı hâl*). Pain is voiced here in a manner that preserves reverence before God and does not slip into objection to His decree.[26]

"[*Gülen*] also grounds this understanding of *patience* in Qur'anic language, repeatedly drawing on assurances such as "*Indeed, with hardship comes ease*" (Qur'an, 94:6) to frame *suffering* within a horizon of *divine promise*."

Prayer and remembrance of God also function in Gülen's post-2016 discourse as key supports of this disciplined inner resistance. When he describes a condition in which "all means fall silent," the appropriate response is not paralysis but renewed turning toward God with one's whole effort and attention.[27] Reliance on God, in this framework, stabilizes the inner world, keeps despair from becoming dominant, and preserves the capacity for faithful and disciplined action under uncertainty.

Alongside patience and prayer, Gülen highlights further spiritual disciplines needed to endure persecution, especially contented acceptance before God (*rıza*) and gratitude. Affliction is acknowledged in full, yet complaint is restrained, and bitterness is not allowed to govern the believer's relation to God. The pain remains real, but it is received within the conviction that "the good lies in what God decrees and chooses."[28] Closely related to this is gratitude, which directs attention to the goods that remain and, in some cases, become more visible under affliction.

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[25] For the *hadith* on patience at the first shock, see also Muḥammad ibn Ismāʿīl al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, Kitāb al-Janāʾiz, no. 1302: "The real patience is at the first stroke of a calamity."

[26] Fethullah Gülen, "Kalbe Oklar Saplanırken," *Bamteli Sohbeti*, December 12, 2016.

[27] Gülen, "Halimiz, Yolumuz ve Duamız."

[28] Gülen, "İrtidat, Din Şûrası (!) ve Hizmet Hareketi"; "Kalbe Oklar Saplanırken."

At times, Gülen expresses this by thanking God even amid deprivation. Gratitude also opens a way of understanding suffering as a site of purification, reward, and renewed devotion.[29]

For Gülen, one of the gravest dangers of persecution lies in the inward collapse it may produce.[30] Worldly attachment, self-importance, and the erosion of sincerity threaten the believer's spiritual integrity. He repeatedly presents sincerity and constancy of heart as indispensable under pressure.[31] The pursuit of status, susceptibility to self-interest and public approval, and worldly preoccupation appear as key points of failure. If these take root, outward endurance loses its spiritual substance. In this framework, the decisive struggle is inward. These spiritual disciplines help the believer endure suffering, preserve sincerity, guard the heart from deviation, and keep one's intention directed toward God.[32]

"...*spiritual disciplines* help the believer *endure* suffering, *preserve* sincerity, *guard* the heart from deviation, and *keep* one's intention directed toward God."

2.1.3. Preserving Communal Solidarity

Gülen's discourse also treats the preservation of communal bonds as essential under severe pressure. This emphasis was closely tied to scriptural imagery of solidarity. Invoking the image of believers as "a firmly joined structure" (*bünyan-ı mersus*; Qur'an, 61:4), he presented harmony (*vifak*), unity (*ittifak*), and mutual support (*teavün*) as indispensable virtues in times of crisis.[33]

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[29] Fethullah Gülen, "Kazanma Kuşağındayken Korku, İftira ve Gıybet," *Bamteli Sohbeti*, January 15, 2018.

[30] Gülen, "Sabrın Kadarsın"; "Muhasebe-Hidayet ve Zulüm."

[31] Gülen, "Derdi Dünya Olanın"; "Derin Müslümanlığa İhtiyaç Var"; "İftiracı Kılıklı Müfteriler ve Medrese-i Yusufiye."

[32] Gülen, "Muhasebe-Hidayet ve Zulüm"; "Derin Müslümanlığa İhtiyaç Var"; "İftiracı Kılıklı Müfteriler ve Medrese-i Yusufiye."

[33] Gülen, "İnanmayın Onlara, Kanmayın Dünyaya, Geç Kalmayın Yardıma."

Within this framework, unity appears as both a religious obligation and a practical condition of communal endurance. It was also understood as one of the principal means through which divine aid was expected.[34]

He also warned that persecution may generate internal corrosion through suspicion and mutual blame. He described this danger as "doubling the calamity," namely, allowing harm inflicted from outside to be compounded by fragmentation from within.[35] He cautioned that periods of affliction easily give rise to accusation and fault-finding, yet insisted that believers must resist such impulses and remain closely bound to one another. In this respect, the avoidance of ill suspicion (*su-i zan*) and the refusal of mutual blame or attribution of guilt (*atf-ı cürüm*) were presented as ethical disciplines necessary for communal survival. The underlying concern was to prevent external repression from reproducing itself within the community in the form of distrust and fragmentation.

In response to this risk, solidarity took two especially important forms. The first was the image of "the Ansar", the Medinan "helpers" who welcomed and supported the early Muslim emigrants. Gülen repeatedly called his followers to recover this model in the present by opening their homes, sharing their livelihoods, and bearing the burdens of those displaced or left in hardship. In diasporic settings, he pointed to concrete practices such as offering rent-free accommodation, sharing resources and opportunities, and building practical networks of care as present-day expressions of that model.[36] In this way, hospitality is framed as a practical expression of communal responsibility.

A second major motif was assistance to the afflicted (*muavenet*), which he framed as a religious and moral obligation toward those left vulnerable by persecution. This duty extended to prisoners, the dismissed, exiles, and especially their families, many of whom faced economic deprivation and social abandonment. He also stressed the need to sustain their morale through continued communication, solidarity, and spiritual encouragement, so that prolonged suffering would not harden into despair.[37]

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[34] Fethullah Gülen, "Siz Nerdesiniz Ey Müminler!," Bamteli Sohbeti, February 26, 2017.

[35] Gülen, "Kenetlenmeliyiz."

[36] Gülen, "Karasevdalılar ve Zamanın Ruhu."

[37] Gülen, "Dikenliğe Düşen Güller ve İnleyen Bülbüller."

"[*Gülen*] also stressed the need to *sustain* their *morale* through continued *communication*, *solidarity*, and *spiritual encouragement*, so that prolonged *suffering* would not harden into *despair*."

Here, assistance was presented as more than charitable giving; it became a disciplined practice aimed at preserving both material subsistence and moral endurance. Those who suffered were to be sustained through support and the steady presence of others.[38] He also emphasized the continuing responsibility of those living abroad toward relatives and fellow believers left vulnerable by persecution, whether in Turkey or in exile. In this context, Gülen praised organized forms of *muavenet*, including fundraising initiatives and *kermes* events, through which the preparation and sale of food became a practical means of relief.[39] He also linked these practices to what is known in Islamic tradition as *iktisat*, the disciplined curbing of one's own consumption to free resources for others, and to *îsâr*, the moral practice of preferring others over oneself even in times of need and hardship.[40]

Yet for Gülen, such assistance extended beyond material support. It also required what he described as "sharing in the suffering of others",[41] which he treated as a mark of genuine faith. From the earliest weeks after July 2016, he cast the moment as one of acute distress and helplessness and called believers to rely on God absolutely, to pray with the desperation of Prophet *Yūsuf* (Joseph) in the well and Prophet *Yūnus* (Jonah) in the belly of the fish, and to carry that anguish into the night in sustained supplication for the persecuted.[42] In another talk, he also called for "circles of prayer, supplication, and entreaty," giving this response an explicitly collective form.[43] Empathy was thus framed as a religious and moral obligation.

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[38] Fethullah Gülen, "İdeal Dünyanın Hak Üçgeni," Bamteli Sohbeti, March 13, 2017.

[39] Gülen, "Kurbet Yolculuğu, Güzergâh Emniyeti ve Muavenet."

[40] Gülen, "Bayram, Mazlumlar ve Hüzün"; "Mutrefin."

[41] Gülen, "Eşkıyanın Tasallutu ve Yol Haritamız."

[42] Gülen, "Yangın."

[43] Gülen, "Nesl-i Cedid ve Dirilişin Esasları."

He repeatedly cited the *hadith*, "Whoever does not concern himself with the affairs of the Muslims is not one of them,"[44] and urged his audience to assess their own spiritual condition by the degree to which the suffering of prisoners, exiles, and families marked by loss and separation affected them.[45] For Gülen, sharing another's sorrow meant remaining attentive to the pain of others and carrying that pain into supplication on their behalf.[46] In this way, his discourse helped form an ethic of disciplined sorrow that bound scattered individuals into a moral community oriented toward the suffering of others and toward the hope of their eventual relief.[47]

"..., [*Gülen's*] discourse helped form an ethic of *disciplined sorrow* that bound scattered individuals into a *moral community* oriented toward the *suffering* of others and toward the *hope* of their eventual *relief*."

2.2 Ethical and Practical Responses Under Repression

2.2.1. Non-Retaliation and Moral Restraint

Although Gülen had long opposed retaliatory violence, including during the politically violent climate of the late 1970s in Turkey, the repression that followed July 2016 placed that stance under exceptional pressure and gave it renewed prominence in his post-2016 discourse. He repeatedly drew on the Qur'anic command to "repel evil with what is better" (Qur'an, 41:34) as a guiding norm for responding to persecution. He did not deny that the Qur'an permits proportionate response: "If you punish, then punish with the like of that with which you were afflicted" (Qur'an, 16:126). Yet he consistently read that permission together with the verse's closing commendation of patience and treated endurance as the higher moral course.

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[44] Al-Ṭabarānī, Abū al-Qāsim Sulaymān ibn Aḥmad. *Al-Muʿjam al-Awsat*. Vol. 7, ḥadīth 7469 (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥaramayn, 1995).

[45] Fethullah Gülen, "Bayram, Mazlumlar ve Hüzün," Bamteli Sohbeti, September 2, 2017.

[46] Gülen, "Nesl-i Cedid ve Dirilişin Esasları."

[47] Gülen, "Izdırap, Izdırap, Izdırap."

His point, then, was that prophetic ethics call believers to forgo vengeance and to respond with restraint in both speech and conduct.[48] Thus, refraining from retaliation was a matter of fidelity to character rather than passivity in the face of injustice, because retaliation risked making the wronged resemble the oppressor.

He grounded this preference for non-retaliation in prophetic examples. He frequently returned to the Prophet's response to humiliation and violence, especially at *Ṭā'if* and in the *Meccan* period, as evidence that injury did not have to culminate in revenge.[49] From this perspective, the first response to oppressors was prayer for their guidance and the refusal to mirror their conduct. Even as he acknowledged pain and the human impulse to respond, he urged his audience to keep these reactions within moral bounds so that suffering would not harden into hatred.[50]

The ethic of non-retaliation is sharpened further through Gülen's appeal to the Qur'anic story of the two sons of Adam, later identified in Islamic tradition as *Hābil* and *Qābil* (Abel and Cain). In this account, *Hābil* is confronted by his brother *Qābil*'s (Cain's) threat of murder, yet refuses to raise his own hand in return (Qur'an, 5:28). For him, this episode offers a model of moral restraint under mortal threat. He applies this model directly to the present, insisting that even severe injury should not lead believers to retaliate in kind, whether through physical force or verbal aggression. He also pointed to the conduct of his followers after 2016 as a concrete confirmation of this ethic. As he presents it, raids, confiscations, and humiliation did not provoke even minimal physical retaliation from those associated with the Movement.[51]

"As [*Gülen*] presents it, *raids*, *confiscations*, and *humiliation did not provoke even minimal physical retaliation* from those associated with the Movement."

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[48] Fethullah Gülen, "Asra Yemin Olsun Ki," *Bamteli Sohbeti*, July 24, 2016; Fethullah Gülen, "Dert, Rıza ve Reca," *Bamteli Sohbeti*, September 23, 2018; Fethullah Gülen, "Acımasızlar ve Merhamet," *Bamteli Sohbeti*, October 22, 2017.

[49] Gülen, "Dünya Şefkate Muhtaç."

[50] Gülen, "Dünya Şefkate Muhtaç";"Acımasızlar ve Merhamet."

[51] Gülen, "Fitne ve Hâbil Tavrı"; "Asıl Hüner ve Gerçek Zafer"; Gülen, "Ne Güzel Yol, Ne İyi Arkadaşlar."

Gülen also extended this ethic of non-retaliation to speech. At times referring to the Qur'anic command to "turn away from the ignorant" (Qur'an, 7:199), he warned against forms of polemical engagement that degraded discourse and drained spiritual energy. In some talks, this concern broadened into a wider caution against habitual outrage, backbiting, and the repeated rehearsal of grievance.

Such exchanges risked distracting believers from the work before them and weakening their moral focus.[52] He therefore urged restraint in public controversy and, in some cases, suggested that responses to slander or legal claims be entrusted to a limited number of qualified individuals so that the wider community would not be drawn into reactive dispute.[53]

Avoiding degrading contention thus carried ethical and spiritual significance, since it helped preserve dignity, prevent escalation, and keep believers from reproducing the habits they condemned. He also warned that acts of provocation could be used to draw the Movement into precisely the kind of reaction that would discredit it. For that reason, he gave priority to restrained forms of address that refused to mirror the oppressor's language.[54]

Gülen's reflections also preserve a distinction between condemning wrongdoing and recognizing the wrongdoer's humanity. Hatred is directed toward qualities such as cruelty and deceit, while the oppressor is still regarded as a human being whose ultimate end may evoke pity rather than vengeance. Within this frame, even tyrants are not placed beyond compassion. He, at times, stressed this point by urging his audience to imagine the oppressor's fate in the hereafter, a fate so grievous that it would stir sorrow rather than satisfaction.[55]

A similar distinction appears in Gülen's reflections on forgiveness. In several places, he preserves a distinction between opposing wrongdoing and recognizing the humanity of the person who commits it, while also distinguishing between personal and collective rights.

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[52] Fethullah Gülen, "O Kutlu Selam Uğruna," *Bamteli Sohbeti*, February 22, 2020.

[53] Gülen, "Eziyetler–Hüzün ve İlahi Emirler."

[54] Gülen, "Karanlıkların Suikast Planları ve Hizmete Komplo."

[55] Gülen, "Muhasebe-Hidayet ve Zulüm"; "Kuvvet Haktadır, Haklı İnsaflıdır."

He states on more than one occasion that he forgives violations of his own personal rights[56], yet maintains that wrongs committed against religion, the community, or future generations cannot be waived at the discretion of any one individual.[57] Forgiveness thus remains a personal ethic, but no individual has the moral authority to waive injuries that implicate the wider community, religion, or future generations. He also rejects apologizing to the oppressor under conditions of persecution, presenting such refusal as a matter of moral integrity. Drawing on prophetic precedents, he argues that such apologies strengthen the oppressor's hand and make injustice easier to sustain.[58]

"*Forgiveness*...remains a *personal ethic*, but no individual has the moral authority to waive injuries that implicate the wider community, religion, or future generations."

2.2.2. Practical Conduct Under Repression

While much of Gülen's discourse revolved around theological reframing and moral guidance, he also addressed practical questions of survival and witness under persecution. A central practical principle in these responses was that one should not "make the oppressor's work easier."[59]

He treated what he described as *gaybubet* (concealment from public visibility) and, where necessary, migration as religiously legitimate responses under severe repression. In the context of surveillance, systematic monitoring, and the threat of arbitrary detention without due process, withdrawal from public visibility appears in his discourse as a prudent means of avoiding unjust arrest. Migration (*hicret*), in turn, appears as a legitimate and at times commendable option when repression becomes so severe that the forms of service and communal life associated with Hizmet can no longer be sustained or remain viable, though he did not present it as a universal obligation.

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[56] Fethullah Gülen, "İftiracı Kılıklı Müfteriler ve Medrese-i Yusufiye," *Bamteli Sohbeti*, January 23, 2017.

[57] Gülen, "Halimiz, Yolumuz ve Duamız."

[58] Gülen, "Rahmet, Ümit ve Niyaz"; "Değmez mi?"

[59] Gülen, "Mefkûre Muhacirleri ve Yiğitçe Duruş."

At the same time, he linked migration to Qur'anic promises of divine provision after persecution and presented it as a setting in which believers might preserve themselves and continue forms of service under new conditions.[60] At times, he also described dispersal as opening new avenues for service.[61]

He grounded this view in prophetic precedents such as Prophet *Mūsā*'s (Moses) flight to *Midian* and the Prophet Muhammad's concealment during his departure from *Mecca*.[62] In some talks, he went further, describing the effort to avoid capture and thus deny oppressors an easier path to injustice as a religious duty and, at times, even as a form of worship.[63] He nevertheless acknowledged the burdens of such a life. In these accounts, life in hiding is marked by restricted movement, dependence on relatives or sympathizers, and the constant fear of sudden police raids.[64]

"In some talks, [*Gülen*] went further, describing the effort to *avoid capture* and thus deny oppressors an easier path to injustice as a *religious duty* and, at times, even as a form of *worship*."

This protective logic also extended beyond Turkey. For those who had remained abroad, the danger took a different form in the continuing risk of abduction or forced return.[65] In that setting, he referred to practical precautions such as remaining out of sight where necessary, alerting local authorities in the event of an attempted abduction, and appealing to international mechanisms where possible.[66]

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[60] Fethullah Gülen, "Hicret ve Cihad-ı Ekber," *Bamteli Sohbeti*, January 14, 2019.

[61] Gülen, "İmanın Tadı: İnsana Sevgi ve Ümit."

[62] Gülen, "Aktif Sabırla Sabredeceğiz."

[63] Gülen, "İftiracı Kılıklı Müfteriler ve Medrese-i Yusufiye."

[64] Gülen, "İçerideki Mazlumlar ve Cebrî Muhacirler."

[65] This concern emerged in a broader context in which the transnational targeting of alleged Gülen Movement affiliates had become increasingly visible after 2016. Freedom House records that the Turkish government stated it had secured the return of 116 people from 27 countries in connection with the coup attempt. See Freedom House, "Turkey," Freedom House: Understanding Transnational Repression, accessed April 9, 2026.

[66] Gülen, "Mefkûre Muhacirleri ve Yiğitçe Duruş."

Gülen also insisted that silence in the face of injustice was a grave moral failure. He used the phrase "mute devil" (*dilsiz şeytan*)[67] for those who remained silent while truth was being distorted and oppression carried out openly. He therefore urged his followers to pursue justice through all available legal and democratic means. Domestic courts were to be exhausted where possible, followed by the *Constitutional Court* and, if necessary, the *European Court of Human Rights*.

Even when these legal avenues proved ineffective or inaccessible, however, he insisted that the obligation to make injustice known remained. International institutions, human rights mechanisms, and transnational media were therefore presented as essential avenues for making injustice visible.[68] He also referred to Said Nursî's statement that "Prevailing among civilized peoples is achieved through persuasion." In this context, advocacy meant making injustice publicly known and seeking redress through lawful and persuasive means.[69]

These practical responses also required mutual consultation under changing conditions of repression. Noting that "every time has its own ruling," he urged collective deliberation over what could still be done within present constraints.[70]

This counsel was closely tied to his understanding of active patience, which here took the form of continued effort and adjustment under constraint. When one avenue was blocked, another was to be sought; when circumstances changed, action had to be reassessed without abandoning principle.[71]

In this way, adaptation appears as a disciplined form of perseverance under pressure. He also raised the possibility that, in moments of strain, some may have relied too heavily on their own judgment and that greater reliance on collective deliberation might have helped avert mistakes.[72] This line of reflection also turned attention inward.

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[67] The expression "*dilsiz şeytan*" is a well-known moral idiom in Turkish Islamic discourse, used to refer to those who remain silent in the face of injustice or falsehood.

[68] Fethullah Gülen, "Bayram, Mazlumlar ve Hüzün," *Bamteli Sohbeti*, September 2, 2017.

[69] Gülen, "Değmez mi?"

[70] Gülen, "Şahsiyet Yetimliğinden Kurtuluş."

[71] Gülen, "İçerideki Mazlumlar ve Cebrî Muhacirler,"

[72] Gülen, "Kurbet Yolculuğu: Güzergâh Emniyeti ve Muavenet."

"[*Gülen*] also raised the possibility that, in moments of strain, some may have relied too heavily on their own judgment and that greater reliance on *collective deliberation* might have helped *avert mistakes*."

2.2.3. Self-Reckoning Under Persecution

One expression of that inward turn was self-reckoning, a recurrent motif in Gülen's post-2016 discourse and a Sufi-inflected practice of moral self-examination (*muhasebe*). It did not displace responsibility for the injustice itself; rather, it directed each person toward self-examination. Drawing on verses such as "tend to your own selves" (Qur'an, 5:105) and "Whatever misfortune befalls you is from yourselves" (Qur'an, 4:79), Gülen urged his followers to begin with themselves by asking what they might have done differently, which opportunities they had underused, and where their intentions had become clouded.[73] In this vein, he often posed tentative questions about the use of communal resources. Could the community have made more effective and disciplined use of its schools, media, and networks? Had a degree of slackening set in over time, reducing the intensity with which these opportunities were pursued?[74]

He also asked whether the positions in which God had placed them had been met with the devotion they required. If even a slight trace of self-congratulation or pride in success had entered the heart, sincerity itself was endangered.[75] Hence his repeated insistence that achievements be acknowledged as divine favor rather than human accomplishment.[76] This concern also widened into a broader warning against inward corruptions such as egoism, narcissism, and worldliness. He asked whether, even in the course of worship or service, subtle desires for recognition, comfort, or influence might have entered the heart.[77]

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[73] Fethullah Gülen, "Muhasebe-Hidayet ve Zulüm," *Bamteli Sohbeti*, August 8, 2016.

[74] Gülen, "Musibet Zamanı İmtihanları"; "İmtihan, Sekine ve Kurtuluş."

[75] Gülen, "Ahiretin İnşası ve Hepsi Allah'a Emanet"; "Gönül Ufkunda Diriliş."

[76] Gülen, "Değmez mi?"

[77] Gülen, "Muhasebe-Hidayet ve Zulüm"; "Kalbe Oklar Saplanırken."

To the extent such impulses intruded, sincerity was at risk. The tone, however, remained exploratory rather than accusatory. The question was whether such motives had quietly settled in the self. The remedy, he counseled, lay in constant self-audit and renewed sincerity.

Finally, Gülen modeled this language of self-reckoning by directing it toward himself. On many occasions, he included himself within this practice of self-examination, at times in explicitly self-accusatory terms. In this way, he presented self-scrutiny as the appropriate response to crisis, directing attention toward renewed sincerity and self-correction rather than toward the faults of others.[78]

"...Gülen modeled [*the*] language of *self-reckoning* by directing it toward himself. On many occasions, he included himself within this practice of *self-examination*, at times in explicitly *self-accusatory terms*."

2.3 Hope and Future Orientation

Gülen frequently interpreted the present through examples drawn from sacred and historical precedent. His post-2016 discourse also kept a clear horizon of expectation before his audience. Even as he dwelt on the darkness of the present, he did not leave his audience there; he reopened a horizon beyond the crisis and kept before them the possibility that these conditions would not endure forever.

At several points, he insisted that history does not remain fixed in one condition and that believers must resist despair even under intense pressure.[79] Hope, therefore, carried moral weight. It sustained endurance and preserved the will to continue under narrowing circumstances. He repeatedly warned against despair, describing it as a force that hinders moral and communal endurance.

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[78] Fethullah Gülen, "Sızıntıdan Çağlayana," *Bamteli Sohbeti*, March 27, 2017.

[79] Gülen, "Sufyaniyet Çağı, Toplumsal Cinnet ve Hukuk Mücadelesi"; "Yolda Dökülenler ve İnsani Davranışlar Manzumesi."

Gülen invoked Nursi's warning that "despair is an obstacle to all perfection"[80] and returned more than once to the image that "every winter is followed by spring".[81] In another talk, he described despair as entering the "snake's mouth"[82] and urged his listeners to ask what could still be done under constrained conditions.[83]

The image of dawn became one of the clearest expressions of this outlook. Gülen argued that even a "false dawn" points beyond itself to the coming of the true dawn.[84] This image allowed him to acknowledge bleak conditions without treating them as final. It also carried practical implications. Believers were to remain steady and active even when signs of change were partial or premature. Present darkness called for continued endurance until a fuller opening appeared.

At times, he expressed this expectation through prophetic history. Referring to the Prophet's departure from *Mecca* and later return, he recalled a pattern in which exile is followed by return and dispossession by restoration.[85] In this way, exile and return became part of a wider pattern through which dispossession could be endured without being treated as permanent. These examples did not function as direct predictions about the present. They provided a religious language of expectation through which affliction could be borne without surrender to finality.

"...*exile* and *return* became part of a wider pattern through which dispossession could be endured without being treated as permanent."

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[80] Fethullah Gülen, "Son Şeytanî Senaryo," *Bamteli Sohbeti*, August 14, 2017.

[81] Gülen, "Mukaddes Çile Nöbeti."

[82] The expression "entering the snake's mouth" conveys surrender to paralyzing despair or to a perceived state of imminent danger. In English, roughly comparable images include "into the lion's den" and "into the jaws of danger."

[83] Gülen, "Rahmet, Ümit ve Niyaz."

[84] Gülen, "Son Şeytanî Senaryo."

[85] Gülen, "Kuvvet Haktadır, Haklı İnsaflıdır."

3. Conclusion: A Theo-Ethical Framework of Endurance

This study has argued that Fethullah Gülen's post-2016 *Bamteli Sohbets* articulate a sustained theo-ethical framework for enduring persecution. These talks do more than console a community under severe pressure. They interpret suffering through theological categories, cultivate spiritual disciplines that counter despair, preserve communal solidarity under conditions of dispersal and suspicion, and place clear moral limits on response through non-retaliation, restraint, and refusal of revenge. They also offer practical guidance by encouraging adaptation, lawful advocacy, mutual consultation, and continued service under narrowed conditions. Taken together, these elements form an integrated framework for living through repression without surrendering moral discipline, communal cohesion, or hope.

"What is distinctive about this framework is its *siting of persecution* within a *theological* and *ethical grammar*.

What is distinctive about this framework is its siting of persecution within a theological and ethical grammar. Oppression is not approached simply as a political injury. Instead, it is interpreted through divine testing, prophetic example, and accountability before God, while response is directed toward sincerity, patience, compassion, and self-restraint. In this sense, suffering is given meaning while clear moral limits are placed on response. This ethical orientation works against retaliation, hatred, despair, and internal fragmentation.

This helps clarify the particular character of Gülen's post-2016 discourse. Even when the talks identify injustice, invoke figures of tyranny, or call for legal and civic efforts, they remain oriented toward preserving moral and spiritual integrity under pressure. The question is not only how oppression is to be confronted, but also how a persecuted community is to endure it without reproducing the logic of the oppressor in speech, action, or communal life. The material analyzed here is best understood as a religiously grounded ethic of endurance.

"The question is not only how oppression is to be confronted, but also how a persecuted community is to endure it without reproducing the logic of the oppressor in speech, action, or communal life."

More broadly, this study contributes to scholarship on religion and persecution by showing how religious discourse can serve as a medium for moral formation, ethical boundary-setting, and communal preservation under repression. Here, spiritual interpretation does not cancel practical responsibility, and ethical restraint does not exclude lawful forms of witness and advocacy. The discourse brings together theological meaning, communal discipline, and practical guidance in a way that resists any simple division between inward spirituality and public response.

This study remains limited to the analysis of Gülen's discourse itself. It does not establish how these talks were received, interpreted, or put into practice across the diverse social worlds of the Hizmet Movement. The extent to which this framework was internalized, adapted, contested, or extended across different regions, generations, and institutional settings remains a question for further research. Future studies may build on this analysis by examining their reception and their relationship to the legal, civic, humanitarian, and transnational practices pursued by Hizmet-affiliated individuals and networks in the aftermath of repression.

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About the Author

Semih Kıyma is a PhD student in Interreligious Studies at *Hartford International University for Religion and Peace*. His research focuses on forgiveness and ethical responses to suffering and persecution in Islam and Christianity, with interests in Islamic ethics, comparative religious ethics, early Christianity, and Christian–Muslim relations. His broader work engages themes of restorative justice, nonviolent resistance, and modern Muslim thought, particularly the ideas of Said Nursi and Fethullah Gülen. He is the author of a forthcoming chapter, "Forgiveness and Restorative Justice: The Limits of Forgiveness in Said Nursi," in a *Bloomsbury Academic* volume, and has presented at conferences on Islamic ethics and contemporary Muslim thought. Alongside his doctoral work, he serves as a Writing Consultant at *Hartford International University*, is actively involved in interfaith engagement, and serves as President of the *Pocono Interfaith Council*, where he helps coordinate dialogue initiatives that bring diverse communities together.

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