



## Fethulla Gülen Movement in South Asia

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### Introduction

Born in Erzurum, in eastern Turkey, in 1941, M. Fethullah Gülen is an Islamic preacher who started his career as a state-licensed Imam of a mosque in Edirne in 1959, and was promoted to a preaching post in 1966 in Izmir.<sup>1</sup> Fethullah Gülen comes from a Sunni-Hanafi Muslim *Qadriya* school of Sufi tradition, but he is more inclined to the mystical traditions as his teacher and great preacher Said Nursi.<sup>2</sup> The emergence of Mahdi, the Islamic version of Messiah, who is said to possess miraculous skills to fix all the problems faced by humanity, is a central faith of his teachings. Many followers of Gülen believe that Gülen himself can be a 'Messiah'. In 1962, during his service in the military, he was jointly charged with sedition because of delivering unofficial sermons.<sup>3</sup> As his popularity rose, his relations with the secular military leadership deteriorated and political leadership occasionally tried to use his popularity. He was briefly arrested shortly after the 1971 military coup, and the case against him was finally dropped in 1974 under general amnesty law. After a hostile relation, Gülen sought to have a practical relation with the military by supporting the 1981 military coup. This was also the time when Gülen dramatically transformed his personality from a turban-clad cleric to a modern-looking preacher. He started building a large network of schools, dormitories, media groups and business associations, and gradually established a worldwide network.

The alliance between the Turkish ruling AK party and the Gülen community has always been tactical, rather than ideological. In 2002, when Recep Tayyip Erdoğan broke with the main Islamic movement, led by Refah Party's chief Necmettin Erbakan, he was in need to reach out to conservative voters, among whom Gülen had a large loyal following. The Refah Party was known

for its anti-European Union, anti-NATO, anti-Western rhetoric over which Erdoğan and his team differed, and chose to actively advance the agenda of accession to the EU. After embracing Gülen, the AKP also embraced Gülen's pro-Western, pro-European Union and reconciliatory approach towards Israel.<sup>4</sup> The alliance of convenience supported many mutual political and business interests. The AKP's growing frustration with the West and Israel was accompanied by its troubled relationship with the Gülen movement.

The Gülen movement's character has always been seen with great suspicion by Turkey's secular, nationalist politicians and military. Prior to his self-imposed exile in the United States in 1999, Gülen was under scanner for being allegedly involved in the attempted assassination of Uzbekistan President, Islam Karimov in 1999, which also affected the relations between Turkey and Uzbekistan.<sup>5</sup> In his memoir, '*Witness to Revolution and Near Anarchy*', former Turkish intelligence official, Osman Nuri Gundes had claimed that Gülen and his network played host to 130 CIA agents in his schools in the Central Asian countries.<sup>6</sup> Around the same time, he was accused of "trying to undermine the secular system and set up an Islamic dictatorship" by the National Security Council (Dawn, 2 Sept. 2000). An article appearing *IRB - Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada* dated 25 November 2002, titled "The presence of Fethullah Gülen's followers in the Turkish army", quoted the then Ankara State Security Court (DGM) Republican Prosecutor Nuh Mete Yuksel as saying: Fethullah Gülen

"... cunningly managed to put thousands of his partisans in critical posts in the army, and he intends to take control of the army at least in the next 10 years. Ultimately, the overthrow of the secular system is one of Gülen 's long-term aims"<sup>7</sup>

Gülen and his movement, however, have always been an important source of political support for one or more sections of the Turkish political landscape , including seculars, nationalists and Islamists, indeed for different reasons. Gülen and his Hizmet movement became the biggest non-state entity having the largest networks of schools, universities, business chambers and various welfare programs. In September 2000, indirectly disapproving the Prime Minister, Bulent Ecevit's public endorsement of Gülen activities, the army Chief of Staff General Huseyin Kivrikoglu, said, "they [Gülen followers] are working against the state every day in order to overthrow it", and feared that they had spread everywhere.<sup>8</sup>

In February 2012, the head of the National Intelligence Organization (MIT), Hakan Fidan, Erdoğan's confidante, was questioned by Ankara's counter-terrorism unit over his alleged links to the Kurdish terror outfit PKK. Officers close to Gülen were suspected to be behind this questioning of Erdoğan's close aide.<sup>9</sup> The infamous cases of Ergenekon and Sledgehammer were also considered to be the handiwork of Gülen-backed officials. The investigation had caused major embarrassment for the government as most of the cases filed against military officials and journalists could not stand the court process . In August 2015, when most of the accused in the Ergenekon case were acquitted, prosecutor Zekeriya Öz, related to the Ergenekon investigation, fled to Armenia to avoid an arrest warrant against him in another case.<sup>10</sup> Zekeriya Öz was believed to be a close aide of Gülen.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, the famous case known as the Sledgehammer, which

uncovered an alleged military coup plot against the AKP government in 2003, was declared fake by the Anatolian 4th High Criminal Court.<sup>12</sup> Both the ruling AKP and the main opposition CHP parties accused the Gülen elements of being behind fabricating the two cases.<sup>13</sup> In February 2014, another controversy erupted after a phone-tapping scandal emerged in which call recordings of many AKP politicians, including Prime Minister Erdoğan's conversation with his son, exposed a wide range of corruption cases. The Erdoğan government had rushed to accuse pro-Gülen prosecutors of illegal phone-tapping.<sup>14</sup>

With the weakening of relationships between the AK party and the Gülen movement, corruption charges against government officials and politicians began to rise. From 2012 onwards, the AKP government suspected the Gülen elements of being behind the anti-corruption cases against its politicians and senior officers, including the case of Iranian-Turkish businessman Reza Zarrab who was tried by the US court for evading U.S. financial sanctions against Iran. Reza Zarrab was the main contact person for Turkish-Iranian trade relations, during the high time of U.S. sanctions against Iran, to find ways to evade U.S. sanctions, something that made the US administration extremely critical of Erdoğan government.<sup>15</sup>

In this backdrop, for AKP, Gülen has been a prime suspect for all internal leakages, judicial and media activism against its politicians and businessmen. On May 2016, the National Security Council (MGK) designated Fethullah Gülen and his movement as a terrorist group.<sup>16</sup> A Gülen linked newspaper, Zaman, was taken over by the government-appointed trustees in May 2016 in another separate case of financial irregularities.<sup>17</sup> This backdrop was enough for a full-blown war between the two rivals; however, a coup attempt on 15 July 2016, involving high-ranking military officials, was not anticipated.

The two sides have created an environment of enmity and mistrust through many political differences over the years. The first major dispute between Gülen and Erdoğan appeared over the appointment of the head of military chief. Erdoğan appointed Hakan Fidan whom Gülen movement considered a pro-Iran officer. In 2010, when the Mavi Marmara flotilla was attacked by Israeli commandos for allegedly entering Israel's water illegally, and nine of the Turkish activists onboard were killed, Fethullah Gülen's response was published in the Wall Street Journal on 4 June 2010 in which he called the flotilla aid "a sign of defying authority" which "would not lead to fruitful matters." Instead, he advocated for prior permission and coordination with Israeli authorities for such aid works.<sup>18</sup>

On the peace process with Kurdish militant group PKK, Gülen had opposed the AKP for opening peace talks. Leaked tapes of Hakan Fidan, head of the National Intelligence Organisation, holding secret talks in Oslo with the PKK had stormed the Turkish politics, almost derailing the secret peace process. Germany's Der Spiegel quoted Gülen, calling against Kurdish militants "locate them, surround them, break up their units, let fire rain down upon their houses, drown out their lamentations with even more wails, cut off their roots and put an end to their cause."<sup>19</sup>

The differences between Gülen movement and the government became more public and bitter after cases of corruptions, audio and video leaks of Turkish politicians being flashed in many pro-Gülen media. This included the three most controversial “conspiracies” to overthrow the AKP government by “Kemalist” officers. In initial years of these leaks, Erdoğan government acted sternly against many military officers, journalists and politicians which resulted in a public outcry against the role of Gülen Movement and its people in the witch-hunting of Kemalist officers.

From 2012 onwards, cases of corruption against politicians, coup plots against the elected government by military officers, judges and journalists started destabilising Turkish politics which resulted in arrest and trial of hundreds of military officers, journalists, judges and social activists. By late 2013, many cases were found to have been fabricated and this created a sense of mistrust against certain officers within intelligence, military and police and government which believed to have had close links with the Gülen movement.

The Gülen Movement has become one of the richest Islamic networks in the world, whose total assets and wealth can be reckoned up to US\$25 billion, an estimate contested by other researchers.<sup>20</sup> There are some 90 institutions affiliated with the Gülen movement currently active in the United States alone.<sup>21</sup> In Turkey, the movement controls many influential educational institutions, like Fatih University, Zirve University, several professional unions of journalists, writers, businessmen and lawyers. Today's Zaman, Samanyolu TV, weekly Aksiyon, the US-based Ebru TV, Mehtap TV and Cihan news agency are the main media groups having close links with the Gülen movement. Turkish business associations such as ISHAD (Business Life Foundation), MARIFED (Marmara Business Federation), and TUSKON (Turkish Confederation of Businessmen and Industrialists) are said to have been set up by the Gülen movement.<sup>22</sup>

TUSKON claims to be the largest non-governmental business network with seven business federations, 211 businessmen associations, and 55,000 entrepreneurs spread over 81 Turkish cities with partner organizations in 140 countries including in India, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh.<sup>23</sup> Until 2012, TUSKON's Chairman and other officials have travelled along with Turkish ministers including Prime Minister Erdoğan on his official international trips.<sup>24</sup>

Gülen movement and its activities in South Asia are spread across educational, business and inter-faith dialogue associations, which are supported by the Turkish NGOs, closely linked to the Gülen movement. After the July 15 coup attempt, Turkish authorities have stepped up their diplomatic efforts to close down or scale down the activities of many of the Gülen-affiliated groups. In Afghanistan, Pakistan and India, their educational institutions have often performed well and have support within the civil society. Any step to ban them will also involve sharp reactions from society as well as the political groups.

## Afghanistan

At a time when there were terrifying security situation in Afghanistan, lack of educational opportunities and teachers, and traditional beliefs that imprison women into their homes, the Gülen-affiliated associations came forward to establish a network of educational institutions across Afghanistan. During the Taliban era (1996 –2001) in Afghanistan, the Taliban closed down Turkish schools in the country, but students and parents supported those schools, and even patrolled them to protect equipments in the school buildings from being stolen.<sup>25</sup> After the Taliban period, a new network of Turkish schools expanded all over Afghanistan with cooperation from the then-Afghan Education Minister, Ghulam Farooq Wardak, who pledged to increase the number of Turkish-Afghan schools in Afghanistan, opening at least a school in each province as an educational role model.<sup>26</sup> Deputy Education Minister, Shafiq Samim has been among the important officials who have supported the Gülen schools in the country. After the July 15 event, the Afghan government and the education ministry officials have been trying to draw a balance between the Turkish government and the Gülen-affiliated schools. Minister Samim said that Afghans knew what was beneficial: “We don’t concern ourselves with the problems that governments have with the people in other countries. However, we also appreciate the Hizmet movement, which showed full support to us even during our hardest times. We will never forget this. We will maintain our support for these schools”, he said in a statement.<sup>27</sup>

There are 23 Afghan-Turkish schools in the country in six different provinces, including a nursery, elementary schools, high schools, Imam-Hatip high schools, university preparatory courses and Anatolian Language and Culture Centers.<sup>28</sup> Seven thousand students are studying in Turkish schools in the country. However, some of the schools were closed down during the Taliban period. Most of these schools are run by Afghan-Turk CAG Educational NGO<sup>29</sup> which run Sheberghan Afghan-Turk High School (Kabul), Mazar Afghan-Turk High School for boys (established in 1996), Kabul Ariana Afghan-Turk High School for boys established in 1998, Kandahar Afghan-Turk High School for boys (established in 1998), Herat Afghan-Turk High School for boys (established in 2006), Kabul Afghan-Turk High School for girls (established in 2006), Herat Afghan-Turk High School for girls (established in 2009) and Mazar Afghan-Turk High School (girls) established in 2011. There are several primary schools and coaching centres.<sup>30</sup>

Among business associations, Afghan Turkish Businessmen & Industrialists Association (ATSIAD) is the most important association responsible for networking the business of the two countries. ATSIAD was established in August 2010.<sup>31</sup>

## Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, International Turkish Hope School, run by Gülen foundation, has seven educational institutions including kindergartens and high schools in the capital Dhaka and Chittagong.<sup>32</sup> The Hope School with its branches were inaugurated by then-President Suleyman Demirel in the Bangladeshi capital of Dhaka in 1997. An event was organized where award winners from previous Turkish Olympics attended with their songs, poems and imitations of prominent Turkish figures.<sup>33</sup> The training languages in these schools are Bengali, English and

Turkish. The foundation also operates charity campaigns besides their educational activities. Although a part of Gülen foundation, these schools are run by Gülen-inspired relief organization “Kimse Yok Mu” (meaning “Isn’t Anybody There?”).

This organization is also engaged in bringing aid to disaster victims and other needy people in Turkey, and around the world. In 2007, it helped Bangladesh to recover from devastating floods. This is mainly because these schools are considered to be a part of elite educational institution, and regarded as promoter of modern rational educational values among its students. Also, in a statement issued on 6 July 2016, Fethullah Gülen condemned the terrorist attack in Dhaka that claimed the lives of hundreds of innocent civilians.<sup>34</sup>

The foundation also uses its base in Bangladesh to provide aid and assistance to Muslim Rohingyas from Myanmar. In 2012, Gülen donated US\$10,000, earned from the sales of his books and audio recordings, to Kimse Yok Mu (Isn’t Anybody There?), which distributed aid packages to Muslim Rohingyas fleeing from Myanmar. The donation was handed over to them in Bangladesh’s Cox Bazaar.<sup>35</sup>

Gülen-affiliated Turkey-Bangladesh Chamber of Commerce and Industry and member of TUSKON have been active in Bangladesh since the arrival of the Islamist party in Turkey.<sup>36</sup> Business groups affiliated with this group have invested in Bangladesh, and have also been supporting a Free-Trade Agreement between Turkey and Bangladesh.

The relations between Bangladesh and Turkey have been disturbed over the execution of war criminals. Turkey has expressed its anguish over the executions, and called back its Ambassador from Bangladesh protesting the execution of the former President of Jamaat Islami Motiur Rahman Nizami.<sup>37</sup> After execution of Mir Quasem Ali on 3<sup>rd</sup> September 2016, a press release of the Turkey’s government said, “We have learnt with sorrow that the death sentence issued by the International Crimes Tribunal in Bangladesh against Mir Quasem Ali, key-financier and central executive council member of the Jamaat-e-Islami, has been executed in Bangladesh”.<sup>38</sup> It adds: “We stress once again that the wounds of the past cannot be healed with these methods and hope that this wrong practice will not lead to separation among the brotherly people of Bangladesh”.<sup>39</sup> Condemning the execution, Turkish President Tayyip Erdoğan, said that “such proliferation of hatred” went against “democratic mentality”.<sup>40</sup> Expressing dismay over Turkey’s reaction, a Bangladesh official said that such reactions were tantamount to interference in the matters of a sovereign state. “This also does not help foster bilateral relations that exist between the two brotherly countries,” according to a note verbale issued to the Turkish embassy in Dhaka by the foreign ministry of Bangladesh.<sup>41</sup>

## India

Soon after the failed coup attempt, the international network of the Gülen movement has come under scanner and Turkish authorities have started pressing for the closure of many pro-Gülen schools, institutions and business associations. There are three types of Gülen-affiliated groups

which claim to have close links with Gulen or Gulen related international institutions such as TUSKON.

**Interfaith dialogue groups:** Mainly headed by Indialogue Foundation,<sup>42</sup> it has its branches in many cities across India including Bangalore, Mumbai and Kolkata. The Indialogue Foundation, established much before the rift started between the government and Gülen, has maintained a strong social, cultural and education presence in many Indian cities. Soon after the failed coup attempt, Indialogue Foundation also issued a statement clearly rejecting the coup attempt.<sup>43</sup> The statement carried a statement of Fethullah Gulen denying accusation of his involvement in the coup attempt.<sup>44</sup> Since 2005, the foundation has been organizing seminars, symposiums, essay writing competitions, and several interfaith activities in which all communities have been invited.<sup>45</sup>

Turkish authorities look some of these groups with suspicion as they claim to have found “some connection in Mumbai, India of the perpetrators”, particularly of “providing money and support to overall organisation [of Gülen]”.<sup>46</sup> As part of the global diplomatic efforts against the Gülen movement network, Turkish Foreign Minister, Mevlut Cavusoglu visited India to discuss the recent coup attempt and briefed about the role of Fethullah Gülen-led organization [FETO]<sup>47</sup>, sources confirmed to the media after Mr. Cavusoglu met Ms. Swaraj.

**Business associations:** The Indo-Turkish Business Association (ITBA) was established in 2005 with six branches in New Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Bangalore, Chennai and Hyderabad. It aims to represent the interests of members and member companies that are interested in establishing business and commercial relations between India and Turkey. ITBA has been founded with the vision to serve as a business link between India and Turkey with special focuses on the business development and marketing services, government relations and brand management.<sup>48</sup>

In 2013, a new commercial body named as the Turkish-Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (TICCI) was established, which is a member of Turkey’s largest business confederations Turkiye Industrialists and Businessmen Confederation (TUSKON).<sup>49</sup> Their activities include business conferences, trade fairs and India-Turkey trade relations.

**Schools:** There are three schools in Hyderabad, Bangalore and New Delhi, respectively. These schools are affiliated to the CBSE board and educate mostly Indian students, and a few children of Turkish businessmen having their businesses in these cities.<sup>50</sup> This is part of chain of schools called “Learnium Schools” with its branches in New Delhi, Mumbai, Lucknow, Bangalore and Kolkata.<sup>51</sup> Most of the students in these schools are Indian student and few students of Turkish nationals staying in India.

Through their public activities, seminars and inter-faith dialogues, these groups maintain good relations with all communities, particularly the religious and spiritual leaders of the country. Muslim scholars and Imams also participate in their activities. Turkey’s internal political debates

appear in these activities only occasionally as most of the activities are related to non-political, religious and educational issues.

## **Pakistan**

The Pak-Turk Education Foundation, which was awarded the Sitara-e-Eisaar by the President of Pakistan in 2006, runs schools in several countries around the world. Twenty eight of these schools are in Pakistan in Islamabad, Lahore, Quetta, Karachi, Hyderabad, Khairpur and Jamshoro, and have been since 1995. The schools employ some 1,500 trained teachers with an enrolment of around 10,000 students from pre-school to 'A' levels. They are affiliated with the Federal Board of Intermediate and Secondary schools as well as with Cambridge for 'O' and 'A' levels.<sup>52</sup> As per the recent news, students have to pay Rs. 5,500 [Pakistan currency] per month, which in comparison to other private educational institutions, remain significantly economical for families. The school also provides counselling services without any extra cost. Especially, in rural areas of provinces, the Pak-Turk schools remain famous to impart quality education. The performance of the faculty and students could be gauged through recently announced results of secondary school certificate part II by the Board of Intermediate and Secondary Education, Sukkur, in which 40% students of the school received 'A1' grade.<sup>53</sup>

With the recent coup attempt in Turkey, there has been significant pressure on institutions which are associated with Gülen or the Hizmet movement, for their forcible shutting down. Turkish Foreign Minister, Mevlut Cavusoglu asked authorities in Pakistan to close the chain of schools affiliated to Gülen. In a joint press conference with Prime Minister's Adviser on Foreign Affairs Sartaj Aziz, Cavusoglu accused the Gülen network of "causing risk and threat to the security and stability of every country that they have presence in."<sup>54</sup>

The management of the schools disclaims any affiliation with the Hizmet movement, or with any other political, religious or denominational movement stressing that the schools are 'a philanthropic and non-political endeavour established for human development in the field of education for the benefit of all Pakistanis, especially the poor, needy and deserving sections of the society.' They 'provide necessary facilities in order to enable (students) to gain access to resources for productive self-employment and to encourage them to undertake activities for income generation and poverty alleviation to enhance their quality of life.' The management further states that these schools provide 'affordable quality education to all segments of population across the various regions of the country with significant amounts given as scholarship to the deserving students so that they may pursue their dream of getting a high-quality education.'<sup>55</sup>

If the institutions, as directed by the Turkish government, are shut down, that means that 1,043 private schools, 1,229 foundations and associations, 35 medical institutions, 19 unions, and 15 universities will be shut down, and their assets seized by the treasury. Though, Pakistan has taken the decision to continue without indeed giving in to pressure from the Turkish government, the move will be ironic, given the number of Madrasas currently operating in the country with established links to political, religious or denominational movements<sup>56</sup> that have a more than

suspected record of terrorism, violence and spurious religious indoctrination. Prominent among these is the Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT) group, which is banned in several countries and officially so in Pakistan. Yet, the South Asia Terrorist Portal and Institute for Conflict Management reports that the LeT continues to operate in Pakistan from its '200-acre headquarters at Muridke, 30 kms from Lahore, built with contributions and donations from the Middle East, with Saudi Arabia the biggest contributor. 'The headquarters at Muridke includes a Madrasa, hospital, market, large residential area for 'scholars' and faculty members, fish farm and agricultural tracts. The LeT also reportedly operates 16 Islamic institutions, 135 secondary schools, an ambulance service, mobile clinics, blood banks and several seminaries across Pakistan. It is known for its hard-line views on religion. LeT publishes its views and opinion through a website, an Urdu monthly journal Al-Dawa, and an Urdu weekly, Gazwa. It also publishes Voice of Islam, an English monthly, and Al-Rabat, a monthly in Arabic as well as Mujala-e-Tulba, an Urdu monthly for students, and *Jehad Times*, an Urdu Weekly.' The alleged founder of Lashkar-e-Toiba, Hafiz Muhammad Saeed, is a man internationally wanted for terrorism connected with several terrorist attacks such as the November 2008 attack in Mumbai. He lives in a fortified house in Lahore.

Presently, management of the Pak-Turk Schools has removed the Turkish principals of 28 schools and colleges of the chain, besides dissolving the Board of Directors (BoD) having representation of Turkish nationals. The Turkish government had suggested handing over of the chain to an international NGO having links with the Erdoğan administration. The Turkish nationals, earlier holding administrative posts, will now work as teachers, according to a senior official of the schools system and familiar with the developments. Pak-Turk schools are no more registered under the international NGO (Pak-Turk International Education Foundation). They will work under a locally-registered Pak-Turk Education Foundation. A new six-member BoD with complete local representation had been formed to run the affairs of the schools. The schools management has also filed a petition in Islamabad and Lahore high courts, seeking orders to stop the Pakistani government from taking any unlawful step which would compromise the future of the students of the institutions or to maintain status quo. As uncertainty rules the system, parents say withdrawal of the faculty and change of management will impact the standard of learning.<sup>57</sup>

The Turkish Confederation of Businessmen and Industrialists (TUSKON)<sup>58</sup> is instrumental in establishing the Pakistan-Turk Business Association in Pakistani cities. TUSKON claims to be the largest business non-governmental organization (NGO), with 34,300 members representing 1,000 companies, with a presence in all of Turkey's 81 cities. The Turkish business groups in Pakistan have a strong affiliation with TUSKON, and claim to be followers of Fethullah Gülen. In the past, TUSKON was the platform that facilitated Turkish investments and trade in Pakistan, which crossed a billion dollars in 2012. TUSKON in that way, had played an important role in Pakistan.<sup>59</sup>

Association (PTBA) in Lahore. As per PTBA Chairman Sahir Rasheed, TUSKON represents 55,000 business people and more than 140,000 companies, and it is the largest business-NGO in the country. TUSKON has a member association in every city and important district of the

country, and in this respect, TUSKON is the most widespread business NGO in the Turkish business community.<sup>60</sup>

PTBA has also closely functioned with the Federation of Pakistan Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FPCCI) to encourage collaborations and lend further strength to Business-to-Business (B2B) ties.<sup>61</sup> It has also been instrumental in holding forums where other business organizations from various countries have been able to use their respective consulates in the development of trade, business and investment in Pakistan.<sup>62</sup> The PTBA has also organized various business tours for Pakistani businessmen in Africa, paving new avenues of investment in the continent.<sup>63</sup>

## **Maldives**

Lale International Youth School is one of the very first of the new model of schools affiliated to Gülen movement and in 2009, President Nasheed has inaugurated the school. At the same time during Mr. Nasheed's tenure H.E. Ms. Iruthisham Adam was appointed as the first Ambassador of the Republic of Maldives to Turkey. Speaking after the credential ceremony Ambassador Adam said, "With the accreditation of an Ambassador from the Maldives to Turkey, for the first time in history, a new chapter of Turkish-Maldivian relations begins". After political change in Maldives, President Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom continued the relations with Turkey. Soon after the failed coup attempt, he sent a congratulatory message to the President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. He recalled in his statement that Erdoğan was the first Turkish Prime Minister who had visited Maldives in 2005." After the recent developments in Turkey, the government of Turkey had not made any statement against the Gulen affiliated school in male.

## **Sri Lanka**

In Sri Lanka, the Hizmet Movement started the Learnium School as well as the Intercultural Dialogue Foundation. Initially, 'the funding for the school came from the movement until it managed to support itself on its own income'.<sup>64</sup> The school management is Turkish with a mixed staff of foreign and well-qualified local teachers. The Intercultural Dialogue Foundation (IDF) which was founded in 2008 "is an action-oriented dialogue and peace foundation".<sup>65</sup> 'Kimse Yok Mu', 'was among the first groups to have responded to the devastating Tsunami that had hit Sri Lanka'.<sup>66</sup> However, Sri Lanka and Turkey's bilateral relations were not affected by the recent developments in Turkey, and the Sri Lankan 'Ambassador to Ankara Pakeer Mohideen Amza had conveyed his country's solidarity with the elected government'.<sup>67</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The Gülen movement has a strong presence in parts of South Asia and its Muslim communities through its network of charitable, educational and business networks and associations. These groups have sprung up their network mostly during the first period of Turkey's Islamist government when the two sides, Gülen and Erdoğan, had maintained close relations, despite

opposition from Turkey's secular and Kurdish bloc. These groups have maintained their independent presence. In Afghanistan where Turkey is part of the NATO force, Gülen School started and expanded with strong support from the Turkish government. In India also Gülen-affiliated groups have worked mostly as a cultural office for Turkey with close coordination of the Turkish government.

The most important fact about the Gülen-affiliated groups is that they are able to maintain their strong presence, particularly after the clash between government and the Gülen movement started, because of their financial independence from the Turkish government. Their business groups and associations, having a strong presence in the Indian subcontinent, have relied on locally-generated financial sources. In the aftermath of the 15 July coup attempt, however, many business groups and associations are being scrutinized, and they occasionally declare their neutrality and disassociation from the Gülen movement

The closure of the Gülen-affiliated schools, business associations or interfaith dialogue groups, despite heavy pressure from the Turkish government, depends on local legal procedures where their associations and institutions are lawfully registered. Their main challenge is not only to avoid the possible bans on their schools and institutions, but also to restore the trust among the civil society members, mostly Muslims of the region whose affiliation with the Gülen movement is more spiritual than political. This is the most difficult time that the Gülen movement has ever faced in its history to survive and regain its popularity among the Turkish people as well as its global supporters.

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*Disclaimer: Views expressed are of authors and do not reflect the views of the Council.*

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