

Central Asia  
BAYRAM BALCI

# Fethullah Gülen's Missionary Schools

**The Nurcu movement founded by Said Nursi (1873–1960) is probably one of the most important religious organizations in Turkey. After Nursi's death in 1960, the Nurcu brotherhood fragmented into several sub-communities with different interpretations of religion, different goals and different positions on political issues.\* Nowadays, Fethullah Gülen controls the most powerful of these groups. His followers are also active in Central Asia but, with the possible exception of Turkmenistan, the movement is unable to operate in an open and public manner.**

Fethullah Gülen was born in Erzurum in eastern Turkey in 1938. Deeply influenced by his family, his religious environment and by the writings of Nursi, Gülen began his career as an official preacher for the government in 1953. In 1966, he was sent by the direction of religious affairs to Izmir, where he created a brotherhood with a small group of students and disciples. His community, or *cemaat*, is designated as the *Fethullahci* movement, although its members do not appreciate this term. Basically, Fethullah Gülen's ideas serve to accomplish three intellectual goals: the Islamization of the Turkish nationalist ideology; the Turkification of Islam; and the Islamization of modernity. And therefore, he wishes to revive the link between the state, religion and society.

## Development of an educational network

No one knows exactly the size of Gülen's enormous community of followers and sympathizers, but most agree on an average estimate of 3 million members. The movement obtains much of its support from young urban men, especially doctors, academics and other professionals. The movement has grown in part by sponsoring student dormitories, summer camps, colleges, universities, classrooms and communication organizations. Without any doubt, education is central to the identity of the community and favoured its growth in the Balkans, Central Asia and the Turkic world in general. However, Central Asian Turkic Republics enjoy a special position in Gülen's strategy.

The collapse of the Soviet Union opened opportunities for Turkey. The state and private companies quickly designed special policies to develop their presence and influence in Central Asia. But very soon, Fethullah Gülen took the lead with his businessmen, supporters and his community teachers. Economic and cultural networks were established between the *cemaat* (groups within the movement) and the different social and economic actors. Several Nurcu delegations visited these countries and invited Uzbek, Kazakh, Turkmen and Kyrgyz officials in Turkey to convince them to advocate the replication of Nurcu educational structures in their home countries.

Those early connections helped to inaugurate in each of the Central Asian republics dozens of schools. Statistics show that in January 2001 the movement in Kazakhstan had already 30 high schools and one university, welcoming 5,664 pupils and employing 580 teachers from Turkey. In the same period, 11 high schools and one university were established in Kyrgyzstan, with more than 3,100 pupils and 323 Turkish teachers. In Turkmenistan, the community controls 14 high schools and one university for 3,294 pupils and 353 teachers. Finally, in Uzbekistan (until September 2000, when all were closed because of a diplomatic crisis) 17 high schools and one international school, employing 210 teachers and welcoming 3,334 pupils, had been founded.

These schools can be said to focus on modern and scientific education. Religious matters are completely absent from their curricula. In all these countries, as a consequence of the Soviet legacy and of the local leaders' suspicion, religion has no place in the educational system. The movement's schools are managed by Turkish and national administrators and teachers. Usually scientific matters (e.g. biology, physics, and computer science) are the main courses and are taught in English and Turkish languages. The national language is of course very much present, as is the Russian language, which is still maintained as a language of communication throughout the area.

The Nurcu community is considered elitist in Turkey, and this is also true for Central Asia. Selective competitions are organized every year to identify the best pupils. As a consequence of the conservatism of the *cemaat*, 95% of the schools are restricted to boys, with only one or two schools in each republic for girls, although all three universities accept both male and female students. Thanks to the modern scientific education, the opportunities for learning English and Turkish, and the favourable chances in passing the universities' entry exams, Nurcu schools have a very good reputation among the local populations. The crisis of the national educational systems partly explains the high performance of the Nurcu schools.

## The schools' *raison d'être*

Turkish media have very often interviewed Fethullah Gülen and his followers about their intentions for Central Asia. They were always given the same answer: 'We are here to help the sister republics of Turkey.' This supposes the creation of 'cultural bridges' between Turkey and Central Asia. Detailed research on the activities and the project of the community shows that the Nurcu movement in Central Asia is a real missionary movement. Its mission is to re-establish Islam in the region, which has been dominated for the last 70 years by an atheist power persecuting Islam. To that objective, the Nurcu employ methods similar to those of the Jesuits. Indeed, like Jesuits, the Nurcu have developed an elitist method of recruitment; they wish to change society through education; and they perceive education as a global supervision of pupils in and out of school. Also, the missionary movement entertains excellent relations with the target populations to in order to 'convert' them.

Despite similarities, the Nurcu missionary method has its distinctive characteristics. Schools, in spite of allegations in the Turkish media – especially in the Kemalist media, are not a direct instrument of proselytism. Because it is too dangerous for the existence of the community itself in Central Asia, Nurcu missionaries never openly or directly proselytize.

Their *hocaefendi*, or 'respected lord', Gülen advocates two main ways of spreading Islam: *tebliğ* and *temsil*. The first, and very classical, *tebliğ*, is to profess and teach openly the 'good' mission. But since nowadays *tebliğ* activities are developing everywhere, the *temsil* method seems to be preferred. With *temsil*, Gülen expects his followers to represent in their daily activities the proper and exemplary way of life. Through

*temsil* the Nurcu will never profess openly the philosophy of Islam, rather they live it. For example, teachers of the movement's schools have to be polite, immaculate, and respectful. These ethics of life demand from the missionaries both hard work and the acceptance of *hizmet insani* ('in service'), or helping others. They must respect the country, its flag, its history, and must prove to be good examples, in particular for the young generation. They are not allowed to pronounce the name of Gülen or Nursi, nor are they permitted to spread Nurcu literature, at least not openly. While in some cases a minority of pupils in some small cities (not very well controlled by the central educational authorities) are subjected to more direct proselytism (*tebliğ*), the most important aim of the *cemaat* is to spread the message without expressing it directly.

## The future of the community

The *cemaat* is present everywhere in Central Asia and will definitely contribute to a number of changes in these republics. It already influences the national educational systems. Managed by private companies, the Nurcu schools are perceived as proof of the efficiency of the market economy (90 % of the pupils enter university). For this reason, in countries like Turkmenistan, cooperation in the educational sector with the Nurcu is encouraged and supported by authorities in order to modernize the national structures.

The aim of the community is to educate and influence the future national elites, who should radically differ from the old Soviet apparatchiks. This might take 10 to 15 years, but the Nurcu are ready to invest in this long-term goal: the future elites are expected to speak English and Turkish and it is hoped that they will prove their good intentions towards the Fethullahci and towards Turkey. Therefore, Turkish authorities show an ambivalent attitude towards the movement. If in Turkey the state (especially the army) is sometimes very critical of the *cemaat* for its 'reactionary' projects, Turkish embassies have developed and entertain good relations with the Nurcu in Central Asia. And by reciprocity the Nurcu benefit from Turkish official support, for without it private organizations face great difficulties in terms of functioning in Central Asia. Considering the benefits the Nurcu schools in Central Asia bring to Turkey, Turkish ambassadors always support and encourage cooperation agreements between the local state and Nurcu educational enterprises.

One should, however, realize that the development of the Nurcu movement in Central Asia is still in its infancy. The community is active in Central Asia since 1991, but it is still primarily a Turkish effort, with Turkish teachers and Turkish businessmen and supporters. Though they work at it in a patient manner, the Nurcu still lack strong local rooting among the populations and emerging elites. Moreover, Islamic movements are not welcome in Central Asia by the governments, and that explains why the *cemaat* never officially or openly shows its authentic religious identity and why usually the local communities have no clue as to the schools' real nature. Most people will know that in town there is a 'Turkish school' but will never mention any 'Fethullahci' school, as this term has no signification for them. Al-

most 95% of the Fethullahci in Central Asia are still Turks from Turkey. That means the movement is an expatriate and migrant phenomenon. Openness on the part of the movement will only be possible should the governments in the area change their attitude towards religion, in particular Islam. The effects of the current crisis in Afghanistan will most likely not lead to liberalization in the Central Asian republics. In fact, it is highly doubtful that activities of foreign religious movements will be tolerated at any point in the near future.

## Note

\* See Hakan Yavuz, 'Being Modern in the Nurcu Way', *ISIM Newsletter* 6 (2000): 7.

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