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## Turkey's Turning Point: Could There Be an Islamic Revolution in Turkey?

By Michael Rubin

*The name Fethullah Gülen is virtually unknown in the United States. Self-exiled here for more than a decade, this prominent Turkish theological and political thinker is the leader of a movement estimated conservatively to have more than a million followers in Turkey. The movement controls a business empire of charities, real estate, companies, and schools. Thousands of Gülen's followers populate Turkey's bureaucracies. AEI's Michael Rubin believes that, just as many people remained clueless or belittled concerns about Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's intentions in Iran thirty years ago, many may be making the same mistake today about Gülen, who professes to want to weld Islam with tolerance and a pro-European outlook. Rubin introduces us to a man who could play a prominent role in Turkey's future at a time when Turkey's "secular order and constitutionalism have never been so shaky."*

Few U.S. policymakers have heard of Fethullah Gülen, perhaps Turkey's most prominent theologian and political thinker. Self-exiled for more than a decade, Gülen lives a reclusive life outside Philadelphia, Pa. Within months, however, he may be as much a household name in the United States as is Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, a man who was as obscure to most Americans up until his triumphant return to Iran almost thirty years ago.

Many academics and journalists embrace Gülen and applaud his stated vision welding Islam with tolerance and a pro-European outlook. Supporters describe him as progressive. In 2003, the University of Texas honored him as a "peaceful hero," alongside Martin Luther King Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, and the Dalai Lama. Last October, the British House of Lords and several British diplomats celebrated Gülen at a high-profile London conference. Later this year, Georgetown University scholar John Esposito will host a conference dedicated to the movement. As in 2001, Esposito

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Michael Rubin is a resident scholar at AEI. A version of this article appeared on National Review Online on April 14, 2008.

will cosponsor with the Rumi Forum, an organization Gülen serves as honorary president.

The Gülen movement controls charities, real estate, companies, and more than a thousand schools internationally. According to some estimates, it controls several billion dollars. The movement claims its own universities, unions, lobbies, student groups, radio and television stations, and the *Zaman* newspaper. Turkish officials concede that Gülen's followers in Turkey number more than a million; Gülen's backers claim that number is just the tip of the iceberg. Today, Gülen members dominate the Turkish police and divisions within the interior ministry. Under the stewardship of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, one of Gülen's most prominent sympathizers, tens of thousands of other Gülen supporters have entered the Turkish bureaucracy.

While Gülen supporters jealously guard his image in the West, he remains a controversial figure in Turkey. According to *Cumhuriyet*, a left-of-center establishment daily—Turkey's *New York Times* in 1973—the Izmir State Security Court convicted Gülen of "attempting to destroy the

state system and to establish a state system based on religion"; he received a pardon, though, and so never served time in prison. In 1986, the Turkish military—the constitutional guardians of the state's secularism—purged a Gülen cell from the military academy; the Turkish military has subsequently acted against a number of other alleged Gülen cells that they say infiltrated military ranks.

In 1998, according to Turkish court transcripts cited in the *Turkish Daily News*, Gülen urged followers in the judiciary and state bureaucracy to "work patiently to take control of the state." The following year, the independent Turkish television station ATV broadcast a secretly taped Gülen telling supporters, "If they . . . come out early, the world will squash their heads. They will make Muslims relive events in Algeria," a reference to the Islamic Salvation Front's overwhelming 1991 election victory in the North African state. After party leaders spoke of voiding the constitution and implementing Islamic law, the Algerian military staged a coup leading to a civil conflict that killed tens of thousands.

Because of his statements and veiled threats, the judiciary in 1998 charged Gülen with trying to "undermine the secular system" while "camouflag[ing] his methods with a democratic and moderate image." Convicted in absentia but free to run his organization from his U.S. exile, Gülen continues a rather inconsistent approach to tolerance and secularism. He often equates the separation of religion and state with atheism, an assertion many of Turkey's most secular officials find offensive: believing that religion is best kept to the individual rather than state sphere does not equate a lack of belief in God. In 2004, Gülen equated atheism with terrorism and said both atheists and murderers would spend eternity in hell.

Gülen has received a legal break, however. In 2002, Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) won a plurality in parliamentary elections and, because of a fluke in Turkish election law, was able to amplify one-third of the popular vote into a two-thirds parliamentary majority. Erdoğan used this advantage to enact reforms that had the net effect of stacking not only the civil service, but also banking boards and the judiciary with his political supporters and religious fundamentalists. Erdoğan's judges wasted no time. They placed liens against political opponents' property; seized independent newspapers and television stations, including, not by coincidence, ATV; and assigned sympathetic judges to hear appeals against earlier decisions levied against Islamists. On May 5, 2006, the Ankara Criminal Court overturned the verdict against Gülen. While a public

prosecutor—a secularist holdout—appealed the court's action, the process is now nearing conclusion. Gülen's supporters are ecstatic. His slate wiped clean, Gülen has indicated he may soon return to Turkey.

If he does, Istanbul 2008 may very well look like Tehran 1979. Just as Gülen's supporters affirm his altruistic intentions and see no inconsistency between a secretive, cell-based movement and transparent governance, too many Western journalists also give Gülen a free pass.

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If this sounds familiar, it should: three decades ago, the same phenomenon marked coverage of Iran. "I don't want to be the leader of the Islamic Republic; I don't want to have the government or power in my hands," Khomeini told a credulous Austrian television reporter during the ayatollah's brief sojourn in Paris. In November 1978, Steven Erlanger, the future *New York Times* foreign correspondent, penned a *New Republic* essay arguing that Khomeini's vision for Iran was essentially a "Platonic Republic with a grand ayatollah as a philosopher-king" and predicting the triumph of an independent liberal left worried more about labor conditions in Iran's oil fields than pursuing any theological tendency.

In Tehran then as in Ankara now, U.S. ambassadors preferred garden parties with the political elite and maintained contacts with only a narrow segment of the population. They were blind. As the State Department and Central Intelligence Agency remained clueless or belittled concerns about Khomeini's intentions, millions of Iranians turned out to greet their imam at Tehran's international airport. Turks now say that similar crowds might greet Gülen when his plane touches down in Istanbul.

Gülen is careful. He will not order the dissolution of the Turkish Republic. But ensconced in his Istanbul mansion, he could simply begin to issue fatwas prying Turkey farther from the secularism to which Erdoğan pays lip service. As Khomeini consciously drew parallels between himself and Twelver Shiism's Hidden Imam, Gülen will remain quiet as his supporters paint his return as evidence that the caliphate formally dissolved by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in 1924 has been restored.

The secular order and constitutionalism in Turkey have never been so shaky. The government now controls

most television and radio stations. Erdoğan has gained the dubious distinction of launching more lawsuits against journalists and commentators than any previous Turkish prime minister.

As Erdoğan discourages dissent, his and Gülen's supporters among prominent Turkish columnists and commentators equate Islamism with democracy and secularism with fascism—a line too many Western diplomats eager to demonstrate tolerance with an embrace of “moderate Islam” accept. Erdoğan himself has argued that it was secularism that led to Hitler and that Islamism would never produce such a result.

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Last month, after one of the few independent judicial authorities filed a lawsuit against Erdoğan and the AKP for violating constitutional provisions separating religion from politics, the prime minister responded with a midnight roundup of leading academics and journalists who had criticized him. Even Erdoğan's supporters were shocked to wake up on March 21 to learn that İlhan Selçuk, the bedridden octogenarian editor-in-chief of *Cumhuriyet* described by Turks as their Walter Cronkite had been arrested in a predawn raid on charges of plotting to launch a military coup; the police have yet to provide any evidence. Nor is Selçuk the only victim in the most recent intimidation campaign. A *Hürriyet* columnist, Ahmet Hakan, has received threatening phone calls from lawyer Kemaletin Gülen, a relative of Fethullah.

When Islamists pursue campaigns of hatred, Western officials not only pretend nothing is amiss, but also, as in the case of Palestinian leaders, often increase their support.

This week, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice will address the judicial case against Erdoğan and the AKP. Members of her staff suggest she will lend subtle support to the prime minister. Indeed, it may be tempting to condemn the court action as a political stunt: the prosecutor's legal brief is shoddily written and poorly argued. Despite its faults, however, the underlying legal issues are real.

Rice should be silent. Any interference will backfire: Turks, already upset that U.S. ambassador Ross Wilson seldom meets with opposition leaders, will interpret any criticism of the case as White House support for the AKP. Secularists will ask why Turkey's liberal opposition should not have the right to all legal remedies. They already ask why the West applauds legal action taken against Austrian populist Jörg Haider and French demagogue Jean-Marie Le Pen, but the same U.S. and European officials appear to bless Erdoğan's legal exceptionalism. By undermining judicial recourse, Rice may accelerate violence and lend support to those who argue—wrongly—that the government's disdain for the law and constitution should be met with the same. On the off chance, however, that Rice accepts that the court case should run its course, Turkey's religious conservatives will accuse her of masterminding the approach.

Over the past seven years, the Bush administration has made many mistakes. Bush was correct to recognize the importance of democratization; bungled implementation has turned a noble ideal into a dirty word. By equating democracy only with elections, the State Department and the National Security Council fumbled U.S. interests in Iraq, Gaza, and Lebanon. One man, one vote, once; parties that enforce discipline at the point of a gun; and politicians who seek to subvert the rule of law to an imam's conception of God do little for U.S. national security. Never again should the United States abandon its ideological compatriots for the ephemeral promises of parties that use religion to subvert democracy and seek mob rather than constitutional rule. Turkey is nearing the cliff. Please, Secretary Rice, do not push it over the edge.