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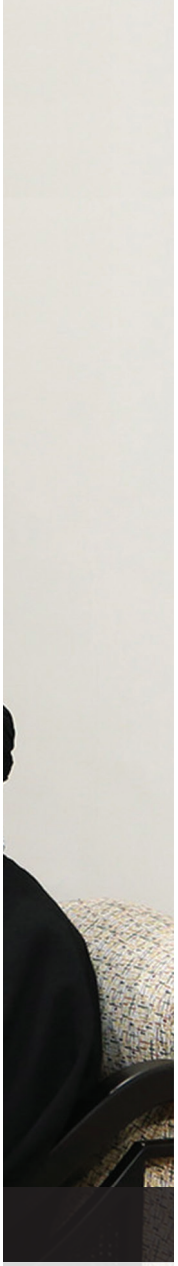

COMMENTARY

When Foreign Policy Matters: The Gülen Movement's Fight with the AK Party over Iran

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ABSTRACT *It is widely accepted that identities are stable and they are one of the main motivations for alliance formations. The recent political rivalry between the AK Party and the Gülen movement, however, provides a rich case for those who claim the contrary. This article is a bold attempt to explain the role of power relations in this political rivalry with a special focus on the AK Party's relations with Iran. Having discussed why identity and interest are not determining factors in the Gülen movement's vehement opposition to the AK Party's relations with Iran, the article argues that it is the power struggle between the party and the movement that largely shapes the latter's imagination of the current Turkish-Iranian relations.*

The last quarter of 2013 brought with it an unprecedented dramatic power struggle in Turkey. The ruling Islam-friendly party was challenged by an Islamic movement for the first time in the history of the Turkish Republic. Given the fact that the AK Party (Justice and Development Party) and the Gülen movement had been in cooperation against the tutelary role of Turkey's state bureaucracy since the AK Party's coming to power in 2002, the tug-of-war between these two actors is quite intriguing. Instead of explaining the roots of this power struggle,[1] however, this paper will explore the conditions under which Iran emerged at the center of the conflict between the AK Party and the Gülen movement. Through this exploration, I aim to prove that foreign policy in Turkey is inextricably linked to domestic power relations.

To speak in theoretical terms,[2] the role of discourses on foreign policy in constructing the first pro- and later anti-AK Party identity among the followers of the Gülen movement is the main topic of this paper. Since a comprehensive answer to this question would require an insurmountable amount of work, ranging from studying the representation of Ottoman history to that of the American in the Gülen movement's documents, this paper will be limited to an anal-

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An Iranian worker stands next to the flags of Turkey and Iran in front of gas pipelines delivering natural gas to Turkey.

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ysis of discourses on the AK Party's relations with Iran. The limitation of the scope of this paper does not imply reductionism, because there is no such thing as a free, neutral, independent statement. Any statement on the AK Party's relations with Iran made by a follower of the Gülen movement always belongs to a series or a whole, and always plays a role among other statements raised by the Gülen movement's followers on other issues.[3] Therefore, studying a specific issue does not reduce the merit of any study aiming to illustrate the general rules of a discursive battle between two competing power blocks. Indeed, studying a specific portion of the discourse in some detail sheds illustrative light upon the whole.

The Paradox

In December 2006, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Turkey's prime minister and the leader of the AK Party, paid a visit to Iran amid a crisis stemming from the West's uneasiness about Iran's uranium enrichment policy. In addition to negotiations on nuclear issues, Erdoğan also put energy issues on the table, and met with Ayatollah Seyyid Ali Khamenei, Iran's supreme leader. This visit was followed by a crisis over suspension of gas supplies by Iran to Turkey, accompanied by an excuse that these supplies were needed for meeting Iran's own domestic gas demand. Although Iran had promised to supply Turkey with 27 million-28 million cubic meters of gas per day under a contract signed in 1996, Tehran reduced Turkey's gas supply 10-fold to about 2.5 million cubic meters in late December 2006, then stopped all supplies completely in the beginning of January 2007. Despite the timing of these events, the *Zaman*, a Turkish daily and the main media outlet of the Gülen movement, portrayed Erdoğan's meeting with

Khamenei as an ordinary occurrence[4] and did not raise any criticism against the so-called expensive price of Iranian gas during Erdoğan's visit to Tehran. When Iran reduced and then stopped gas supplies to Turkey, the *Zaman* presented this as a necessity stemming from Iran's domestic needs.[5] The *Zaman* also hosted many reports in order to prove that Turkey faced no crisis due to Iran's decision to stop the gas supply.[6]

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In January 2014, Erdoğan paid another visit to Iran amid a domestic crisis that escalated with skyrocketing speed after a major corruption probe against the AK Party government began in December 17, 2013. In a report titled "Scandal in Iranian Gas," the *Zaman* strongly criticized the government's policy regarding natural gas on the grounds that Ankara had missed an opportunity to buy Azerbaijani gas at $450 per 1.000 cubic meters, and instead was importing Iranian gas at a price of $490 per 1.000 cubic meters.[7] Erdoğan's meeting with Khamenei and his remark that Iran is "like his second home" drew strong criticism from both the *Zaman* daily and its columnists. For example, Kerim Balcı wrote a column titled "I feel myself at home only in Turkey"[8] and argued that "Iran is a giant with eyes everywhere… Iran is not a friend [of Turkey] and does bad things on every occasion… my prime minister should know that, as long as he feels at second home in Tehran, I'm worrying about losing my home in my own country." Kerim Balcı and some other columnists in the Gülen media (which includes dailies such as *Zaman*, *Bugün*, and *Today's Zaman*; Turkish television stations such as *Samanyolu TV* and *Samanyolu Haber*; a worldwide news agency *Cihan News Agency*; and weekly magazines such as *Aksiyon*) also accused Erdoğan of standing "in front of the spiritual leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei like a humble student."[9]

Explaining the Paradox

How do we explain the above paradox? In other words, why did the Gülen media describe the first visit as an ordinary one but criticize the second in its every aspect? The paradox is not limited to the representation of the AK Party's relations with Iran. Rather, it can be traced in every issue ranging from the representation of the AK Party's education policy to that of torture in prisons under the AK Party rule. To put it differently, all issues became "contested terrain" between the AK Party government and the Gülen movement after 2013. By shedding light on two different representations of the AK Party's relations with Iran by the Gülen movement's

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followers, this paper aims to understand the role of discursive practices in turning these two actors into competing power blocks.

Three potential answers to the above paradox can be raised, which fall into the following categories: identity, interest, and power-relations. These are the answers made available by the pundits for a baffled public. According to the identity-based explanation, the Gülen movement has a religious and national enmity towards the Shiite sect of Islam. What Fethullah Gülen said on this issue in an interview for the *Yeni Yüzyıl* daily in 1997[10] is worth quoting at some length: "When Iran is considered, there are two issues to be careful about. First, the export of a bigoted sect under the name of religion and Islamic revolution. For them, their sect and interpretations come before the true religion. If a human being is not Shiite, he/she is almost nothing. Second, their understanding of Ali; it is just an excuse for legitimizing their interpretation. In fact, it is not the love of Ali but hatred of Abu Bakr and Umar that keeps them united. In order to ground their wrong belief, they have turned Ali into a flag. Today, Persian expansionism in the region and Iran's historic rivalry with us obviously pose a grave danger. Iran will not remain idle in the region. There is a significant amount of Shia population in Iraq, I would worry."

Gülen's description of Iran as a grave threat to the Sunni world is not limited to his interviews under the pressure of the harsh campaign against the Islamic movements in the 1990s. In his book, a collection of sermons from various occasions, Gülen presents Iran as an eternal threat for Islamic believers by arguing the following: "throughout the history of Islam, Iran has always remained a diseased limb. This is so much so that the Persians had close relations with the Nusairis, deniers of Allah and the prophet [Muhammad], rather than the Sunnis, and they directed all their struggles against the Sunnis within the Islamic world."[11] A close reading of Gülen's sermon transcripts[12] makes clear the religious-based enmity of the Gülen Movement towards Iran, but it falls short of explaining the *Zaman*'s initial description of Erdoğan's 2006 visit to Tehran and the paradox stemming from the *Zaman*'s U-turn in reporting the 2014-visit.

The interest-based analysis posits that the Gülen movement is in competition with Iranian expansion, especially in Central Asia and the Middle East. A brief look at the history of the schools owned by the Gülen movement in Central Asia and the Middle East proves that there has been a struggle for influence between Iran and the Gülen movement in these areas.[13] Added to this, the Gülen move-

ment pursued close relations with the West in parallel with the increase of its global influence, especially in the US and Europe. Therefore, hostility towards Iran functioned as a strategy for consolidating the legitimacy of the Gülen movement and its activities all over the world in the eyes of the global Western powers. For example, the Gülen movement defended itself against accusations[14] of indoctrinating radical Islam in its schools in the US by pursuing and re-emphasizing its critical tone towards Iran and radical Islamic movements in the Middle East. According to Hasan Kösebalaban's analysis, these actions and discourses are part of the Gülen movement's strategy for gaining "American approval for [its] activities in many parts of the world."[15] However, like the identity-based explanation, this interest-based analysis cannot account for the radical change in the *Zaman*'s stance towards the AK Party's relations with Iran since nothing had changed in terms of the competition between Iran and the Gülen movement in the last decade.

Looking at Competing Power Blocks

I argue that the analysis of domestic power relations provides the most convincing explanation for the above paradox. Before analyzing these power relations, it is necessary to explain briefly how the AK Party government and the Gülen movement have turned into two competing power blocks. In the first decade of its rule, the AK Party government cooperated with the Gülen movement in the campaign against the Kemalist bureaucracy, a shadow government in Turkey since its establishment. As part of this cooperation, the AK Party government allowed the Gülen movement to take control over the police, the judiciary, and large parts of the state apparatus in order to defeat the Kemalist bureaucracy - especially the military, which had exerted a tutelary power over Turkish politics for a long time - through a series of police operations and mass trials from 2008 to 2011. When the Kemalist establishment was weakened, the Gülen movement, an enormously organized body within the state bureaucracy, especially in the police and judiciary systems, sought to increase its power as in the case of the so-called *MİT* (the National Intelligence Organization of Turkey) crisis. In February 2012, the chief of the Turkish intelligence agency Hakan Fidan, a confidant of Erdoğan, and four of his former colleagues were called by an Istanbul prosecutor to testify as part of an investigation into the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party) on the grounds that Hakan Fidan and his former colleagues had held secret meetings with PKK leaders in Oslo. Although Fidan refused to testify, these summons triggered pro-AK Party figures' complaint of a "parallel state" within the state, since the Gülen movement was widely believed to have been behind the attempt.

In the period following the MİT crisis, *Today's Zaman*, *Zaman*'s English-language sister newspaper, adopted a highly critical tone towards

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani shaking hands with Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu in Tehran on December 17, 2014.

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the government on such issues as negotiations with the PKK, the role the government had tried to attain in the Middle East in general, and Syria in particular after the Arab Spring, and Erdoğan's so-called "authoritarian" governing style.[16] However, the *Zaman* daily did not follow its sister until it exposed the AK Party government's plan to close down "prep schools" for university exams, through which the Gülen movement mobilizes its followers in Turkey, in mid-November 2013.[17] The publication of this leak functioned as leverage in transferring the critical tone of *Today's Zaman* not only to the *Zaman* daily but also to all the apparatuses of the Gülen movement. As a result, Hakan Şükür, an AK Party parliamentarian known for his sympathy to the Gülen movement, resigned from the AK Party on 16 December 2013. His resignation was followed by a real clash when Zekeriya Öz, an Istanbul prosecutor who is widely known as the Ergenekon prosecutor, initiated an early morning raid on some individuals, including the sons of three ministers, an AK Party mayor, businessmen and bureaucrats. This raid soon turned into a corruption scandal which threatened the survival of the AK Party government. As a response, the government carried out a purge of police officers and officials conducting the corruption investigation on the grounds that they are members of the so-called "parallel state" run by the Gülen movement. Added to this, Erdoğan openly accused Fethullah Gülen of being the leader of a gang within the state and a tool of Turkey's foreign enemies.

Bringing Foreign Policy Back In

Erdoğan's 2014 visit to Iran came amidst such an atmosphere. At this

point, I want to argue that foreign policy is not only a policy directed towards foreign countries, but also more importantly, it is part of domestic power relations and discourses on which our subjectivities are established. While foreign policy functions, in the hands of a hegemonic power block, as an exclusionary practice in silencing oppositional alternative discourses, it also serves as a point of resistance for oppositional power blocks in their attempt to delegitimize the hegemonic block and authorize their own stance. The drastic change in the *Zaman*'s representations of Erdoğan's two visits to Iran is related to the Gülen movement's changing relations with the AK Party from close ally to competitor. All of the criticisms on the part of the Gülen media towards Erdoğan's 2014 visit to Iran are thus part of the movement's larger power strategies, and these criticisms undertook a function in the tug-of-war between the two competing power blocks. As part of its power struggle with the AK Party, the Gülen media followed three main strategies in its criticism towards Erdoğan's 2014 visit to Tehran. According to the first, they argued that Turkey has been cheated by Iran, especially in energy agreements, and therefore missed the opportunity to buy cheaper energy from other sources such as Azerbaijan. For the second, they asserted that the encroachment policy pursued by Erdoğan with Iran not only comes at the detriment of Turkish interests but it also aggravates the penetration of Iran into Turkish domestic politics. The third criticism argued that Erdoğan's love of Khamenei proves that Erdoğan behaves like a servant of Shiite ambitions in the region.

Currently Iran has an influence on Turkey equal to that which it enjoyed during the last period of the reign of Bayezid, the second

In 2013, Ankara was paying $490 per 1,000 cubic meters of Iranian gas, while paying $335 for gas from Azerbaijan and $425 from Russia.[18] At the time, Turkey received about 57% of its gas for domestic consumption from Russia; 18% from Iran; 9% from Azerbaijan; and 14% from other purchases. Since the price of Iranian gas was the highest, comparatively, the Turkish state-owned Petroleum Pipeline Corporation (BOTAŞ) applied to an international court of arbitration in 2012 to help reduce the price of Iranian gas. Although the case was not finalized, the Turkish government continued to negotiate with Tehran for a more favorable price cut. Accordingly, one of the declared aims during the 2014 visit was to ask Iranian officials to decrease the price of natural gas. However, the *Zaman* put the price of Iranian gas on its agenda and published many news analyses in order to prove that the AK Party government had not done its homework to buy cheaper gas. Unlike its previous reports, the *Zaman* started to accuse the AK Party government of buying expensive Iranian gas on

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purpose, and not utilizing other cheap sources such as Azerbaijan.[19] By doing this, the Gülen media aimed to de-legitimize the AK Party government as a defender of Turkish national interests.

To exemplify the second strategy, the framing of Turkish-Iranian relations by Abdullah Bozkurt, a columnist in *Today's Zaman*, is worth quoting at some length:[20] "Tehran has best made use of pro-Iranian sympathy in some of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AK Party) cadres, cashing in on a return derived from a decades-long investment in political Islamists. The bias towards Iran by these circles has blinded them to the extent that sinister Iranian overtures were seen in the context of good neighborly relations when in fact they were simply conduits for Iranian expansionism and penetration into critical areas of the Turkish government and social structures." As regards Erdoğan's 2014 visit to Iran, Bozkurt went on to argue that Turkey did not benefit much from deals signed with Iran; on the contrary, "the mullah regime got what it wanted from Turkey while undercutting Ankara's influence in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan and other places." As a result, Bozkurt asks a highly controversial question: "why has the Erdoğan government been pursuing an unreciprocated love affair with Iran when Turkey is not benefiting greatly from the closer and deeper engagement and in fact is being exposed to many threats with the mullah regime's clandestine activities?" Similarly, Ali Ünal wrote the following: "Today, one of the important clues in understanding what is happening in Turkey is Ankara's unrequited love for Iran, which has always been in competition with Turkey. Currently Iran has an influence on Turkey equal to that which it enjoyed during the last period of the reign of Bayezid, the second."[21]

The representation of Erdoğan as a servant of Shiite ambitions in the region aims to de-legitimize the AK Party's fame as a Sunni-friendly party, and re-situate the Gülen movement at the center of Sunni tradition. For example, Kerim Balcı made a comparison in his column in *Today's Zaman*[22] as follows: "the political Islamists, represented by the Justice and Development Party (AK Party) today, regard the US and Israel as the prime enemies of Turkey and regard the so-called Islamic revolution of Iran as a kind of role model all religiously motivated political groups have to respect, despite its failures. On the other hand, apolitical faith-based movements, represented by the Sufi lodges and the Hizmet [Gülen] movement today, regard Iranian expansionism as a real and imminent threat that needs to be tackled." These differing discourses related to actors' identities both problematized Erdoğan's popu-

larity as an Islam-friendly leader and re-constructed the subjectivity of the Gülen movement's followers, who had voted for the AK Party in previous elections.

This three-legged strategy regarding Iran is not separable from the domestic power struggle between the AK Party and the Gülen movement. The Gülen movement, aiming to de-legitimize the hegemonic language of the AK Party in domestic politics, used relations with Iran to normalize what was done in the domestic setting. By doing so, the Gülen movement not only normalized its harsh criticism towards the AK Party but also de-legitimized the AK Party's accusations towards itself. For example, the representation of Erdoğan as a servant of Persian ambitions, rather than Turkish interests in the region, functioned as an alternative and challenging discourse towards the pro-Erdoğan media's labeling of the Gülen movement as a subcontractor working for the US and for Israel.[23]

Conclusion

The de-legitimizing and differing discourses of the Gülen media on recent relations between Turkey and Iran can be easily situated within the greater normalization process of the Gülen movement's struggle against the AK Party government. To speak in theoretical terms, when the Gülen movement attempts to speak on foreign affairs, foreign policy works as a double approval of its identity and difference. By doing so, the Gülen movement (re)consolidates its difference and oppositional position *vis-à-vis* the AK Party's dominant discourse. In other words, the Gülen movement instrumentalized relations with Iran as a node of double resistance against the hegemonic language of the AK Party in order to cultivate an alternative subjectivity and render its position hegemonic. Accordingly, differences in foreign policy preferences are immanent in the (re)materialization of the Gülen movement's identity and therefore, these policy practices central to the constitution, production and maintenance of the identity and difference are not separable from power relations. As a result, it can be argued that we can have a better understanding of the dramatic change in the Gülen movement's representation of Iran to its audience when we look at the case through the lens of the fact that foreign policy is a practice central to power relations.

Endnotes

1. For a brief analysis the reasons behind this struggle, see Galip Dalay, "The Structural Roots of Turkey's Power Struggle," The German Marshall Fund of the United States, On Turkey series, 4 February 2014.

2. For theoretical bases of this paper, see David Campbell, *Writing Security: United States foreign policy and the politics of identity*, (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1992); Richard K. Ashley, "Untying the Sovereign State: A Double Reading of the Anarchy Problematique," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 2, (1998), pp. 227-262; Ali Balcı, "The Kurdish Movement's EU Policy in Turkey: An Analysis of a Dissident Ethnic Block's Foreign Policy," *Ethnicities*, Vol. 15, No. 1, (2015), pp. 72-91; Ali Balcı, *Dış Politikada Hesaplaşmak, AK Parti, Ordu ve Kemalizm*, (İstanbul: Etkileşim Yayınları, 2015).

3. See Michel Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge, Translated by A. M. Sheridan Smith, (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 111.

4. "Erdoğan, Hamaney ile biraraya geldi," *Zaman*, (3 December 2006); For a relatively positive report on Khamenei's statements on Turkish-Iranian relations, see "'Türkiye-İran ilişkilerinde yeni dönem,'" *Zaman*, (4 January 2006).

5. "İran, Türkiye'ye verdiği doğalgazı kıstı," *Zaman*, (13 December 2006); "İran kış ortasında doğalgazı kesti, kriz kapıda," *Zaman*, (3 January 2007); For a report which brought the high price of Russian gas to the agenda in this period, see İsmail Altunsoy, "Türkiye'ye Rusya'dan daha ucuz doğalgaz vereceğiz," *Zaman*, (6 December 2006).

6. For example, see "'İran doğalgazında kısıntı var ama sıkıntı yok,'" *Zaman*, (15 December 2006).

7. İsmail Altunsoy, "İran doğalgazında skandal," *Zaman*, (31 January 2014).

8. Kerim Balcı, "Sadece Türkiye'de evimde hissediyorum," *Zaman*, (31 January 2014); See also "Başbakan Erdoğan'ın sosyal medyayı sallayan İran pozu," *birgun.com.tr*, (31 January 2014). For a relatively negative report on Turkish-Iranian relations see, "Erdoğan'a sert suçlama," *Zaman*, (29 January 2014).

9. Kerim Balcı, "Burden of an angry prime minister," *Today's Zaman*, (5 February 2014).

10. "İran İslam'ı," *Yeni Yüzyıl*, (24 July 1997); Also available at http://tr.fGülen.com/content/view/7878/15/

11. See, M. Fethullah Gülen, *Fasıldan Fasıla*, Volume 1, (Nil Yayınları, 1997).

12. For a summary of Gülen's thoughts on Iran, see "Fethullah Gülen'in dine dayalı bir devlet kurma gayesi ve hedefi var mıdır?" http://tr.fGülen.com/content/view/20239/172/

13. See for example, Nevval Sevindi, *Contemporary Islamic Conversations: M. Fethullah Gülen on Turkey, Islam, and the West*, (SUNY Press, 2008), p. 120-122.

14. For example, the Gülen movement was described as a jihadist threat for the future of the US by conservative circles in the US. An article published in *FrontPage Magazine*, a conservative online political magazine in the US, provided a detailed analysis of the Gülen Movement's activities in the US and concluded that "it remains a real possibility that Fethullah Gülen and the [Gülen movement] believe conditions are "ripening" for their stealth jihad in America, using charter schools as their vehicle." The article also suggested that "the time is right for a comprehensive investigation of the [Gülen movement's] charter school system, and Imam Fethullah Gülen." Arnold Ahlert, "Pushing Back Against Stealth Jihad Charter Schools," http://www.frontpagemag.com/, (13 November 2012).

15. Hasan Kösebalaban, "The Making of Enemy and Friend: Fethullah Gülen's National-security Identity," *Turkish Islam and the Secular State: the Gülen Movement*, Hakan Yavuz and John L. Esposito (ed.), (Syracuse University Press, 2003), 170-183, p. 179.

16. For example, see, "AK Party's biggest corruption case shows stakes of press censorship, transparency woes," *Today's Zaman*, (4 August 2013); "Another journalist fired, gov't to confiscate media boss's investment," *Today's Zaman*, (5 December 2013).

17. "Eğitime Büyük Darbe," *Zaman*, (14 November 2013).

18. Although prices of gas from Russia, Iran and Azerbaijan vary from source to source, the above numbers are from *Today's Zaman*. See "Erdoğan to ask Tehran to cut price of natural gas," *Today's Zaman*, (28 January 2014).

19. İsmail Altunsoy, "Faturaları, pahalı İran gazı şişiriyor," *Zaman*, 23 January 2014; İsmail Altunsoy, "İran doğalgazında skandal," *Zaman*, (31 January 2014); İsmail Altunsoy, "Ucuz Azeri gazı için süre doluyor," *Zaman*, (7 February 2014).

20. Abdullah Bozkurt, "Iran created perfect storm for attacks on Turkey," *Today's Zaman*, (14 Februaty 2014).

21. Ali Ünal, "Erdoğan, Haşhaşîler, sivil yardım kuruluşları," *Zaman*, (20 January 2014).

22. Kerim Balcı, "Prime Minister Erdoğan in his second home," *Today's Zaman*, (29 January 2014).

23. See, for example, "CIA demek cemaat demek," *Takvim*, (10 March 2014).