

Tolerance Is Love: Gülen, Ghazali, and Rūmī

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Gülen: "As for the Movement; Neither Now, Nor in the Future Should Our Friends Have Any Ambition for Government"

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M. Fethullah Gülen's name gains daily prominence in the wake of ever-widening discussions and scholarly researches into the changing political and religious climate of Turkey today. Those hoping to influence future Turkish foreign policy invoke Gülen's ideals of tolerance and dialogue (see for example *Turkish Islam and the Secular State: The Gülen Movement*). Because Gülen also plainly denounces political extremism, especially the violent kind that calls itself and all too often dupes media outlets into calling it "Islamic", would-be players on the emerging political scene link their name to his, marking their moderate stance without having to criticize extremists themselves. Further, because Gülen's name also gains *gravitas* through frequent linkage in the academic arena with ancient Sufi sages, these proto-politicians can also lend themselves an air of erudition steeped in traditional values and reverence for the past. Through association with Gülen's "movement" (a phenomenon he himself eschews) the gravity rubs off on them, without their lifting a page of text with the likes of "Alchemy" in the title. Thereby, they avoid the moniker "mystical" which would detract from their aspirations to be viewed as powerful, rational, men of the world. In other words, "Gülenism" has become political token. The application of Gülen's ideals to alien contexts distorts them to the point they require *ressourcement*.

Positioned as it is in this conference section entitled "Islam and Democracy", this paper seeks to show that Gülen does not tender "tolerance" as political tool. Tolerance is a term linked to love, not power. To Gülen, tolerance is not a way to accommodate the "other" across stake-

holder territories, it is a way to embrace all in the dissolution of boundaries. Invoking Gülen in the name of “political Islam” is grave error and does his ideals certain injustice.

Gülen is an advocate for dialogue and tolerance in interpersonal, not international, relations.

Gülen is not an activist and never seeks public profile. He leads no marches or sit-ins; his life models piety. Living reclusively and ascetically, he devotes himself to deepening human

understanding. He personally has no agenda or political platform. He asks of life only a quiet

burial, wearing his scholar’s cap (retrieved August 2005 from <http://www.fgulen.org/a.page/press/interview/interview.with.mehmet.gundem.of.milliyet.daily/a1934.html>).

Had he ever wanted a movement-as-incipient-political-party developing in his name he would time and again have shown himself at conferences and rallies, even (maybe especially) if he had to be wheel-chaired onstage. This he has repeatedly refused to allow. Instead, he has richly merited exoneration from charges of this kind of activity against him. He does not now seek stand-ins who would walk that mile in his stead while he remains a shadowy string-puller backstage.

Efforts to cast oneself in the name of “Gülenism” into the roiled waters of internal Turkish and international politics to buoy one’s political aspirations must founder. His genius requires contemplation in a quiet mind, from whence it may inform action but must not incite ambition. Gülen’s influence, properly appreciated, is more likely to draw one away from the political battleground than onto it.

This paper aims to restore Gülen to where he is at home by shining a little light on his sources, placing him within the Islamic spiritual tradition known as *tasawwuf*, or Sufism. That home is not one that must shut all its doors to the outside world, as contemporary Sufism does; it is one that embraces the world while, importantly, shunning worldliness, as Medieval Sufism does. Tolerance in Gülen shows the way to avoiding power politics, not how to indulge in them.

Toward these ends I compare slices of Gülen’s thinking on tolerance and dialogue, a utopian vision compiled as *Toward a Global Civilization of Love and Tolerance* (Gülen 2004), with an equally small serving of the thought of one scion of Sufism, al-Ghazali (1058-1111 CE), and look at both in relation to the poet Rūmī (1207-1273 CE). Ghazali played a role in defining medieval Islam’s ethical and spiritual values of tolerance in “Duties of Brotherhood,” a section of *The Alchemy of Happiness* (Al-Ghazzali 2002). Rūmī has long defined love for all. First, I distinguish use of the term tolerance within international relations from tolerance in interpersonal relations. Understanding the respective definitions of and orientations to “other” helps clarify the distinction. Second, I position Gülen within Sufism. It would be ideal if Gülen’s thought could inspire ethical and spiritual practices everywhere, especially in those who hope to hold power in the new Turkey coming to pass. In order for that to happen, however, Gülen must be read deeply embedded in his real context, not in that shallow one of a playbook of political consultancy. Appreciating Gülen’s mystical dimension serves to prevent the hijacking of his thought for narrow political – democratic or otherwise – ends.

Coming to Terms with “Tolerance”

Tolerance is one of those words best defined by its opposite, in this case, intolerance. Belligerence declines tolerance and dialogue, preferring conflict. Tolerance seeks to avoid hostilities. Tolerance would prevent, with or without concomitant dialogue, the outbreak of hostilities. However, the common Anglophone understanding of the term “toleration” does not imply a stretch to compassion. In Gülen’s writings, tolerance is compassion and compassion is love. As a negotiating strategy, by contrast, tolerance is put forward as a way to allow potentially contending parties to avoid conflict without their having to go all the way to embrace of the

“other”. To do that would require acknowledging so much good in the other that one would lose face by seeming to disown one’s opposition stance.

What tolerance means in this context is that the tolerator simply allows others to abide without interference, in their own realms of thought from which one still dissociates oneself. Although this tolerance does not altogether forswear dialogue, it does not have to seek it out in order to forestall hostility’s eruption. If the tolerator happens to know, through unsought dialogue, others’ contrary beliefs, he brackets them and sets them aside. The tolerator puts up with whatever cognitive dissonance accidental dialogue might generate between what he holds to be the case and what others hold. Dialogue might accidentally even find a middle way between opposing positions, but it need not – maybe even had better not try. Tolerance itself has forestalled hostilities; consensus, unnecessary at best, is icing on the cake. Compassion is out of the question.

This kind of tolerance-in-abidance can be the sort that puts up with a noisome child or neighbor, for example, so long as he remains sufficiently subdued to allow one to pursue one’s own interests. This kind of tolerance definitely has no place for dialogue. There is no middle ground on differences to seek, because the other goes largely unrecognized. Even though this tolerance results in no more than a standoff, it does avoid outright conflict nonetheless. It is nonviolent – so long as the means to achieve the distance between parties to the pact it preserves has not entailed, in this example, beating the child or neighbor into submission. Even if he is acknowledged, one can still take the other’s ideas and interests to be entirely wrong at worst, or entirely irrelevant, at best. If dialogue takes place, it serves mainly to define one’s own position over and against the other. In politics, this has crucial consequences: one retains one’s own following; nobody in one’s party slips over to the other side. Constituency is consolidated.

In Gülen's use of the term, on the other hand, tolerance does press past mere abiding-with and toward genuine embrace of others' viewpoints. He insists in fact that dialogue achieve this end. His tolerance can even allow the *potential* rightness of what others hold to be the case, over and against one's own understanding, or at the very least two truths can live together amicably in acknowledged cognitive dissonance of the sort that everyday life is bound up with. This kind of tolerance may even take as a possibility that truth finally is unmonopolizable by any one party. (Some call this "relativism," implying that it abrogates commitment to one's own beliefs – a definition with which I disagree). This tolerance does more than just hinder hostilities. In this sense of tolerance, the boundaries between *other* and *one* become indistinct and lose focus. The mutual acceptance of the possible open-endedness of truth implies that tolerance entails a dialogue that actually is a resonance in harmony between two parties. This tolerance-cum-dialogue is something more than standoff, but something other than identical agreement, concerning beliefs. Duality in the sense of two opposing stances is removed, but not to the complete obliteration of one and other (see Kurtz below: both Gülen and Rūmī move beyond this distinction still cognizant of it). Removing the focus on opposing points of view obviates the necessity of working out a middle ground between them.

Sufism

It is when appreciating his views in the light of the mystical dimension of Islam from which they ultimately arise that Gülen's understanding of tolerance becomes clearest. Today's Sufism is not Gülen's context, however. Few writers on Fethullah Gülen fail to mention Sufism in characterizations of him, but most are quick to distinguish contemporary Sufism from its earlier medieval expressions. Father Thomas Michel, S.J., affirms in his analysis of Gülen and Sufism, "The dynamism of the early Sufis was often dissipated in the institutional that took

shape in the later Sufi orders. Particularly in recent times, many Sufis divorce themselves from real life and engage in useless metaphysical speculation”. (Michel 2005, 348)

Anthropologist David Buchman’s recent findings in Yemen paint the same picture of today’s Sufism. He found the practice of “conventional” Sufism declining today under pressure from three forces:

1. Sufism appears to favor an “inward turning that promises closeness (*qurb*) to God, beauty (*ihsan*) of character, and sincerity (*ikhlas*) in religion,” a principle of withdrawal from the world that contrasts to the strong social engagement that mainstream Islam teaches and thus makes Sufism seem critique “unIslamic”;
2. Sufi orders today do not produce teachers to perform the traditional role of spiritual direction and guidance on which the growth of advanced Sufi practice depends;
3. “...young people living under current economic hardships are attracted to political Islamic movements which promise outward action and material benefits”.

(Buchman 1977, 21-24)

Not to otherworldly Sufism, Buchman’s article implies. What Sufism fails to do today, the findings suggest, is engage the entrant with the world. However, this investigator sees the engagement preferred by most youth to be that of conflict and its supposed rewards. Perhaps modern Sufism’s major failing is not that of refusing to engage in political conflict, but rather, its failure to engage the world outside its own insular brand of Islam. Members of the Tarika today join arms and make a closed circle, chanting only to ones initiated into it.

Sufism in the Middle Ages, like Ghazali’s, entailed engagement with the world at large. Gülen must be understood in the context of those who do care deeply about others in the world

around them. Yet Gülen does not altogether conform to any generalized medieval Sufi model much better than he does to any modern one. It has not been his practice to take on individual students as their “master,” nor has he ever founded a “school” of his followers, both characteristics of medieval Sufism. Zeri Saritoprak best states Gülen’s orientation to Sufism, calling him “a Sufi in his own way” (Saritoprak 2003, 169), especially if one bears in mind Michel’s proviso that in the early tradition, each entrant then, like Gülen is today, was a Sufi in his own way too (Michel 2005, 341).

How then position Gülen within medieval Sufism? Lester Kurtz calls “the Sufi Solution...one of the keys” to understanding Gülen (Kurtz 2005, 377). He refers specifically to the medieval lyric poet Jalal Al-din Rūmī, citing Gülen’s “Rūmī-inspired duality of one foot in his own faith tradition while the other roams freely to the faiths of others” (Kurtz, 378). Rūmī describes his own stance as follows:

What is the solution, O Moslems: for I do not know myself.

Neither Christian, Jew, Zoroastrian nor Moslem am I;

I am not an Easterner or a Westerner, or of land or sea:

Not of nature nor of Heaven: Not of India, China, Bulgaria,

Saqsin;

Not of the Iraqs, nor of the land of Khorasan.

My place is my placelessness: my sign is no sign.

I have no body or life: for I am of the Life of Life.

I have put away duality: I have seen the Two worlds as one...

(Divan-i-Shams-i-Tabriz, tr. Idries Shah)

Kurtz cites several excerpts from Gülen's writings that accord in tone with the above, which sing a language of love that would liquidate the boundaries between all creatures, without obliterating their individuality. Undoubtedly Rūmī is, as Gülen himself acknowledges, one potent influence on Gülen's writings. Kurtz interestingly precedes his remarks above with the statement, "Gülen's vision of tolerance goes far beyond what is ordinarily understood by the term" (Kurtz, 375) – ordinarily understood, that is, by Westerners in contrast to Turks, who take the term *hosguru* which entails embrace of the other, usually translated as "tolerance" which entails only putting up with.

In addition to Rūmī's, another name often linked to Gülen's is that of the medieval Sufi Al-Ghazali. He represents a medieval Islamic tradition of nonviolence and a model of peacefulness for Gülen. In "An Islamic Approach to Peace and Nonviolence," Saritoprak identifies al-Ghazali's position as "avoidance of *fitnah* and social anarchy" (Saritoprak, 2005, 415). He goes on to establish this as foundational for "the Sunni tradition of Islam *vis-à-vis* social disorder and anarchy". Elisabeth Özdalga (2000) and others also identify the Sunni tradition, shaped in part by al-Ghazali, as formative for Gülen's thought. Saritoprak further connects Ghazali's principles to those of nonviolence-theorist Gene Sharp's categories, "staying at home" and "avoidance of provocation." He then brings forward Fethullah Gülen as also a proponent of this stance (Saritoprak, 415), thereby linking Ghazali and Gülen via Sharp.

Interiority and conflict-avoidance characterize Gülen's stance as surely as does the melancholy of Rūmī's reed flute. In order to source al-Ghazali after Rūmī as a second *fons et origo* of Gülen's position, however, the question must be addressed how far Ghazali's tolerance reaches as compared to Gülen's. Does al-Ghazali, or Gülen for that matter, seek ultimately to go as far as compassion and love for the other? If Gülen can rightly be linked with Rūmī, then he

must, because those sentiments pervade Rūmī's entire opus. Then logically must al-Ghazali's too in order for the sourcing to hold. In order to assess the linkage of Gülen and al-Ghazali, not only must we understand to what lengths tolerance goes, we must understand to whom it applies. Who are the beneficiaries of tolerance in Gülen and al-Ghazali? This is to ask, in effect, who exactly is "other" to each of them. To glimpse that, we must move to the texts.

Al-Ghazali

"The Duties of Brotherhood," book XV, part ii of al-Ghazali's *Alchemy of Happiness* translated by Muhammad Nur Abdus Salas (2002) spells out one of that sage's most straightforward and systematic prescriptions for interfacing with the "other." At the outset, al-Ghazali expansively wraps all of humankind in the tolerant embrace of *Tawhīd*, the oneness of God and all creation:

Know that the world is one stage of the stages of the journey to God Most High.

All in this station are travelers. Since the destination of journey of this caravan of travelers is the same, they are all as one. There must be friendship and unity among them and mutual aid. (Al-Ghazzali,17)

The "friendship and brotherhood" that occur "for the sake of God Most High" al-Ghazali calls "among the most meritorious forms of worship". We must go beyond tepid abidance-tolerance, Ghazali urges, to the loving embrace of one another. Al-Ghazali gives instances of God's revealing to the Prophets Muhammad, David, and Jesus that friendships are great gifts from God bringing with them grand rewards:

And (the Messenger) said: "For those persons who have friendship for each other for the sake of God Most High a red ruby column is set up on top of which are 70,000 pavilions. From there they will look down upon the inhabitants of heaven,

and the light of their countenances will fall upon the inhabitants of heaven, like the light of the sun in this world. The people of heaven will say, ‘Come, let us go look at them.’ They will see them clothed in green brocade. On their foreheads will be written Those who love each other in God: They are the friends of God most high.” (Al-Ghazzali, 20)

Al-Ghazali then further distinguishes two types of friendship for the sake of God. One is that formed with another because he or she leads one to greater knowledge. The goal of that knowledge is the Hereafter. A teacher, or another whose acceptance of one’s charity and benevolence leads one to the “peace of mind for worship” (Al-Ghazzali, 21), exemplifies this.

The second type of friendship Ghazali describes, however, far exceeds this. It is personal, and extends to another *because* he or she “is a servant of God and created by Him.” Al-Ghazali calls such love “greater because this arises from the excess of love of God Most High, so much so that it reaches the boundaries of passionate love.” It leaks out of the love of God over into love of another, and even extends then to love of the walls of the beloved friend, the district in which the beloved friend lives, and even the dog that roams the beloved friend’s part of town (Al-Ghazzali, 22). This friendship, going far beyond merely putting up with another, al-Ghazali applies to *muslims*. It must be remembered that the term “muslim” can mean to al-Ghazali as to any Arabic speaker simply “one who surrenders”, thus this impassioned form of tolerance he references need not place limits upon whom it admits into toleration’s realm; however, if we take “muslims” to mean “Muslims” in the sense of a member of a formal religion, it might delimit. I suggest the former reading is more appropriate. Even so, in how it links one to another it goes far beyond the toleration that is mere abiding with another. Yet to stop here in al-Ghazali’s “Duties of Brotherhood” would be to stop short.

Al-Ghazali stresses, “They must respect each others rights” (Al-Ghazzali, 17). Not all have the same rights, however. He carefully describes seven categories of rights distinguished by with whom one deals. For dealing with the unbelievers, sinners, and oppressors, al-Ghazali has other guidelines than those for embracing People of the Book, but there are overlapping areas of grey. For example, in chapters 3 and 4, concerning “Enmity for the Sake of God” and the “Degrees of Anger Against the Opponents of God,” al-Ghazali counsels that although one should love even a sinful Muslim for his being a Muslim, one must “hold him as an enemy for his sinfulness” (Al-Ghazzali, 24).

Chapter 7, “The Rights of Muslims, Neighbors, Relatives, and Captives,” enumerates the duties attendant upon brotherhood. Al-Ghazali lists twenty-three rights that accrue to *muslims* with whom one is *not* bound in friendship. The first is a reverse Golden Rule: whatever one does not like done to oneself, do not do it to another Muslim (Al-Ghazzali, 43). The second is interesting especially in that it signals the requirement throughout for a carefully nuanced reading of this text. It reads, “The second right is that no Muslim be troubled by [one’s] deeds or speech.” This exchange immediately follows:

The Messenger (pbuh) asked: “Do you know who is a Muslim?” They answered: “God and His Messenger know best.” He said: “That person from whose hand and tongue the Muslims are at ease.” They asked: “Who is a believer?” He said: “He with whom the Muslims are secure in their own bodies and property.”

This anecdote underscores al-Ghazali’s understanding “muslim” and “believer” to mean anyone who has surrendered one’s will to do harm to the followers of Muhammad. It sounds very like a live-and-let-live policy, one not picky about litmus tests of orthodoxy and more interested in the orthopraxis of non-conflict. Tolerating *everyone* who tolerates you would appear to be the

message, especially upon reading in the next lines, “no one should look at another scornfully; it may be that the person is a friend of God Most High and (the scorner) not know it; for God Most High conceals his Saints so that no one may approach them” (Al-Ghazzali, 43). The friends of God become obvious in Paradise, but not necessarily here. One must allow for the possibility that another’s position, differing even from one’s own, may prove fully acceptable to God. Recognizing that possibility and exercising appropriate non-judgmental restraint is not “relativism.”

Further down still, al-Ghazali invokes Sunnah, “Do good with everyone you are able to; if that person is not of that disposition, you should be so... The basis of intelligence, after faith, is showing friendship to people and doing good deeds *to the chaste and the unchaste*” (Al-Ghazzali, 44, italics mine). Here the text clearly does not restrict friendship either to the “muslim” or to the Muslim. Nevertheless, Ghazali’s injunctions here do seem to limit toleration to something short of that practiced in impassioned friendship. It makes no provision for loving the tolerated one’s walls and district and dog.

In Chapter 7.II, al-Ghazali does draw clear distinctions concerning the extent of toleration when he writes:

As for the rights of neighbors, there are many. The Messenger (pbuh) said, “There is a neighbor who has one right: he is an unbeliever. There is the neighbor who has two rights: he is a Muslim. There is the neighbor who has three rights: he is a Muslim relative” (Al-Ghazzali, 57).

Just when it seems Ghazali will finally give his reader grounds on which to draw the line between herself and her fellow believer, he shifts the ground. Instead of making how closely one is linked in Muslim blood-brotherhood the grounds for distinguishing those to whom one must

be most neighborly, Ghazali makes neighborliness to all the grounds for distinguishing how Muslim one truly is. Again he quotes the Prophet:

...And he said: “A person is not a Muslim whose neighbor suffers or is not safe from him.” And he said: “The first of two judgments at the Resurrection shall be with the neighbor.” And he said “Whoever throws a stone at his neighbor’s dog gives offense to him.”

You might not have to love your neighbor’s dog – there is a limit – in contrast to that of your friend’s whom you will love, but you had better not hound the neighbor’s if you hope to get to heaven. The neighbor will be annoyed, and the result will not be good:

The Messenger (pbuh) was told: “Such-and-such a woman fasts by day and spends her nights in prayer, but she annoys her neighbor.” He said: “Her place is in hell.”

Al-Ghazali’s neighbor, moreover, is not just the guy next door, but “forty houses to the right, forty houses to the left, forty houses to the front, and forty houses to the rear.” (Al-Ghazzali, 57) Even in a thickly-settled city, that takes one several blocks. Outside it, one could easily go a country mile before finding an end to the tolerance that al-Ghazali hails. It ranges from what could be called friendliness to that deep love inherent in friendship. Whatever is it called, al-Ghazali considered it import enough to emphasize by allowing a rare sardonic note to be sounded by the prophet: “Gabriel, peace be upon him, has always counseled me about the rights of neighbors to the point that I supposed they would inherit from me” (Al-Ghazzali, 57).

Gülen

Like al-Ghazali, Gülen too begins metaphorically – “we all live in this world and we are passengers on the same ship” (Gülen 2004, 45) – with the oneness that is *tawhīd*:

As we are all limbs of the same body, we should cease this duality that violates our very union. We should clear the way to unite people...we should remove all ideas and feelings that pull us apart, and run to embrace one another (Gülen 2004, 7).

The means to this goal of embrace Gülen calls tolerance:

At a time when the world has become like a large village and at a point when our society is on the verge of great change and transformation...tolerance must permeate all of society (Gülen 2004, 42).

Even if neighbors in al-Ghazali have become nations for Gülen, finally the requisite tolerance of other involves for Gülen, as does friendship for Ghazali, wrapping one's arms about another's heart. Conflict, based on ideas and ideals – which always may differ from person to person – Gülen gives no quarter. (On how there will always be differences, see especially “Tolerance in the Life of the Individual and Society” 37ff.) No tepid abidance-tolerance works for Gülen, nor has it ever:

...Our glorious ancestors captured the hearts of people by means of tolerance and became the protectors of the general peace (Gülen 2004, 42).

As in the impassioned friendship of al-Ghazali, those who embrace all bring about the dissolution of boundaries between oneself and others: “...they avoid divisive and antagonist thoughts, such as ‘they’ and ‘we,’ ‘others’ and ‘ours.’” (Gülen 2004, 100)

Gülen seems to prefer a deeper end of the tolerance ocean even than does Ghazali overall. Another way to express this difference between Gülen and Ghazali is to observe toward what vanishing point impassioned tolerance or “friendship” moves. In Ghazali, the tolerator becomes indistinct from the “other” along a horizontal axis, as it were. She extends herself outward as far, as we have seen, as the dog even forty houses in any direction. In Gülen, the practitioners of

tolerance experience vertical uplift resulting from what is their profound rapport with any and all others:

Having been melted in the depths of closeness to God, a closeness which depends on one's merit, and in the ocean that is like divine unity, their earthly desires and corporeal passion take on a new shape... [They] breathe the same air as the angels at the peaks of spiritual life while conversing with terrestrial ones, fulfilling the licit requirements of life on Earth. (Gülen 2004, 101)

In the end, in both Gülen and Ghazali the distinctions between self and other no longer matter.

In another way, however, the two still differ. Al-Ghazali's laying down the law about not stoning the neighbor's dog or judging another an infidel points to a different motivation on his part than on Gülen's. Ghazali's time called for a reorientation of spiritual life with renewed attention paid to the practical application of *shari'a* law in daily life. Gülen himself documents this:

After these great compilers came Hujjat al-Islam Imam al-Ghazali, author of *Ihya' al-'Ulum al-Din* (Reviving the Religious Sciences), his most celebrated work. He reviewed all of Sufism's terms, principles, and rules, and, establishing those agreed upon by all Sufi masters and criticizing others, united the outer (Shari'a and jurisprudence) and inner (Sufi) dimensions of Islam. (Gülen 1999, xviii)

Gülen's time, ours, calls for the re-spiritualization of an era overbearingly oriented to the mundane and litigious:

What we need now is not ordinary people, but rather people devoted to divine reality who think to a lofty degree; people who by putting into practice their

thoughts lead, first of all their own nation, and then all people, to enlightenment and help them find God—in other words, dedicated spirits, people who think what needs to be thought, who know what needs to be known, who without hesitation practice what they know and who wander like Israfil, who is on the verge of blowing the last trumpet in order to prepare dead spirits for the Day of Resurrection, and who instill hope in everybody. (Gülen 2004, 105)

Gülen and Ghazali share a commitment to balanced overlap in life between the immanent and transcendent dimensions.

Conclusion

Gülen must be located and understood squarely within that Sufi tradition indicated by al-Ghazali and Rūmī. Both the latter insist on non-belligerence in love and do not prescribe strategies for foreign affairs. Both move toward the ultimate end of dimming distinctions between self and other, not of prescriptions for peaceably protecting borders. Both lean away from the possibility of defining each other as “other.” Both look on the world of humankind as oriented to eternity, not hegemony. Both define Gülen.

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