Check for updates

"Traitor over a night": on critique and the fragility of privilege in the aftermath of Turkey's coup attempt

Sertaç Sehlikoglu[1] ●

Abstract

Drawing on ethnographic research with the devout members of Gülen movement displaced in the aftermath of the coup attempt in 2016, this paper studies the existential crisis these formerly "proper Turkish citizens" have been experiencing after being targeted by the Turkish State. This existential crisis, as argued in this paper, is significantly informative in understanding how privilege-based ethical self-making emanates fragility. The paper, thus, both parallels Sunni-Turkish-ness with whiteness and provides a reading of ethical self-making processes the Gülenists developed vis-à-vis the notions of critique and comfort. It first looks closer at the two Islamic revivalist movements, Milli Görüş as the predecessors of Turkey's ruling AKP (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi/Justice and Development Party) and the Gülen Movement, their rivalry over claiming the canon and the ways in which they differ in their notions of politics, political Islam, and critique. Although critique and self-critique are integral components of ethical self-formation processes, Gülen movement takes a somewhat inconsistent approach in implementing them to the heteronomous layers of self. Meaning, that while self-critique is an essential part of ethical self-making, critiquing the movement itself, the state, nation, and ancestors (as they were imagined) are not seen as ethical acts. It concludes with an analysis of how this discrepancy results in a sporadic distribution of ethical self-formation, leading to an existential crisis.

Keywords Gülen · Erdogan · Turkey · Privilege · Ethical self · Critique

"Why haven't they (the police) taken you yet?" was the repeating question Serhat[1] and his wife kept hearing from their relatives, neighbours, and friends in the second half of 2016. It started about a month after the coup attempt when several of my

---

[1] All names are pseudonyms.

✉ Sertaç Sehlikoglu
  s.sehlikoglu@ucl.ac.uk

[1] University College London, London, England

interlocutors, a number of whom are affiliated with the Gülen movement and living in different parts of Turkey, explained to me how their close ones, somewhat callously, had started questioning why they were not arrested yet. "One of my family members (a first cousin) has been harassing me via WhatsApp and other social media, texting me photos of people being tortured. Later on, his brother was arrested (with the suspicion of being a Gülenist), after which his texts stopped. About a week after his brother's arrest, though, he started asking me why I was not yet arrested". Serhat further clarified during the interview I conducted in August 2021.

> "In those conversations (within family circles), what was expected of me was to show off how I condone the coup attempt and swear at Fethullah Gülen and his followers. Even if I have strong feelings about (against) the coup attempt, I have never been the kind of person who swears anyway. My honesty (about my position to the coup attempt) has been questioned every time I was approached by my relatives, though. (…) More often than I could possibly describe, this conviction in my dishonesty had been turning into a threat that my very own relatives would punish me instead (cezanızı biz vereceğiz)".

The coup attempt on 15th July, 2016 in Turkey was organised by a small number of military men from various ranks who named themselves "the Operation of Peace at Home, Peace in the World"—inspired by Ataturk's famous saying. The group was said to be composed of people from various political inclinations, including several Gülenists (their exact ratio does not seem to be agreed upon). The Gülenists (members of the movement established by the self-exiled Turkish preacher Fethullah Gülen) support for the coup attempt was undeniable. Yet, the level of support they offered is still a matter of disagreement. The government officers, the President, and various media outlets swiftly declared the attempt to be (yet another) Gülenist plot. The "yet another" part of this statement refers to the bribery investigations and arrests of several high-ranking members of the ruling party and their family members in December 2013. All were seen as a conspiracy masterminded by Gülen and his followers in police forces and judiciary. The ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) had already started a Gülenist purge to remove the movement members from the police force, bureaucracy, and the judiciary when the coup attempt occurred. However, tracking Gülenists in the military was much more complicated, the same narrative suggested.

The clash between the AKP and the followers of Gülen has shocked many members of the public—and even several scholars of the region. One of the main reasons why several people found the clash between the two groups unexpected was not only because of the shared Sunni Islamic lifestyles of the supporters of both groups but also because they both seem to have similar nationalist liberal-Islamic ideals such as progress, education, democracy, equality, and the state. This paper accepts both groups' Sunni Turkish-ness as a privileged position and studies the processes through which this privileged position is turned into politics. It uses Turkish Sunni-hood to refer to their self-formation, following the theories of selfhood. The paper then argues two interconnected points by using the differences between the self-making processes in those two movements. First, although critique and self-critique are essential in ethical self-making processes, they have only

been established sporadically amongst Gülenists. The sense of loyalty (to Islam, the Turkish State, and the movement) resulted in an unquestioned and uncritical engagement with the privileged position of Sunni Turks to the existential crisis experienced by the group members. Second, several Gülenists, deep disappointment and existential crisis since the purge is not just due to displacement and systemic violence they are facing, but because the sense of self they had formed in the movement as loyal to the core ideals of the Turkish state and its state-making practices, has failed. The article, therefore, experiments with the idea of the non-autonomous self to privilege and how its uncritical formation lies at the centre of this existential crisis experienced.

Before I move on, I would like to note that, in this paper, I use the term *Gülenist* only to refer to the devout followers of Fethullah Gülen as ideological and spiritual leader. Several of those individuals are *TT* (tayine tabi/subject to appointment), as they call it, although not all of them. *TT* refers to the most devout members whose devotion is measured by their readiness to be sent off to any part of the world under designated employment, such as school teachers or *imams* of cities. The level of devotion might be interrupted from time to time due to several factors, including relocations, personal and/or familiar matters, or even the political games taking place within the Gülenist organisation. *TT* or not, the people this paper refers to as Gülenists have always seen themselves as devout to the movement, even when their connections to the group are interrupted.

I have interviewed several Gülenists. Most are highly devout group members and thus have been living in different parts of the world. This paper is part of a larger project on the new Turkish Islamic populism: its emergence, evolution, and expansion. The data in this paper has been collected over four years, between 2016 and 2020, through 38 interviews conducted in Turkey, Greece, Germany, Belgium, France, Slovenia, North Macedonia, Kosovo, Bosnia-Herzegovina, US, Canada, France, Asia (country not specified due to anonymity purposes), and the UK.[2] The interviews were conducted per their anonymity demands, which means I either did not record their voices at all or promised to keep the recordings in the formats and equipment not equipped for wireless connection to prevent unauthorised remote access—until their transfer to the secure folders. The level of comfort male interlocutors had while speaking to me as a woman differed based on the context and the level and type of religiosity they had. I sought my (male) partner Fahri Karakaş's assistance during the interviews with some pious male interlocutors to establish a better rapport.

Not friend, not foe either

Despite the superficial similarities, few people are aware of the striking contrasts in the Gülenist and AKP's understandings of and engagements with the state and the religion. Especially for those familiar with the state crimes, including those

---

[2] I will not reveal the countries of some individuals in the article if that was their demand.

against the leftists and the supporters of the Kurdish cause, these two Islamic groups would appear to be essentially the same. For many ideological and social outsiders, these two had worked in harmony for several years, imprisoning and sentencing the political activists and ultra-nationalist Kemalists, all under the same umbrella, as "the enemies of the state". Indeed, both of these Sunni Muslim groups are also right-wing nationalists and had similar ideas about what kind of activism ought to be labelled as anti-state.

The contrasts between these two groups are about how to manifest a political Islamic self and thus evoke the questions of ethics and canonising privilege. Additionally, since both groups' Islam is established on Turkish-Sunni Islam, the founding element of the Turkish state and the majority of the country, they operate in a somewhat invisible privileged position.

The Gülen movement has worked on nationalist and liberal-Islamic sentiments, which take different shapes in different geographies. Thus, the movement is known differently in different parts of the world. While in Eastern Europe (Balkans), Central Asia, Africa, and Southern Asia (roughly the Global South), it is known chiefly for its ventures into education, while in North America and Western Europe, the movement and the word Gülen mainly have advertised and presented itself with their activities on interfaith dialogue and peace (Bilici, 2006; Tee, 2016; Vicini, 2007). In his 2006 article, political sociologist Mücahit Bilici outlines the Gülen Movement's formative forces and its shift to interfaith dialogue as a strategic shift from spreading Islam to establishing dialogue across Abrahamic religions. In the expansion outside of Turkey, the Gülen movement has taken a thoroughly uncritical perspective of the state and its crimes, as will be mentioned in various parts of this paper. However, in contrast, AKP started its journey from reviving Islam as a political project deeply critical to the secular state, which translated itself into a particularly neoliberal and Sunni-Turkish form of populism (Vicini, 2014). Locating their politics to a shared starting point, to the state of being Sunni Turks, the two have landed on dissimilar ethics primarily due to their relationship to critique and privilege, as this paper suggests. While Gülenism was never familiar to an ethical self that is critical to the state, AKP deeply criticised the state while claiming the majority's voice.

The Gülenist group's secretive nature has deepened the limited data about the movement's devout members. Not many people, including scholars who have written on the movement, have clear ideas about "who the Gülenists are" (despite dozens of books about the group or series of articles about the group published), a challenge addressed in diverse ways by various scholars or what their ideology corresponds to (Bilici, 2006; Bruijn, 2018; Çakır, 2001/2016; Cetin, 2013; Dreher, 2014; Ebaugh, 2009; Esposito & Yilmaz, 2010; Göktürk, 2018; Keles et al., 2019; Michel, 2014; Taş, 2022; Tee, 2016; Turam, 2007; Ulu Sametoglu, 2013; Vicini, 2007; Weller, 2022; Yavuz, 2013; Yavuz & Koç, 2016). The group has not been transparent about its operations and devout and less-devout members. Many people are still unaware of the differences between simple attendance to religious discussion groups (*sohbet*), financial support in the form of subscribing to the daily newspaper *Zaman* or monthly magazine *Sızıntı* vs being *TT*. *TT* members' devotion is also signified by not holding an occupation outside of the movement or an individual career. *TT*'s

salaries are paid by the movement, referred to as "bursary" since they are sourced from the donations to the group.

The *TT*s' devotion to the cause often resulted in them proudly rejecting any career possibilities and becoming teachers ready to be sent off abroad to the countries they, as often put, "could not have pointed on a map". The level of devotion is marked by being unquestioning, a virtue celebrated and manifested, referencing to the famous Sufi saying "being like the dead body (*meyyit*) in the hands of a washer (*gassal*)". Meaning, just as the body of a dead person cannot have any power over the person who washes it while preparing for the burial, a real devout shall let their sheikh have complete control. This principle is applied to the movement. Consequently, its TT members' readiness to be sent to countries they had not heard of and would not know where (a marker of their devotion to the cause).

In practice, devotion to the cause (*hizmet* often translated as service), obedience to superiors, and obedience to the state/rulers were connected like concentric layers. A continuation of the devotion principles (and the way obedience is structured as layers and hierarchies) is deeply related to a particular naïve imagination of nationhood, which will be discussed in this paper.

The complication arises from this selfless devotion, even the *TT*s might not be part of the decision-making processes.[3] Often, as highlighted by several of my interlocutors (and widely known), *TT*s are not immediately on the stage or front lines in any of the public events either. Not being after credit is associated with selflessness and thus is a product of self-discipline. Yet, this principle results in the movement looking suspiciously secretive. Moreover, since those more visible in the public events are the non-devout members, during the purge, they were the ones targeted by the state in the aftermath of the coup attempt, despite being in the peripheries of the movement. After the coup attempt, those with any traceable ties to the Gülen movement—traceable by media subscriptions, working at or attending to their institutions, and having a bank account in their bank—faced risks of imprisonment. Some were reportedly tortured, and many fled the country to seek refuge abroad. Yet, for both the *TT*s and the non-devout members, the main struggle for many of my research participants was the rapid change in their status from devout *vatanperver* (lovers of the homeland) to "enemies of the state" and the existential crisis emerged as a result.

Primus inter pares

All my Sunni interlocutors have responded to the question on their religious affiliation as 'Muslim' and 89% responded 'normal' or 'ordinary' (*normal/bildiğimiz Müslüman*) to the follow-up question "What kind of Muslim". They explained

---

[3] There are regular meetings called *istişare* (consultation), amongst the members but they are mostly to develop action plans at the local level as to how to follow the decisions delivered to them from Gülen. These decisions would be called *gündem* or *notlar*, delivered to the members. My interlocutors all explained that they have little to zero power over those decisions as they are delivered from top to bottom.

'non-normal' as secular or atheist, and not as Alevi. Unlike the minority groups, the Sunni-hood form an "unmarked" category, in Bourdieu's terms (Bourdieu, 1990). I find it helpful to follow the definitions of whiteness in understanding the prerogative the relationship between the state and Sunni-hood in Turkey.

In critical race studies, the White Privilege is used to denote an advantaged position in the power mechanism where the privileged can easily take up the role of the state apparatus or feel reassured of its support—not of any criminal activity perhaps—but of its very existence.[4] Just as Barrett and Roediger famously discussed in "How White People Became White", all the marked categories are established through an imagined contrast with the centrality of whiteness. Since everyday and institutional norms are established around the centrality of Sunni Turkishness, all other ethnic and/or religious categories are then left marked.

Following Schuller's terms, Sunni Turks, like whites, "are usually interpellated as nonhyphenated".[5] They are the unmarked category, never had an awkward relationship with the Turkish motto, "How happy is the one who says I am a Turk", and have established a selfhood interconnected with nationhood. As I explore in the following pages, the way this interconnection between the nation and the self is established becomes one of the most fundamental differences between the two groups: Gülenists and the Milli Görüş. Today's Justice and Development Party (AKP) was established by several members of Welfare Party (Refah), which was the political party of decades-long Milli Görüş (National Vision) movement; that is mainly stemmed from Necmettin Erbakan's political view but was supported by several religious groups.

While both are nationalist, Gülenist movement is more explicitly Turkish (Gülmez, 2017; Koyuncu-Lorasdaği, 2010), while Milli Görüş propagates the idea of *ümmet* (ummah/the Islamic nation) at the very core, presented as a priority over the idea of Turkish nation. Yet, the Turkish-ness continues to be the 'unmarked' category, since Turkish nation is then presented as the protector of the *ümmet*.

I join the scholarship that divergse from how the populist term "White Turks" has long been used—a term that has paved its way into the academic genre. White Turks is long used to refer to the urban (*kentsoylu*) middle to upper-class secularist citizens who are predominantly Turkish—but might also compose Armenian and Jewish constituents. The term thus seems to be used almost to denote some form of elite status, although privilege and white privilege are not limited to the elite. Especially between the mid-1990s and early 2000s, White Turk was a phrase used to signify the privileged position of the secularist ruling elite and their middle-class henchmen (i.e., doctors and militarymen) (Arat-Koç, 2007; Bora, 1995; Saktanber, 2002; Yalçın, 2004).[6] Limiting the whiteness to elite-ness to less than 5% of the population yet failing to address the socio-political mechanisms through which the state is formed does not capture how white privilege operates (McIntosh, 1989). Yet,

---

[4] One key focus of critical race theorists is a regime of white supremacy and privilege maintained despite the rule of law and the constitutional guarantee of equal protection of the laws.

[5] Malini Johar Schueller, 2009, Locating Race: Global Sites of Post-Colonial Citizenship.

[6] There is a very comprehensive overview of the evolution of the term White Turk in Tanıl Bora's book on nationalism (1995), in footnote 96, page 263.

that was not necessarily the only shortfall in the conceptual formulation of whiteness in the Turkish context. The term White Turks was often used to simultaneously signify the believing and practising Sunni Muslim Turks as the 'others' of the society. Although referring to white-ness as the ideological elite-ness is understandable, the lack of critical filter in thinking through race theories runs the risk of equating Sunni-Turkishness with blackness, which was later on followed by a number of people (Karaca, 2009; Kütahyalı, 2014; Nalan, 2018). This entire debate has dominated the political debates across Turkish public for several years, even resulting the Kemalists to self-declare as 'the new oppressed blacks' of Turkish society (Ulusoy, 2019). It was up until recently we started observing a systematic study of Turkish-Sunni-hood as the core component of the Turkish state.

Instead, I converge with the recent scholarship that has been triggered after Murat Ergin's intervention to the way the term White Turk is used (2008) and significantly spread after Barış Ünlü's powerful and thorough analysis of the formation of white-ness in the case of Turkey (Ünlü, 2018).[7] Ergin's article presents a theoretical framework that challenges prevailing approaches in Turkey that neglect the significance of race, specifically whiteness, in the context of Turkish modernity. On a similar vein, in his book, Ünlü offers a critical reading of historical and socio-political dynamics of Turkish identity construction, which he marks with the historical moment the Turkishness Contract was signed (1915–1925) that simultaneously defined Turkishness almost as a self-declared state of being. By doing so, Ünlü helps us understand and historically trace how the combination of Turkish-ness and Sunni-hood, in fact, formed a political whiteness in the state-making processes. The book intervenes in nationalist narratives by employing critical race theories and thus locating Turkishness as a form of whiteness that, in turn, shapes the Turkish state's and the Turkish public's relationship with non-Turkish elements and minorities.

Guarantee of privilege: obedience to the state

The sort of Islam Gülen preached is often seen as a moderate Islam—and I am not entirely sure why some still insist on an empty signifier term like this. It is safe to say that Gülen's interpretation of religious sources prioritises higher education and internationally recognised scientific accomplishments. When the movement decided to open itself to the broader public in the early 1990s by hosting "dialogue iftars" that invited celebrities, bureaucrats, and intellectuals, the major secular newspapers (Sabah, Milliyet, and Hürriyet) were competing to interview Fethullah Gülen. The interviews were the platform where Gülen highlighted the

---

[7] I presented different versions of this paper in 2017, 2018, and 2020 at various workshops. The initial presentation, accompanied by the pre-circulated paper, did not have the chance to engage with Ünlü's work as it was not out yet and I had not been aware of his ongoing research either. Luckily, he not only published his book (2018) but also had triggered a very vigorous debate in social science circles, that approaching Sunni Turkishness as a form of whiteness had become scholarly much more grounded.

nationalist undertone of his movement and declared his loyalty to the secular state to the extent of handing his schools over to the Turkish state if need be.

Being aware of the secularist sentiments, Gülen never declared himself a religious leader—neither did he attempt to form/lead a *tarikat/*Sufi order. Turkish secular regime had a long history of targeting *tarikat* leaders. In the early decades of the Turkish Republic, İstiklâl Mahkemeleri infamously executed several Sufi leaders with the suspicion of attempting to bring *hilafet*/hilafah back. Since then, *tarikat*s have been under state scrutiny as they were seen as threatening the secular regime.

Instead of being part of an existing *tarikat*, forming leadership in one, or even attempting to form a new one (traditionally not possible), Gülen has taken a less daring and risky strategy. He has presented himself as a simple preacher who is (undeservedly, he adds) loved and followed by many people. Lacking a *tarikat*-like order has also enabled and reinforced the movement's missionary organisation. In a *tarikat*, recruitment often occurs through spiritual means, such as being called in a dream by the sheikh. On top of the challenges in gaining leadership in *tarikats* through traditional routes, there were also political challenges. *Tarikats* were long targeted by the Kemalist regime, and all *tarikats* were abolished (Çinar, 2005; Ozdalga, 2013; Toprak, 1984). The *tarikats*, especially the Nakşibendi group, have become the founding figures of Islamist politics in Turkey from the 1950s onwards (Ayata, 1996; Heper, 1997; Kandiyoti, 2012). Gülen has never formed a tarikat, so the movement has not been under an immediate Kemalist attack—although it had been monitored closely. After his arrest in the 1980 coup due to his sermons, Gülen followed a more careful approach. He managed to steer clear of the state's definition of "Islamic threat". Instead, by establishing schools, the movement has ensured a more modern outlook for the public and the secular state.

Gülen's obedience to the state surfaced after the "orange coup" of 28 February 1997. While the headscarf ban at the universities was protested on the streets, in multiple interviews, he explained to the reporters that he does not see the headscarf as one of the salient principles of religion, that it is a "*farz furu*" (a trivial/insignificant must), risking upsetting dozens of Islamist groups who think otherwise. Some of the female members of the movement explain how they had been crying for several nights for being obliged "to make a sacrifice" by taking off their scarves, feeling exposed and even violated. Just months after the coup attempt, Esra describes bans in the late 1990ies in the following words: "It was a necessary sacrifice to protect our institutions". Esra was not referring to donning her headscarf as abandoning a religious rule but as a sacrificial, devout, pious act.

The ideal Islam is not-too-much-Islam

The 1990s witnessed the rise of political Islam in Turkey, and every other day, reality shows exposed how religious groups fooled their followers and established a cult. One infamous of those is still remembered as the Fadime Şahin/Aczmendi incident, which put the words sex scandal and tarikats in the same sentence for the first time on public television was the most famous one in the 1990s (Dole, 2006; Şeyma, 2016; Ulman, 1997). The incident was prompted by Fadime Şahin,

a female follower of the Aczmendi group's accusations of one of the leaders, Ali Kalkancı, with illicit sexual behaviour. This particular incident took over the secularist media with repeating messages on tarikats' sexual and financial abuse of innocent believers was a peak point that, according to several Turkish Islamist scholars, had surfaced the secularist propaganda of anti-Islam (Şahin, 2019).

During this period, namely, the mid-1990s, the Gülen movement started changing its façade as they started taking steps towards an opening process and becoming more welcoming to less pious and more secular Muslims of Turkey. The opening process needed to be formed by preserving their most conservative rules and expectations for their immediate devotees, the most loyal members. As for the recruits and potential recruits, those conservative rules were not to be presented as a priority. "It is not too different from the early years of Islam. Rasulullah (Prophet Mohammad), peace be upon him, never invited people to Islam with a list of rules. Rules came later on," explained Esra. The double standard is not seen as a hypocracy by the devout members but rather part of a natural occurrence of Islamic davet/dawa/invite. Fabio Vicini, a sociologist and anthropologist of Islam known for his uniquely careful analysis and reading of the movement, explains to us how the elder brothers (abis) say that they change their attitudes and requests according to the kind of *talebe* (student/recruit) they have, with the hope they will become stricter with the time (2019). Therefore, inevitably, the Gülen movement's rigidity regarding religious rules and principles is experienced differently by different individuals. Often, those who are potential recruits are not discouraged with an over-emphasis on religious obligations or bans.

For the majority of the public, a rigid Islam or Islamic order has not been very appealing—if anything, it would even be somewhat repugnant. The Sunni-Turkishness, in other words, combined with the success of the secularist project, has never been too Islamic[8]—although it has always been nationalistic.

Deniz Kandiyoti refers to the sacred aspect of the Kemalist project and its establishment in the lives of Turkish citizens, primarily through military interventions, as a 'process of "sacralisation"—and further transmogrification—of the secular' (Kandiyoti, 2012: 521). In other words, the relationship between the laicist (*laik*) state and religion was not limited to secular control of Islam under state law (Kuru, 2007; White, 2002). It also involved how Kemalism, as a secularist project, called for a series of devotions to the founder of the country Mustafa Kemal, to the country itself, in the form of glorification of martyrdom (Turkmen, 2009), and also to spirituality, an appropriated Sunni Islam where any form of Islamic symbols are disapproved (Çınar, 2008; Dağtas, 2009; Gökarıksel, 2009; Sandikci & Ger, 2005; Sayan-Cengiz, 2016) yet daily prayers might still be observed (Dağtas, 2016).

Gülen's diligence against appearing too rigid in religion and religious rules has resulted in an immediate rise in the number of students in their schools—which eventually meant

---

[8] Ethnographic work reveals the points at which the ostensibly incompatible or opposing ideologies of Kemalism and Islam appear as reflections of the same ideology in the lives of Turkish citizens (Tapper & Tapper 1991).

more schools to respond to the demand. The particular type of popularity of the movement reflects how well they have understood Turkish Muslimhood, a "good-enough" Muslimhood, as Kandiyoti (2012) pins the term to refer to her informants who occasionally pray and perhaps occasionally drink alcohol. This non-pious and non-radical form of Muslimhood is recognised by the Gülen movement and appropriated to their missionary principles by appearing significantly more sympathetic to non-Islamic practices. Burak, for instance, is one of the many people who is a good enough Muslim yet does not fit the Gülenist profile. His sins, such as occasional drinking, never harm anyone. As described by a famous song by Cem Karaca, he "repents a thousand times, then drinks wine again". Due to his un-Islamic habits, he could never be a true recruit to the movement either. Yet, he still lost his passport rights due to a'support to terrorism' court against him for his son's attendance at a Gülenist school. Gülenist group's indiscriminating approach in recruitment had affected several lives like Burak's.

Gülen seems to be a figure familiar to anyone who knows the region (Turkey) and its diverse range of Muslimhoods in a country where piety does not dominate the public sphere (Saglam, 2018). That marks Turkey differently from other Muslim contexts, such as Egypt, where piety is almost palpable in public spaces (Abdelrahman, 2006; Bayat, 2002; Mahmood, 2003; Schielke, 2009, 2015; Winegar, 2012). Neither does Turkey carry the secular-Islamic polarity, a binary which has turned into "empty signifiers" (Kandiyoti, 2012: 527–8). Understanding and landing itself onto this particular social fabric, as in many forms of popularism, is more intrinsic to the movement's success than establishing or attracting people around a coherent ideology. The welcoming nature of the Gülen movement formed a different type of populism, that is comfortable, pleasant, unquestioning, and uncritical.

Comfort against critique and the ethical self

Sharing parallels with several Islamic Revivalist movements, spreading the word of God, "*emr bil maruf nehy anil münker*" (commanding the right and forbidding the wrong),[9] is how Gülenist mission is formulated as a central theme in Fethullah Gülen's sermons. Taking his listeners (in the mosques back in the 70 s and 80 s, and cassettes by the 1990s) to the examples from the time of the Prophet Mohammad to various Islamic scholars and saints (*evliya/veliler*), he tailored his sermons to highlight this as the most central and even prophetic duty a Muslim should have. The distribution of those sermon cassettes was also seen as part of this prophetic duty, placing the Islamic group's missionary statement in a particular position.[10]

---

[9] For the theological and historical analysis of this religious principle, please refer to Michael Cook's renown book "Forbidding Wrong in Islam" (2003).

[10] After 1996, these sermons would start being censored by the groups itself both to be understood and welcomed by a wider audience and to receive legal licences. Those that were licenced would have the official stamp on them (bandrol). From this point, the uncensored ones would be referred to as *bandrolsuz* (un-stamped) which were also being destroyed by the community to ensure the opening process would not incriminate their leader or any of their members.

Şadırvan (courtyard fountain) sermon series were one of the most popular and widely known among his sermons. The *Şadırvan* sermon series were the sermons delivered in İzmir Hisar and *Şadırvan* Mosques between the years 1989 and 1991. His fourth sermon in this series is entitled "*Iman ve aksiyon*" (faith and action/activism), to which he concludes that the best way to follow the prophetic duty "emr bil maruf nehy anil münker" in today's world is through (higher) education. The education he defines, in his words, is to marry the heart and the mind. Like many figures in populist politics, he also paints an attractive picture to describe this: raising world-class scientists who are also pious Muslims. In Gülen's descriptions, education can never be achieved solely through formal institutions. It needed to be supported by structures specialised to "feed the heart", in his words, in addition to the mind. His solution was to offer "ışık evi" /houses of the light (a romanticised reference to households where like-minded members and recruits stay together.) The aim to reach out to souls deprived of the word of God is to be the central strive of all Muslims. In the same *Şadırvan* series, Gülen also sets a "horizon" (*ufuk*, part of the Gülenist terminology used to refer to goal or objective) to his followers as an ultimate aim to reach in the journey of mission:

> "cross the lands and carry the sacred flag, cross seas like your ancestors did (….) and when they tell you that there is nowhere else to reach in this world, that the sacred words have reached to everyone; you then will seek to find ways to reach to non-humans. The fire inside you will make you to find a ladder long enough to reach the moon and other planets to carry this sacred flag".

The mission to establish Turkish schools abroad, first in Central Asia and then other parts of the world, was presented as a counter-colonization against the British, French, and American colonial projects. Even within Turkey, the Gülenist schools were aspired to become more successful than American private colleges (such as Robert College.)

This note re-signifies how the ideas of nationhood and selfhood are manifested uncritically in the lives of Gülenists.[11] In Gülen's above quote and almost all of the sermons, the "ancestors" were portrayed as almost sacred and are to be referred to with respect and love. The examples of the ancestors can sometimes be Sufi saints such as Beyazid Bistami, Veysel Karanî, Rabia'tül Adeviyye, or Cüneyd Bağdadî; or be military leaders such as Omar bin Khattab (the Third Khalifa 634–644), Salah Ad-din Ayyubi (the first Sultan of Egypt and Syria of Kurdish origin who fought against Crusader States in Palestine between 1174 and 1193), Ukbe bin Nafi (General in Rashidun Khaliphate, 635–683). Other ethnicities celebrate those figures as theirs. Gülen to claim and present them as ancestors of the Sunni Turks lends itself

---

[11] I would like to note that I use the term Gülenist only refer to particular type of individuals who are both the devout followers of Fethullah Gülen as their ideological and spiritual leader and those who were accepted as members of the movement by the movement itself. Amongst other followers of Gülen, the level of devotion might be interrupted time to time due to several factors. The people I refer to as Gülenists, on the other hand, *perceive* their devotion to the movement to be uninterrupted.

to the existing nationalist narrative and robs his followers of the possibility of imagining an Islamic past beyond Sunni-Turkishness.

The uncritical approach to power and state could be observed in Gülen's narratives in which no military gain (in Turkish and Islamic history) was for power, to extend territory or for financial gain. In those narratives, all the Islamic military expansion aimed to carry God's name beyond borders, which is seen as God's prophetic principle. Thus, the military expansions in those narratives brought prosperity to the lands believed to be suffering at the hands of the non-Muslims. This particular narrative and its relation to the uncritical notion of power and military (expansion) was to feed the *emr bil maruf nehy anil münker* principle. It has simultaneously created a romanticised notion of nationhood and weakened the possibility of critical reflections on those notions and narratives.

Suffering in the hands of the secular state: Milli Görüş perspective

The clash between Gülenists and the ruling party (AKP) is more profound than a simple conflict of interest. The battle over the canon, as two Sunni Turkish groups, lies at the ways in which they formulated political action and ethical self.

The Gülenist revivalist project was radically different from Milli Görüş's one at that time. Therefore, they had contrasting ideas about Islamism (and I define Islamism as a political project.).[12] While Milli Görüş's Islamism centred on the well-being of the *ümmet* and invested into political activism to accomplish this, including establishing political parties and forming grassroots, Gülen propagated (whether they actively prioritised is always up for a debate) political Islam as un-Islamic, that Islamic needs to be spiritual and the suffering in the hands of the state should be embraced as an opportunity for spiritual advancement.

Predominantly Turkish and exclusively Sunni, Milli Görüş groups have always questioned the legitimacy of the secular Turkish state. There had been debates within several Milli Görüş circles about whether it is still compulsory to attend Friday prayers since Turkey is no longer a "land of peace/Islam" (*Dar'ul Islam*) but a "land of war" (*Dar'ul Harb*). It is not difficult to see why many believing and practising Muslims might have found such debates appealing (after all, if you can deny as many religious duties as possible by blaming another, why not). Still, I would like further to open up this tension (and frustration).

During the early Republican period (from the 1930s to 1950s), several regulations were implemented to ensure the country's transformation from Eastern and Islamic into Western and secular. The most significant regulations of those in the memories of the Milli Görüş members were the banning of the Quran schools (to enforce the

---

[12] For a detailed account on the emergence of Gülen movement during the rising of Milli Görüş, Mücahid Bilici's (2006) article titled "The Fethullah Gülen Movement and Its Politics of Representation in Turkey" is highly recommended. His analysis is also one of the few interventions in post-9/11 context written against the Islamophobic and ultra-liberal readings of the movement, both tend to miss the intra-religious dynamics across various Islamic groups in Turkey.

alteration of the Arabic alphabet with the Latin alphabet) and conversion of the call for prayer from Arabic to Turkish (*ezanın Türkçeleştirilmesi*.) The military enforced most of those rules, making it the guardian of secularism. This pushed the believing and practising Sunni Muslims into a knotty position as their traditional or devout practices were estranged by some of the state apparatus, such as the military.

Since the early 2000s, religious middle-class families of the 1990s have formed tight connections amongst themselves based on shared political views, shared dreams for the prosperity of the nation and of the *ümmet*, passionate devotion to Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (the President of Turkey and founder of the AKP), and readiness to lend their support to furthering the agenda of him and his party. The elite members of the contemporary ruling class come from a lower-middle class background and were once self-identified as *mazlum* (tyrannised), referring to their spiritual strength gained under the tyrant's oppression (the secularist state of Turkey). Derived from a romanticised Islamic worldview, *mazlum* narrative was often accompanied by various secularist bans -prior to Erdoğan's rule—of the headscarf, the Arabic call for prayer (*ezan*), Quran reading, and other restrictions on religious life. Spiritual virtues such as oppression, charity, patience, perseverance, or humility were all embraced and nourished through a series of ethical responses, all fostered by being *mazlum*. Religious middle classes also invested in refusing worldly pleasures as part of this self-imagination. In the current state, the fast transformation from being *mazlum* to being powerful unleashed a series of ethical self-conflicts, which are yet to be resolved by the Islamic elites themselves. Still, the emotive attachments to this imagination have remained as a cardinal fervent reference. I suggest we trace elements of frustration, longing, and dreams—more assertively.

Although this discursive transformation to nostalgia and longing has been repeatedly referred to as Islamic or Islamist (Cagaptay, 2009; Gontijo & Barbosa, 2020; Rüma, 2010; Yavuz, 1998), I insist on following the overwhelmingly nationalist thread here. The neo-Ottomanist elements seem to be heavily nationalist, as they simultaneously attribute a leadership role to the Turkish Islam (Bargu, 2021). Equally, the neo-Ottomanist elements also provide an influential populist genre that provokes nationalist sentiments across a wide range of followers (Kandiyoti, 2014; Özçetin, 2019).

While forming their political aspirations, Milli Görüş has situated their politics to the Sunni-Turkish privileged position. As the founding figures of Turkish Republic, they advocated for the liberation of the *mazlum* (tyrannised) religious Sunni majority from the Kemalist yoke. The core discomfort shaping their *mazlum* discourse was to be deprived of religious rights in their *own* country and that they should rise—just as practising Muslims do in *namaz/*prayer (rising to kıyam/qiyaam). It was never, for instance, about other basic rights such as being unable to speak their mother tongue—as it was with the Kurdish politics. It is safe to underline that the rise/kıyam dreamt by the Sunni Milli Görüş shared a series of resemblances with other right-wing supremacist backlashes against the elite in other parts of the world. In the Turkish case, this backlash was against the secular elite.

What is relevant to this paper, however, is that Gülen's Islamism is a betrayal of both the Milli Görüş Islamic nationalism (*ümmetçilik*), and the (strategic) future of Turkey. The sense of betrayal was heightened during the orange coup in 1997 (often

referred to as 28 Şubat/28 February) when the rising Islamism was targeted by the military and the secular state, after which several members of the Milli Görüş, then Refah Party, was imprisoned. While Gülenist institutions have suffered by shrinking their schools and other enterprises, they have presented a full loyalty to the secular Turkish state. Gülen himself, on many occasions, declared how he would be willing to let the state take over the schools or close them if need be. The Gülenist women donned their headscarves, following Gülen's aforementioned fatwa on headscarf as *farz furu*. Not defending women's right to wear headscarf, being the largest group in support of the liberal-right against Welfare/Refah Party, and even pursuing the corruption allegations against the AKP elite, were all due to the fundamental differences between the two Islamisms. The accusations themselves, on the other hand, are explained to the public as fabrications invented by those willing to steal Turkey's dreams away, by enemies of a Turkey that is 'waking up' (*bu millet uyanıyor*), 'imperiously rearing up' (*şahlanmak*), and experiencing a 'resurrection' (*diriliş*). This dreamy message is disseminated by media channels owned by these new elites, and each of these themes was articulated in *Strategic Depth*, a book published in 2001 by Dr. Ahmet Davutoğlu, a well-known Islamic intellectual—who acted as a Prime Minister between 2014 and 2016. In other words, Gülen was not only failing to develop a systematic critique of the state and its systemic violence toward the Sunni-Turkish majority, but it was also downplaying the very suffering Milli Görüş was building its ideology onto.

Activism not-as-ethics, but against ethics: an analysis of existential crisis of privilege

I traced the contrasts between the ideas of Islamic ethical self-making in each groups, both reinforced to serve the "vatan" homeland as the supreme element. AKP, on the other hand, has primarily linked Turkey's role in their aspiration for the *ümmet*. As I argue, the distinct differences in their aspirational focus have shaped the sense of selfhood they invested in. Both groups, Milli Görüş-originated AKP and the Gülenists have formed a white Islamism. The privileges of being Sunni highly influenced their perspectives and Islamism. Their whiteness that also informed their critique the country was their own, and they could not and should not have turned into *pariah* in their own lands. This is why the following lines from a poem were highly quoted in published media outlets "Öz yurdunda garipsin, öz vatanında parya", meaning, "You are a stranger in your own hometown, a pariah in your own homeland". The boiling anger to the secular state, was not just the anger of the oppressed, but the anger of the white oppressed, who saw themselves as the founding members of the society.

Coming back to the comparison, despite the similar foundation, the ideological manifestations of the two groups in their attachments to the state and its politics were quite different. Gülen and his group have never directly challenged the state—neither for its secularism nor for its use of violence. For a group of such considerable size to take a consistently politically conformist position and maintain it since the day it introduced itself to the larger public in the 1990s, for twenty years, it needed to turn a blind eye to any injustices and violence carried out by the state. As many of my interlocutors

also addressed, the Gülenist group did not have a habit of acknowledging the existence of any injustices committed or enabled by the state. On the surface, that is, due to the notion of loyalty formed in the lives and hearts of the members and how loyalty to the nation was embedded into the loyalty to the movement, as I elaborate below, the way critique and belonging is structured in the processes of ethical self-formation is the foundation of the crisis experienced by the various members I interviewed.

On the one hand, the sense of self is deeply embedded in the sense of belonging to the community and, through the community, to the nation. More specifically, the self and the ethical are cultivated subjects to the community and the nation simultaneously. At the same time, there is a disconnect between personal ethics and institutional ethics.

Where is critique located in the ethical self? The community highlights the importance of *nefis muhasebesi*, which establishes a habit of severe critique of the self by the individuals themselves. The crucial part was for the individual to gain this as a sort of spiritual mannerism.[13] The principle is taught through examples from Sufi characters and their chronicles of various moments, demonstrating how they excel at harshly critiquing themselves, their behaviours, their intentions, and so forth. Although it's a self-practice, there was also an ethical support mechanism in which a religious confidant called *hayırhah* could help to caution the ethical short-comings of each other or make each other accountable for religious duties.

While there is an ethical principle (*nefis muhasebesi*) and an intersubjective mechanism to establish and maintain critique of the self, self-critique at the institutional or communal level was oddly absent. While *nefis muhasebesi* puts individual ethics is under constant, thorough, and multi-layered critique, neither the broader community nor the state/nation is to be made an object of critique. While an ethical self is formed through critique, the communal and national self it is embedded into is not. This hiatus poses obstacles to activism. It also simultaneously results in inconsistencies in ethical self-making.

Any critique that could be directed at the community, its institutions, the state, the nation, and its history was made highly unfavourable. Instead of using the same notion of critique, *muhasebe* within the same lines and assuming it as an essential element for improvement, critiques to those layers of institutions are silenced by the use of another principle: *Şahıslara takılmamak lazım* (one shall not hang up on individuals). This phrase was to accept the wrongdoings of an individual that belongs to the glorified institutions: the movement itself and the state. An example of this is how the devout members perceive Enver Pasha from the Ottoman past and his atrocities against the Armenians in the early twentieth century. Still, his acts were separated from the institutional mechanisms that have enabled his act.[14] Therefore, unsurprisingly, the Gülenist group and its media have systematically ignored state crimes in its media outlets and its small circles (Bali, 2004; Bruijn, 2018; Taş, 2022).[15]

---

[13] Also see Kostadinova in this issue.

[14] This phrase might sound similar to "bad apples" although "One shall not hang up on individuals" does not indicate a need to remove the individual.

[15] One of the most notorious examples of the systematic dismissal and re-narrating of state crimes in the Gülenist media would be the TV series "Tek Türkiye"/Single Turkey" broadcasted on Samanyolu TV Channel, a conspiracist portrayal of the Kurdish resistance.

In this process, a particular imaginary of the state and of the movement is constructed: that neither could ever be violent or dishonourable at any level to innocent individuals, which ended up indirectly legitimising any atrocities of the past and present. Consequently, everyone revolting against the state are to be betrayers and anarchists, bringing chaos/*fitne*. Anarchist is synonymous to chaos-bringer and is a profoundly negative term.

Since the need for the order established and maintained by a line of authority was quite central, especially at the university level where young adults start thinking more closely and critically about the state, a need for *ışık evi* (light houses) emerges. *Işık evi* are student accommodations are believed to be essential because the universities are perceived to be spaces full of seductions. Gülen refers to them in his preaches as *doldur boşalt evleri* (refill houses) and explains that the youth will lose their spiritual charges on the campus and are in need of a space to be recharged. The fear that politics and sexual decadence might easily corrupt the young individuals was causing concern to the Sunni parents living in smaller cities and rural areas. Universities had been presented,[16] as sites of political conflicts and violence for several decades. Offering housing to children of humble religious families from across Anatolia meant more than affordable accommodation. *Işık evi* was also a way of preserving their children's nationalist and religious values. The (adult) children could be prevented from being "seduced" by the leftist groups organised at the campuses.

Any activist movement in or around the university, including demonstrations, petitions, or riots, was perceived as anti-state and thus were perceived as acts of betrayal of the nation. This attitude as if the state is always logically coherent and works for the benefit of its citizens—and thus no individual or collective political activism against or in conversation with the state is necessary—can be traced to a particular comfort and trust traced in supremacist positions. Due to this perspective, Gülenists were caught "off guard" when the state was taking over their schools, universities, media enterprises, banks, and hospitals. It was not just because the movement always supported the state. Rather, they never imagined the state as an organisation that targets good and proper citizens. The unfiltered and uncritical acceptance of state discourses lies at the centre of their privileged position as part of the supremacy.

Gülenists' dismays were articulated through the notions of selfhood and the Turkish nation, since the Gülenist discourses have long interwoven the two. This contrasts, for instance, with the way Kurdish activists speak of their selves and the Turkish nation. "We are always ready for the worst" a Kurdish activist academic once told me in 2013, "I don't think Turks would be able to defend themselves against the state when it comes for them.". The Gülenists' existential crisis, as put very clearly by Selma, a woman who spent over a year in a refugee camp along with Kurdish refugees from Turkey, was about being in the same category as those who "are the actual enemies of our homeland".

---

16 Until 1990, only the state-owned TV channels were broadcasted in Turkey.

Not-so-noble nation

"The shattering of certainty is a traumatic experience" (Ghamari-Tabrizi, 2008:3)

Nuriye is a housewife with a university degree who met the Gülenists after she married to a very active and devout one. Her relationship with the movement has always been rather awkward, as she was seen as a representative of the group during her life abroad (I will call that country ID) due to her husband's status, although she, in her words, "was never trained in *houses*". Like many other people I talked to, she felt highly vulnerable once the purge had accelerated. Several people around her, whom she called friends, have insulted her over the phone and in messages. One of her immediate family members, with whom she had several business problems, snitched on her and her husband, which was especially devastating for Nuriye. "People's sudden change feels as if they have been waiting for me to fall so they could step on me," she says during the interview.[17]

Nilgün is from a smaller city in Eastern Anatolia and studied engineering at one of the top universities in Turkey.[18] She has been in the movement for over two decades, since her early teenage years. After her husband lost his well-paying job at a strategic state institution during the first purge in 2015, they decided to develop a backup plan in case anything went sour. Once their application for a visa abroad (country anonymous, will call Q[19]) was approved, they decided to go to NN and see if they would like to live there—and if so, in which part. As the couple was exploring this new country Q, the coup attempt happened, resulting in their children being trapped in Turkey. Nilgün then had to enter Turkey from an Aegean border, pick up her two kids, and fly back—not having a chance to pack up properly. As they were going through a series of struggles, Nilgün was angrier at the people she personally knew—and not the political conditions that had targeted them, just like Serhat. She told me that their family assets are frozen, but she looked more upset when she spoke about how the person, they trusted to sell their car and send the money to Nilgün's husband to aid them, then decided to keep the car for himself. As she found herself in this series of betrayals, her disappointment with the people, her friends, neighbours, and even family members (some of whom rejected her) made her question the movement's cosmology of ancestry vis-à-vis her sense of self.

"They (the Gülenists) have fooled us for years repeating 'necip millet (noble nation) necip millet'. What is noble about it? I am certain that the people who did that to their own (kind/group) must have butchered the Armenians and bombed the Kurds. I am sure of it".

---

[17] Nuriye, interview, September 13, 2016.

[18] To ensure anonymity, the full affiliations such as cities the interlocutors are from or the universities they attended will not be shared.

[19] The family has moved to another country last year and became asylum seekers, not in NN, but in a third country.

"I really doubt that the Ottomans had been as merciful as we were made to believe. Do you remember the stories of the Ottoman soldiers who were hungry and picked the fruits from the trees and left small pouches of money on the branches instead? It might have happened on one or two occasions, but I highly doubt that was some habit of the Ottoman soldiers".[20]

The absence of a critique of the state has created a paradoxical relationship between comfort, critique, and the ethical self that is composed of multiple subjectivities. The self, as detailed in several earlier works, is not static, nor is it single-layered. Instead, it is fluid and multifaceted. The same principle applies to the ethical self and its formation processes. While their disappointment with the depictions of the past in the nationalist-religious narrative is almost a shared experience among many people I interviewed, Emrullah, a 49-year-old medical doctor, shares a similar frustration. In his words:

"I have learned religion from my father. I grew up reading authors like Huseyin Üzmez, (Abdurrahman) Dilipak, and people like Yavuz Bahadıroğlu. I grew up reading them with pride. I grew up reading the Ottomans with pride, too. The other day, I listened to a radio programme about the new Ottomans. What Ottomans are we talking about? What is left of them? More importantly, why the hell were we made to believe that they were better at all?"

Emrullah is enraged to be misled and deceived. His feelings of rage often come in waves, triggered by terms widely used and established throughout his upbringing years, with noble history being one of them. However, the waves of rage are not prompted only by the limited triggers about historical narratives he was brought up with. Instead, they seem to be tremors part of a more significant collapse of the sense of selfhood. During our long conversations, every single time he felt enraged at 'being misled' (*kandırılmak*), he continued speaking about the other, more devout members of the group who, according to Emrullah, did not experience the same awakening he did: "Accepting (the wrongdoings of the Gülen group) is about their personality (*kişilik*). They perceive belonging to the group to be (an essential) part of their personality. Those are the type of people who cannot criticise".

The feelings of rage, as Emrullah explained to me, are about "letting them shape my personality". "Are you undoing what they had done now?" I pushed. "I am not doing anything. But yes, I think I am taking my personality back". The entire process of rage and Emrullah's management of those moments are his recalibrations of sense of self, separating it from its attachments to the group and rewiring his sense of critique to the group and its values. Particularly in his case, and in the case of a number of other people I interviewed, this might mean losing faith in the state, the nation, and the religion itself.

"I have not gone to Friday prayer last week, neither have I attended this week. That is because the sermons have been about Turkish politics every Fri-

---

day since the coup attempt, ending with a quarrel or fight". Emrullah questions himself: "Maybe a political fight in a mosque was not something we were familiar with. The sermons call people to demonstrations (in support of Erdoğan)". Through Friday sermons in the mosques, people are called to politics and that causes more tension. I am surrounded by many people (men) who pray five times a day but do not do the Friday prayer".

While Emrullah's departure meant gradually departing from religion, something that echoed in several other interviews, including those with Nilgün's; Gürkan, another interlocutor, articulated his post-coup transformation more radically: "I have come to the point where I am not questioning just political Islam. I have come to the point where I am questioning (the notion of) religion itself". Gürkan is a 35-year-old professional who studied at one of the European high schools of Turkey, which provided him with a high-quality Western education and a social network composed of secular middle-class individuals. As someone born into a religious family and studied in a very secular school, his family trusted the Gülen movement for their support to their intelligent son's religious formation and allowed him to stay in their houses for several years. They also had supported Refah Party, later on AKP, for several decades. Gürkan's unquestioned set of privileges had an element of being urban and middle class, on top of being Sunni an Turkish. When the Gülenists were subjected to purge, he witnessed his close friends being targeted, causing him to feel enraged on their behalf. When I interviewed him in 2019, the feelings of rage had long faded, and he was starting to experiment with alcohol for the first time in his life and had just made a life-changing decision to quit academia and start prioritising becoming rich in the corporate world.

Conclusion

The members of the Gülenist group had become crucial to the larger study I have been leading due to their conflicting inside-enemy position. Gülen movement's cosmological references (Vicini, 2020) have shaped the foundation of the contemporary neo-Ottomanist agenda of Turkey with their structure in disseminating it, whereas the movement's sudden annihilation in Turkish socio-political life also locates them in a position of critique. This paper explores the question of privilege and its fragility by looking at a clash between two political formations, which form the foundation of their politics through their Sunni-Turkish background. It juxtaposes the Erdoganist transformation of the Turkish political scene in the last ten years vis-a-vis their clash with the Gülenists. Using the battle between the two over claiming power and authority in canonical Islam makes it possible to question the notions of privilege, comfort, and critique in the ethical self-making processes.

In the aftermath of the 2016 coup attempt, Gülenists drifted further away from the mainstream position of "proper Turkish citizens", which I read in line with whiteness and white supremacy. In a very short period, they have moved from the "White Turk" status to "*vatan haini*" (traitor). Being referred to as a "traitor", *hain*, is especially heavy on them. The article uses those feelings to study notions

of critique and privilege in the ethical self-making processes. While the members have not questioned their social privileges, the devout members' selfhood is established on principles of devotion. This devotion and belonging were constructed through layers: devotion to the cause/group, to the leader (Gülen), to the nation, and to Islam. As they work on gaining political refugee status, Gülenists in exile also recalibrate their relationship with the Gülen movement itself as the main source of their displacement.

The interconnected layers of devotions have shaped the members' self-cultivation yet any form of critique beyond the self was lacking. The very lacuna of critique combined with the comfort enabled by the privileges informed the crisis (of faith, of the group, and of the nation) they experienced later on. Gülen's self-cultivation principles have not only been problematically shaped around the sanctity of the Turkish state and nobility of the Turkish nation but have enabled them to link the members' Sunni Muslim privilege uncritically to those elements. Privilege, however, is always fragile.

The Gülen movement's ethical self-formation, which is profoundly uncritical to the state and its politics, has formed, as studied in this paper, a disrupted sense of ethical self. Hence, their experience and existential crisis signify the differences between the two Islamist groups and enable us to think about ethical self-making vis-à-vis critique.

Understanding the concepts of critique and ethical self-making and incorporating them into an analytical framework is also crucial to bringing light to multiplicity in the manifestations of canonical Islam. It also enables us to read such forms of Islam through terms of privilege and even supremacy. It unsettles the tendency to approach the canon uncritically.

As I have been writing different parts of this paper since 2017, I have followed the news of various Gülenists and their family members' experiences of violence with a heavy heart. An earlier version of this paper was presented at AAA in 2017, only a week after the news of a family of five drowning in the Aegean Sea while trying to cross to Greece in search of refuge. I could not stop connecting their unpreparedness for state violence to their lack of social capital, inability to imagine this possibility (of state-enabled systemic violence), and unquestioned privileged status. I could not stop feeling devastated about their suffering. Comfort and privilege do not justify the violence they endured. I dedicate this article to their spirits.

Data availability All data used here are anonymised and have not been made available in accessible platforms due to ethics regulations and protocols.

Declarations

Ethical approval The ethnographic material collected in duration of this research was approved by the UCL Research Ethics Committee ID 11059/007.

Competing interests The author is an Editorial Board Member of the journal.

References

Abdelrahman, M. (2006). Divine consumption:"Islamic" Goods in Egypt. Cultural Dynamics in Contemporary Egypt. *Cairo Papers in Social Science, 27*(1/2), 69–79.

Abenante, P., & Vicini, F. (2017). Interiority unbound: Sufi and modern articulations of the self. *Culture and Religion, 18*(2), 57–71.

Arat-Koç, S. (2007). (Some) Turkish transnationalism (s) in an age of capitalist globalization and empire: "White Turk" discourse, the new geopolitics, and implications for feminist transnationalism. *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies, 3*(1), 35–57.

Ayata, S. (1996). Patronage, party, and state: The politicization of Islam in Turkey. *The Middle East Journal*, 50(1), 40–56.

Bali, R. N. (2004). *Devlet'in Yahudileri ve "öteki" Yahudi*. Istanbul: İletişim.

Bargu, B. (2021). Neo-Ottomanism: An Alt-right formation from the South? *Social Research: An International Quarterly, 88*(2), 299–333.

Barış, Ü. (2014). Türklük sözleşmesi'nin imzalanışı (1915–1925). *Mülkiye Dergisi, 38*(3), 47–82.

Bayat, A. (2002). Piety, privilege and Egyptian youth. *Isim Newsletter, 10*, 23.

Bilici, M. (2006). The Fethullah Gülen movement and its politics of representation in Turkey. *Muslim World*, 96, 1–20

Bora, T. (1995). *Milliyetçiliğin kara baharı*. İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları.

Bourdieu, P. (1990). *The logic of practice*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Bruijn, P. d. (2018). Deep State. Visual socio-political communication in the television series and serials of the Turkish television channel Samanyolu. *TV/Series* (13), 1–22.

Cagaptay, S. (2009). The AKP's foreign policy: The misnomer of Neo-Ottomanism. *Turkey Analyst, 2*(8), 1–3.

Çakır, R. (2001/2016). *Derin Hizbullah: İslamcı Şiddetin Geleceği*. İstanbul: Metis Yayınları.

Çetin, M. (2013). *Hizmet: Questions and answers on the Hizmet movement*. New Jersey: Blue Dome Press.

Çınar, A. (2008). Subversion and subjugation in the public sphere: Secularism and the Islamic headscarf. *Signs, 33*(4), 891–913.

Çınar, A. (2005). *Modernity, Islam, and secularism in Turkey: Bodies, places, and time*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Cook, M. (2003). *Forbidding wrong in Islam*. Cambridge University Press.

Dağtas, M. S. (2009). Bodily transgression: Conflicting spaces and gendered boundaries of modernity and Islam in contemporary Turkey. *Anthropology of the Middle East, 4*(2), 1–13.

Dağtaş, M. S. (2016). The personal in the collective: Rethinking the secular subject in relation to the military, wifehood, and Islam in Turkey. *Feminist Studies, 42*(1), 70–97.

Dole, C. (2006). Mass media and the repulsive allure of religious healing: The Cinci Hoca in Turkish modernity. *International Journal of Middle East Studies, 38*(1), 31–54. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/3879793

Dreher, S. (2014). What is the Hizmet movement? Contending approaches to the analysis of religious activists in world politics. *Sociology of Islam, 1*(3–4), 257–275.

Ebaugh, H. R. (2009). *The Gülen movement: A sociological analysis of a civic movement rooted in moderate Islam*. Houston: Springer Science & Business Media.

Ergin, M. (2008). 'Is the Turk a white man?' Towards a theoretical framework for race in the making of Turkishness. *Middle Eastern Studies, 44*(6), 827–850.

Esposito, J. L., & Yilmaz, I. (2010). *Islam and peacebuilding: Gülen movement initiatives.* Houston: Blue Dome Press.

Ghamari-Tabrizi, B. (2008). *Islam and dissent in postrevolutionary Iran.* London: I.B. Tauris.

Gökarıksel, B. (2009). Beyond the officially sacred: Religion, secularism, and the body in the production of subjectivity. *Social & Cultural Geography, 10*(6), 657–674.

Göktürk, D. (2018). Ethnographic account of a pedagogical project: Sisterhood institution in the Hizmet movement. *British Journal of Sociology of Education, 39*(5), 654–668.

Gontijo, L. C., & Barbosa, R. S. (2020). Erdoğan's pragmatism and the ascension of AKP in Turkey: Islam and neo-Ottomanism. *Digest of Middle East Studies, 29*(1), 76–91.

Gülmez, R. (2017). Two islamic movements in conflict in terms of linguistic nationalism. *Japanese Journal of Political Science, 18*(2), 247.

Heper, M. (1997). Islam and democracy in Turkey: Toward a reconciliation? *The Middle East Journal, 32*, 109–123.

Kandiyoti, D. (2012). The travails of the secular: Puzzle and paradox in Turkey. *Economy and Society, 41*(4), 513–531.

Kandiyoti, D. (2014). No laughing matter: Women and the new populism in Turkey. *Open Democracy, 50.50: Inclusive Democracy*. Retrieved from https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/deniz-kandiyoti/no-laughing-matter-women-and-new-populism-in-turkey

Karaca, N. B. (2009). İsmet Berkan'ın 'beş para etmez' Demesine Canım Sıkıldı. *Daily Habertürk*. July 10.

Keles, O., Sezgin, I. M., & Yılmaz, I. (2019). Tackling the twin threats of Islamophobia and puritanical Islamist extremism: Case study of the hizmet movement. In J. L. Esposito (Ed.), *Islamophobia and Radicalization: Breeding Intolerance and Violence* (pp. 265–283). London: Springer.

Koyuncu-Lorasdaği, B. (2010). The prospects and pitfalls of the religious nationalist movement in Turkey: The case of the Gülen movement. *Middle Eastern Studies, 46*(2), 221–234.

Kurt, M. (2019). 'My Muslim Kurdish brother': Colonial rule and Islamist governmentality in the Kurdish region of Turkey. *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies, 21*(3), 350–365. Retrieved from https://pure.royalholloway.ac.uk/en/publications/my-muslim-kurdish-brother-colonial-rule-and-islamist-governmental

Kuru, A. (2007). Passive and assertive secularism: Historical conditions, ideological struggles, and state policies toward religion. *World Politics, 54*(6), 568.

Kütahyalı, R. O. (2014). Zenciler ve bayram. *Sabah Daily, 4 Ekim*. Retrieved from https://www.sabah.com.tr/yazarlar/kutahyali/2014/10/04/zenciler-ve-bayram

Mahmood, S. (2003). Ethical formation and politics of individual autonomy in contemporary Egypt. *Social Research: An International Quarterly, 70*(3), 837–866.

McIntosh, P. (1989). White privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack. *Pace and Freedom.* (July/August).

Michel, T. (2014). *Peace and dialogue in a plural society: Contributions of the hizmet movement at a time of global tensions.* Houston: Blue Dome Press.

Nalan, O. (2018). Karşi Hegemonik Bir Söylem Olarak Dindar Müslüman Kadin Söylemi. *Süleyman Demirel Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi, 30*, 201–235.

Özçetin, B. (2019). 'The show of the people' against the cultural elites: Populism, media and popular culture in Turkey. *European Journal of Cultural Studies, 22*(5–6), 942–957.

Ozdalga, E. (2013). *The veiling issue, official secularism and popular Islam in modern Turkey.* London: Routledge.

Rüma, İ. (2010). Turkish foreign policy towards the Balkans: New activism, neo-ottomanism or/so what. *Turkish Policy Quarterly, 9*(4), 133–140.

Saglam, E. (2018). Aestheticised rituals and (non-) engagement with norms in contemporary Turkey: A contribution to discussions on piety and ethics. *Anthropology of the Middle East, 13*(1), 8–23.

Şahin, B. K. (2019). *Türkiye'de İslamofobik Yaklaşimlar (1980–2000)*. Sakarya Universitesi (Turkey).

Saktanber, A. (2002). Becoming the "Other" as a Muslim in Turkey: Turkish women vs. *Islamist Women. New Perspectives on Turkey, 11*, 99–133.

Sandıkcı, O., & Ger, G. (2005). Aesthetics, ethics and politics of the Turkish headscarf. In S. Kuscher, & D. Miller (Eds.), *Clothing as Material Culture* (pp. 61–82). London: Berghan.

Sayan-Cengiz, F. (2016). *Beyond headscarf culture in Turkey's retail sector.* London: Palgrave

Schielke, S. (2009). Being good in Ramadan: Ambivalence, fragmentation, and the moral self in the lives of young Egyptians. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute, 15*, 524–540.

Schielke, S. (2015). *Egypt in the future tense: Hope, frustration, and ambivalence before and after 2011.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Şeyma, A. (2016). Darbeler ve batı medyası: 28 şubat darbesi üzerinden bir analiz. *Liberal Düşünce Dergisi, 84*, 35–56.

Tapper, R., & Tapper, N. (1991). Religion, education, and continuity in a provincial town. In R. Tapper (Ed.), *Islam in Modern Turkey. Religion, Politics and Literature in a Secular State.* London: IB Tauris

Taş, H. (2022). Collective identity change under exogenous shocks: The Gülen movement and its diasporization. *Middle East Critique, 31*(4), 385–399.

Tee, C. (2016). *The Gülen movement in Turkey: The politics of Islam and modernity.* London: IB Tauris.

Toprak, B. (1984). Politicisation of Islam in a secular state: the National Salvation Party in Turkey. In *From nationalism to revolutionary Islam* (pp. 119–133). Springer.

Turam, B. (2007). *Between Islam and the state: The politics of engagement.* Stanford University Press.

Turkmen, G. (2009). *Religious nationalism vs. nationalist religion: The discourse of martyrdom in Turkey and Palestine.* University of Virginia (PhD Dissertation).

Ulman, S. (1997). Turkey opens trial as sex scandal rages. Retrieved from https://www.upi.com/Archives/1997/01/08/Turkey-opens-trial-as-sex-scandal-rages/8747852699600/. Retrieved 3 April 2020 https://www.upi.com/Archives/1997/01/08/Turkey-opens-trial-as-sex-scandal-rages/8747852699600/

Ulu Sametoglu, S. (2013). *Halal Circle: Leisure, humour, and aesthetic spaces created by young Muslim women of Gulen movement i France and Germany.* Paper presented at the Everyday Life Practices of Muslims in Europe.

Ulusoy , A. D. (2019). Türkiye'nin yeni 'zenciler'i: Atatürkçüler. *Gazete Duvar.* Retrieved from https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/forum/2019/11/12/turkiyenin-yeni-zencileri-ataturkculer

Ünlü, B. (2016). The Kurdish struggle and the crisis of the Turkishness contract. *Philosophy & Social Criticism, 42*(4–5), 397–405.

Ünlü, B. (2018). *Türklük Sözleşmesi: Oluşumu, İşleyişi ve Krizi.* Ankara: Dipnot Yayınları.

Ünlü, B. (2012). Turkishness contract and the Turkish left. *Perspectives: Political Analysis and Commentary from Turkey, 3*(13), 23–27.

Vicini, F. (2007). *Gülen's rethinking of Islamic pattern and its socio-political effects. Paper presented at the Conference Proceedings Muslim World in Transition: Contributions of the Gülen Movement.* London, October, Leeds: Leeds Metropolitan University Press.

Vicini, F. (2017). Thinking through the heart: Islam, reflection and the search for transcendence. *Culture and Religion, 18*(2), 110–128.

Vicini, F. (2020). *Reading Islam: Life and politics of brotherhood in modern Turkey.* London: Brill.

Vicini, F. (2014). The irrepressible charm of the state: dershane closures and the domestic war for power in Turkey. *Jadaliyya.* Retrieved from https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/30437

Weller, P. (2022). *Hizmet in transitions: European developments of a Turkish Muslim-inspired movement.* Berlin: Springer Nature.

White, J. B. (2002). *Islamist mobilization in Turkey: A study in vernacular politics.* University of Washington Press.

Winegar, J. (2012). The privilege of revolution: Gender, class, space, and affect in Egypt. *American Ethnologist, 39*(1), 67–70.

Yalçın, S. (2004). *Efendi: Beyaz Türklerin Büyük Sırrı.* İstanbul: Doğan Kitapçılık.

Yavuz, M. H. (1998). Turkish identity and foreign policy in flux: The rise of Neo-Ottomanism. *Critique: Journal for Critical Studies of the Middle East, 7*(12), 19–41.

Yavuz, M. H., & Koç, R. (2016). The Turkish coup attempt: The Gülen movement vs. the state. *Middle East Policy, 23*(4), 136–148.

Yavuz, M. H. (2013). *Toward an Islamic enlightenment: the Gülen movement.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.