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Letter from Constantinople

by Barry Cooper
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POLICY PAPER

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Fellow, CDFAI
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1600, 530 – 8th Avenue S.W., Calgary, AB T2P 3S8
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On the surface, water flows through the Bosphorus from the Black Sea to the White (or Mediterranean) Sea. Far below the surface, the current runs in the opposite direction. This peculiar hydrology was discovered less than 80 years ago and, although I am confident I am not the first to invoke it as a metaphor for Turkish politics, the image is apt. This report originated in several emails dispatched from Turkey during May, 2014. It may have little scholarly or probative value, but it clarified a few things for me.

Late in February, 2014, several Canadians, including me, were contacted by the Intercultural Dialogue Institute, a Toronto non-profit organization whose mission is to promote respect and understanding among diverse ethnic, cultural, and religious communities. Their headquarters is in Turkey and they are affiliated with the Hizmet (Service) movement established by Fethullah Güllen, who follows the Sufi tradition and resides, for medical as well as political reasons, in Pennsylvania.

The Hizmet/Gülen movement is a moderate, religiously inspired and thus Islamic social movement. Along with the Justice and Development Party (AKP) of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and President Abdullah Gul, it began as a response to what Orhan Pamuk, who won the Nobel Prize for literature in 2006, called “the secular fury” of the Republic founded by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Hizmet/Gülen is also a response to the economic modernization and literacy promoted by the Republic. It has been likened by its friends to a benign Turkish Peace Corps but also to a Muslim version of the Roman Catholic Opus Dei. Despite the charming manners of our hosts, it did not take long for the Canadians to express, at least to one another, a certain wariness regarding the purpose of their invitations.

The geopolitical importance of Turkey has been evident to the West since the days of Herodotus. Today Western long-term strategic interests still directly involve Turkey. Turkey’s membership in NATO and the current instability in Iraq aside, its geographic position has important implications for such relatively peaceful issues as European energy supplies. European long-term dependency on Russian gas has led to several efforts at source diversification, all of which involve Turkey. Transporting gas from the eastern Mediterranean to Europe requires not only Israeli cooperation but a peace settlement between the Turks and Greeks concerning Cyprus. The Azerbaijan state oil company, SOCAR, has proposed building the Trans Anatolia Natural Gas Pipeline (and has received encouragement from the Canadian government). In the more remote future, moving Iranian gas to Europe involves a transit of Turkey.

On the surface, Turkey is almost European –and, of course, the right bank of the Bosphorus, the Sea of Marmara, and the Dardanelles is European. European analogies come readily to mind. The contemporary narrative Turks tell to themselves is a story of an increasing GDP (growth is projected at 4.5% for 2014) and of a stable Muslim-majority and democratic government, unique in the region. The AKP by this account is a moderate religious party able to provide civilian control of the military and fend off dangerous Islamists and other foreign threats. Certainly threats from the military and their traditional allies in the courts are real. In 2008 and again in 2012 the AKP was nearly banned for undermining Kemalist secularism.

Until recently this surface narrative seemed compelling and accurate. Today, however (and again leaving aside the problem of Iraq), Erdogan and the AKP have been increasingly preoccupied with political survival and have levelled charges at their opponents, including Hizmet/Gülen that are, frankly, unbelievable. One consequence is that Turkey’s future role in



the region and its relationship with western countries in Europe and North America are more uncertain than in the past.

The AKP and Hizmet/Gülen alliance was not just religious but was devoted to shifting the balance away from the cosmopolitan, secular, sophisticated, and traditional-elite-centred Istanbul towards the “Anatolian tigers” around Ankara who also were (and are) more pious and more in touch with the agricultural past of the country. The first paradox of Turkish politics is that the stability guaranteed by the old Istanbul elites enabled the possibility of newer Anatolian opposition. By the mid-1990s religious parties began to challenge the secular establishment. They were banned in 1998 and 2001, but recovered under new names and with greater strength. In 2002 the AKP won on a platform of reducing the economic gap between the Istanbul elites and the Anatolian masses. The AKP did not emphasize its religious inspiration but nevertheless provoked secular resistance, if not outright opposition from the military and the judiciary.

After 2007 the AKP was strong enough to take on its enemies, starting with repression of a mostly notional “Deep State,” said to be a conspiracy of retired generals allegedly intent on overthrowing the AKP. In 2010 a new plot, this time involving active-duty generals, was uncovered (or invented). The AKP, still allied with Hizmet/Gülen, next turned their attention to reforming the police and the national intelligence service (MIT) and developing ties to the media.

By the summer of 2010 however, the coalition of the AKP and Hizmet/Gülen was beginning to unravel. Initially the debate centred on the role Turkey was to play in foreign affairs. Hizmet/Gülen had by then established nearly a thousand schools in 115 countries. The schools combined math and science with Turkish- and English-language instruction. Instruction in Islam was limited to areas that were already Muslim --in Azerbaijan, for example, rather than Colombia (there are no such schools in Iran or Saudi Arabia). The AKP preferred traditional state-centred diplomatic and foreign aid activity. The aftermath of the May 2010 Gaza flotilla precipitated a major split because the AKP was much more assertive in their opposition to the Israelis than Hizmet/Gülen.

In April, 2014, shortly before our arrival, the AKP again sought to curtail the influence of Hizmet/Gülen schools along with their hospitals and foreign humanitarian aid delivered chiefly by Kimse Yok Mu, another Hizmet/Gülen affiliated group (the name in Turkish means “is anybody there?” and refers to yells coming from the rubble after the August 17, 1999 earthquake in Ankara). By then however the break was complete and centred, according to the Hizmet/Gülen side, on the growing corruption and authoritarianism of the AKP and Erdogan.

This issue was front and centre in a conversation we had at the Zaman Media Group with the editor of the Turkish Review, Korim Balci. The Media Group includes a news magazines and papers; they provide TV and radio content to non-Hizmet/Gülen stations, on-line magazines, and other media outlets.

As is true of many in the Hizmet/Gülen movement, Balci lamented the decline of pluralism from Ottoman times when Persian, Arabic and Turkic, as well as Bosniak and Kurdish were all accepted languages. He argued at length that religious moderation was a precondition to any discussion about democracy. This is true enough: democracy does have certain social preconditions and in Turkey they concern religion first of all and its place in civil society. Twice by way of criticism he compared Erdogan to the long-defunct sultan.



The focus of Hizmet/Gülen on civil society provided the context of Erdogan's recent musing about a "parallel government," a successor to the "deep state" conspiracy. Erdogan's charge is nonsense on the surface, but Fethullah Güllen and Erdogan's other opponents are not a loyal opposition either. A loyal opposition is loyal to the regime if not to the government of the day; but Hizmet/Gülen want to change it: hence their work on the fundamentals –civil society. They are a real threat to the entire Turkish regime, not just to the AKP. This is why Güllen, the individual, has said he has no interest in forming a party, which would invariably sustain the regime by opposing Erdogan within the very rules that Güllen wants to change.

The "parallel government" problem gets even more interesting in light of the specific corruption charges against the Erdogan regime. Corruption, or more euphemistically client-politics or clan politics, is not unknown elsewhere in the region, the Mediterranean basin, or the world. If Balci is right, Erdogan has far exceeded the local norms. For example, the "golden loophole" in Iranian sanctions permits the export of gold to private Iranian entities. Apparently, gold from Uganda, flown on Turkish Airlines via Dubai, is "given" to Iran by Bilal and Burak Erdogan, sons of the Prime Minister; Iran then "gives" oil to Turkey. In the process, Balci said, the Erdogan family has acquired billions. He set the number at 34B Euros, a tidy sum, if true.

Last winter the investigation by the public prosecutor and the police, many of whom had become Hizmet/Gülen sympathizers, was made public. In response the government removed a total of 5600 police, mostly from financial crime and from the surveillance department –which as a matter of course had been spying on Erdogan and his sons. The prosecutor's office was also purged and hundreds of lawyers were fired. As a result many Turks expect the court case against Erdogan will be terminated and nothing done. Among other things, this suggests that the extent of corruption remains within the political class and that the bureaucrats –the police and the prosecutors—are relatively clean, which is a reversal from a decade ago.

Erdogan has responded to these difficulties with a "perception management strategy," which has been a qualified success and depended on his ability to influence the mass media. The mechanism is well known from elsewhere in the world: as a study by Freedom House put it, because the Turkish PMO controls public procurement and has great discretion in awarding contracts, their influence on companies that have media subsidiaries is enormous. Moreover, the ability to launch tax investigations in a society where tax-compliance is far from universal provides another lever of influence.

More significant, like tyrants everywhere and always, Erdogan has begun accusing his opponents of what he is in fact doing: hence the charge concerning the "parallel government." In May, Erdogan responded to a heckler by attacking a bystander, Taner Kurucan. The assault was caught on tape. Erdogan then claimed that Kurucan was part of the parallel government working for Hizmet/Gülen as well as for Mossad. A couple of days later, Kurucan issued a correction exonerating Erdogan: this was perception management at work. Seymour Hersh reported in the London Review of Books that Erdogan and his family profited from sending guns via the MIT to the wrong people in Syria. When this rumour/story surfaced, it provided Erdogan with more evidence of a parallel government.

To make sense of this intensely interesting experience of contemporary Turkey (and I have not mentioned the government response to the terrible mining disaster that occurred while we were there, nor the ultimately futile efforts at banning Twitter or the peculiar reasons advanced by



Erdogan why this prohibition was necessary), I would make but two comments. First, when corruption is openly divulged to outsiders as it was by our hosts to us, something is very wrong with the regime. Second, in a 1968 book by Sam Huntington, Political Order in Changing Societies he argued that, as societies such as Turkey “develop,” which is to say come to resemble, at least superficially, the democratic and prosperous societies of Europe and North America, they become more complex and more divided. Members of the middle classes and persons active in civil society become less satisfied with the conventional and traditional way of conducting public affairs or with “political order.” They demand more effective government and more responsible –or as we say nowadays, more transparent– government. The institutions of government are no longer seen as the private domain of the ruler of the day. The result is more or less constant turbulence, argument, disagreement, and even political upheaval. As countries become more prosperous, concern for wealth distribution intensifies. This is true for Turkey as it is for Brazil, Thailand, China, or many other countries. Moreover, social media have accelerated and intensified these changes.

Turkey is not a dictatorship, however much Erdogan and the AKP may be tempted in that direction. It has a lively civil society along with increasing prosperity. Criticizing the government can entail economic costs and costs to a critic’s liberty, but such consequences are common enough. The courage of members of the Hizmet/Gülen movement has unquestionably opened a public space for greater discussion and critical analysis, which is one reason why contemporary Turkey has so far avoided dictatorship.

► **About the Author**

Barry Cooper, a fourth generation Albertan, was educated at Shawnigan Lake School, the University of British Columbia and Duke University, where he received his doctorate in 1969. He taught at Bishop's University, McGill, and York University before coming to the University of Calgary in 1981. For the past twenty-five years he has studied western political philosophy, both classical and contemporary. Much of his teaching has focused on Greek political philosophy whereas his publications have been chiefly in the area of contemporary French and German political philosophy. Over the years he has spent considerable time in both countries, teaching and doing research.

Cooper's other area of continuing interest has been Canadian politics and public policy. Here he has brought the insights of political philosophers to bear on contemporary issues, including the place of technology and the media in Canada, the on-going debate over the constitutional status of Quebec, and the precarious status of Canadian defence and security.

He is the author, editor, or translator of 30 books and has published over 150 papers and book chapters. He writes a regular column in the Calgary Herald.



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CDFAI was created to address the ongoing discrepancy between what Canadians need to know about Canadian international activities and what they do know. Historically, Canadians tend to think of foreign policy – if they think of it at all – as a matter of trade and markets. They are unaware of the importance of Canada engaging diplomatically, militarily, and with international aid in the ongoing struggle to maintain a world that is friendly to the free flow of goods, services, people and ideas across borders and the spread of human rights. They are largely unaware of the connection between a prosperous and free Canada and a world of globalization and liberal internationalism.

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