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**This is a pre print version of the following article:**

*Original Citation:*

*Availability:*

This version is available <http://hdl.handle.net/2318/1680891> since 2018-11-07T19:15:14Z

*Published version:*

DOI:10.1080/21567689.2018.1453268

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(Article begins on next page)



# UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI TORINO

This is a pre-print author version of the contribution published on:

Ozzano L.

From 'the New Rome' to the Old One: The Gülen Movement in Italy

*Politics, Religion & Ideology* (2018) Vol. 19, No. 1

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21567689.2018.1453268>

# From 'the New Rome' to the Old One: The Gülen Movement in Italy

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## ***Abstract***

The Gülen movement, led by the Turkish cleric and philosopher Fethullah Gülen, has been in the past years the subject of extensive scholarship, also as a consequence of its expansion in the west through dozens of dialogue and education institutions. While the literature has covered the Gülen organizations in many European countries, the Italian case was however still uncharted, although in the country existed, in the late 2000s, Gülen-related institutions in seven different cities. The research outlined in this paper <sup>1</sup> – based on in-depth interviews, participant observation and second-hand sources – originally aimed at filling this gap, by charting the Italian organizations in the context of the broader Gülen network. However, the current political and judiciary events inside Turkey and abroad – together with economic factors – have recently implied a significant downsizing of the organizations and a change in their scope and activities, which the paper will also try to describe, trying to sketch some reflections about the future of the movement in the west.

Keywords: Gülen movement, Italy, transnational religious movements, Islam, Fethullah Gülen

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<sup>1</sup> The research for this paper was carried out also thanks to funds provided by the University of Turin (project on ‘Attori religiosi transnazionali: il movimento Hizmet di Fethullah Gülen e le sue attività in Italia’, funded in 2014) and by the Compagnia di Sanpaolo foundation (project on ‘Searching for Alternative Communitarianism, Religion and Economic Development. A trans-disciplinary analysis of the economic networks of the Focolare, Hizmet and Damanhur religious movements’, funded in 2015).

## 1) Introduction

The Gülen movement,<sup>2</sup> led (or simply inspired, as the movement members claim) by the Turkish preacher Fethullah Gülen, is today one of the most peculiar phenomena in the field of Muslim social movements, and has been the subject of extensive scholarship between the late 1990s and the early 2010s. This is a consequence of several factors: the pro-dialogue and pro-western orientation of the movement and its founder (who has been living in the US since the late 1990s); its public relations activities, including also academic events and publications; its feud with Turkey's current government, and, more recently, the crackdown on the movement, started in 2010-11 and culminated in the events following the July 2016 attempted coup (for which the movement is blamed by the Turkish political authorities).

Since the movement has started spreading outside Turkey in the 1980s, there is today an extensive corpus of international literature on its organizational network in countries throughout the world. Some contributions – although not rarely included in works funded or published by institutions related to the movement – also exist about the Gülen organizations and activities in European countries such as France and Germany<sup>3</sup>, the UK<sup>4</sup>, the Netherlands<sup>5</sup>, and Ireland and Northern

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<sup>2</sup> In this paper, the movement will be always referred to as 'the Gülen movement', which is the name adopted throughout the special issue. The members of the movement commonly refer to it as Hizmet (service) movement, while in Turkey it was also often called – especially by its opponents – 'the cemaat' (the brotherhood) and, more recently, FETÖ (Fethullahist Terrorist Organization), the label officially adopted by the Turkish government after the 2016 attempted coup (which, however, had already been in use in pro-government publications, mainly in articles about the so-called 'parallel state' theories, at least since the end of 2014. See for example: <https://www.sabah.com.tr/gundem/2014/12/11/ergenekonun-degil-paralelin-tetikcisiyim>).

<sup>3</sup> Emre Demir, 'The Emergence of a Neo-Communitarian Discourse in the Turkish Diaspora in Europe: The Implantation Strategies and Competition Logics of the Gülen Movement in France and Germany', in Paul Weller and Ihsan Yilmaz (Eds.), *European Muslims, Civility and Public Life. Perspectives on and from the Gulen Movement*, by (London; New York: Continuum, 2012), pp. 101–12; Jill Irvine, 'The Gülen Movement and Turkish Integration in Germany,' *IslamOnline*, 2009, <http://www.fethullahgulenforum.org/inpress/12/the-gulen-movement-turkish-integration-germany/>.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Weller, 'Robustness and Civility: Themes from Fethullah Gülen as Resource and Challenge for Government, Muslims and Civil Society in the United Kingdom,' in Weller and Yilmaz (eds.), *European Muslims*, pp. 143–59.

<sup>5</sup> Martin van Bruinessen, 'The Netherlands and the Gülen Movement,' *Sociology of Islam*, 1:3–4 (April 30, 2014): pp. 165–87.

Ireland <sup>6</sup>. With the exception of the latter, the above-mentioned countries are among the main Turkish-immigration countries in Europe, so it is not by chance that scholarly attention has focused on them. However, since the 2000s a wide network of Gülen-related institutions, still mostly uncharted by the literature, has developed also in European countries without a sizeable Turkish diaspora. This is also the case of Italy which, although counting less than 20,000 Turkish immigrants,<sup>7</sup> has seen in the 2000s the creation of several Gülen organizations, with a total of seven local branches: the Tevere Institute, based in Rome; the Alba Intercultural Organization, based in Milan, Como, Imperia and Turin; and the Milad Intercultural Organization, based in Modena (with an offspring, which officially is an independent organization, in Venice). This paper will try to contribute to a better understanding of the Gülen network in Europe (and particularly in non Turkish-immigration countries) by analyzing such organizations and the activities they carried out (now, as we will see, their activities have significantly downsized), also in comparison to the findings of existing works focused on other national cases. It will also try to understand the changes intervened in the organizations, their stances and their activities, as a consequence of the current political crisis in Turkey and the crackdown on the movement in the homeland and abroad and what they imply for the future of the movement in Italy and, broadly speaking, in the west.

The methodology of the research is first based on in depth interviews (carried out between May 2014 and November 2017) to the official representatives of Gülen's Italian organizations (including the heads of the organisations, as well as Italy's coordinator for the movement), to members of the movement involved in organizations, and to other informed people;<sup>8</sup> on the author's observations

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<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Lacey, 'Fethullah Gülen through the Activities of a Gülen-Inspired Religio- Cultural Society Based in Ireland,' in John L. Esposito and Ihsan Yilmaz (Eds.), *Islam and Peacebuilding. Gülen Movement Initiatives* (New York: Blue Dome Press, 2010), pp. 249–72; Jonathan Lacey, 'An Exploration of the Strategic Dimension of Dialogue in a Gülen Movement Organization in Northern Ireland,' in Weller and Yilmaz (eds.), *European Muslims*, pp.127–39.

<sup>7</sup> ISTAT, 'Stranieri Residenti Al 1° Gennaio - Cittadinanza,' 2017, [http://dati.istat.it/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=DCIS\\_POPSTRCIT1](http://dati.istat.it/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=DCIS_POPSTRCIT1).

<sup>8</sup> The author has carried out 10 interviews, mainly to prominent member of the movement in Italy (including: the Gülen coordinator for Italy, the president of the Tevere Institute, the president of Alba, and two high-ranking members of Milad Modena and Milad Venice). The research plan originally included more interviews, also to rank-and-file members of the movement in Italy, especially women and students. However, as a consequence of the harshening of the political crisis in Turkey, most of the author's contacts have started to refuse to be interviewed, usually without explaining the reason (although it is reasonable to suppose that they were either afraid of publicity as a consequence of the repression in Turkey, or had taken a distance from the movement, for the same reason). The names of the interviewees are mostly omitted to protect them from unnecessary exposure. The interviews have been carried out in

during several events organized by the movement (conferences, gala dinners, iftar dinners, and intercultural events); and on a careful analysis of the literature dealing with Gülen's transnational network. However, since the history, the ideology, the features and the evolutionary path of the movement have already dealt with in the introductory articles to this special issue, this paper will focus primarily on the Italian case. It will not, instead, extensively address broader issues, except in the conclusions, where the meaning of the findings of the research on Italy will be analyzed also in relation to the broader development of the Gülen movement.

### ***The Italian Case***

Italy makes no exception in a European scenario where the main Gülen-inspired organizations have been created in the early and mid-2000s. In the case of Italy, however, the presence of many different organizations was quite striking, since today there are officially 19,217 Turkish citizens living in Italy (11026 male and 8191 female),<sup>9</sup> and in 2003, when the first Gülen organization in Italy was established, there were little more than 7,000<sup>10</sup>: a small fraction of the about 9 million Turks (both Turkish citizens and citizens of Turkish origin who have changed their citizenship) living in Europe (outside the Turkish borders) today<sup>11</sup>. This proliferation in many different Italian cities probably has many reasons. On the one hand, despite the small Turkish community, Italy was a strategic country for the movement's strategies, both because of its role of the European Union (not to mention the fact that during the 2000s the country was mostly led by Silvio Berlusconi, who was personally rather friendly towards Turkey and then Prime Minister Erdogan), and for the presence of the Holy See in Rome.

More broadly, however, the expansion of the movement in Italy was also connected to the political developments in Turkey and the new style of foreign policy inaugurated by the AKP governments, based on 'public diplomacy': that is, 'a method [...] to enhance [...] national interests through non-

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Rolo (RE) during a 'Turkish festival' gathering Gülen followers in Italy, in Rome at the headquarters of the Istituto Tevere, and in a couple of cases by phone or Skype.

<sup>9</sup> ISTAT, 'Stranieri residenti al 1° gennaio - Cittadinanza.'

<sup>10</sup> ISTAT, 'Cittadini non comunitari: presenza, nuovi ingressi e acquisizioni di cittadinanza', 2016, <http://www.istat.it/it/archivio/129854>; [comuni-italiani.it](http://comuni-italiani.it), 'Turchi in Italia'.

<sup>11</sup> Jeffrey Cole, *Ethnic Groups of Europe: An Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara, Ca: ABC-CLIO, 2011), pp. 367.

governmental channels'.<sup>12</sup> This strategy – in opposition to the mostly elitist outlook of past Turkish diplomacy – strongly relied on the partnership with civil society organizations, think tanks and business associations (but also on the creation of new institutions, such as the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities),<sup>13</sup> to promote the image and culture of Turkey and Turkish interests abroad. In the case of western Europe, this dynamics was particularly strong, because it was connected to the effort carried out by the Turkish government between 2002 and 2006-7 to advance the process of Turkey's integration in the European Union. At the same time, in relation to the diaspora communities, the Turkish government encouraged Turkish immigrants in Europe to integrate and improve their position in European society, while at the same time maintaining their Turkish culture. These strategies, as noted by Yaşar Aydın, were only partially effective, both because European countries such as Germany were skeptical about an “externally controlled penetration” carried out also through a religious conservative message, and because it further contributed to fragment the fabric of the Turkish diaspora.<sup>14</sup> In any case, the Gülen movement (at the time an ally of the AKP) was crucial in this strategy throughout the 2000s, both in order to propose to the European authorities and public opinion a ‘modern’ and ‘enlightened’ image of Turkey and Turkish Islam, and to facilitate the penetration of Turkish entrepreneurs in the European markets.

Finally, we must also highlight the many specific reasons for the Gülen movement's presence in Italy's different cities: interreligious and intercultural dialogue (Rome and Venice), business (Milan and Turin), and the need to be close to the Turkish diaspora communities in Italy (Como, Imperia and Modena). The following paragraphs will introduce the main Gülen organizations in Italy, their features and their activities.

## **1. Associazione Interculturale Alba**

The Associazione Interculturale Alba (Dawn Intercultural Association) was created in 2003 in Milan ‘with the aim to build bridges of friendship among peoples’.<sup>15</sup> Dialogue is the main focus of

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<sup>12</sup> O. Can Ünver, ‘Changing Diaspora Politics of Turkey and Public Diplomacy’, *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, 12:1 (2013), pp. 181-9:188.

<sup>13</sup> Kerem Oktem, ‘Turkey's New Diaspora Policy: The Challenge of Inclusivity, Outreach and Capacity’, Istanbul Policy Center, 2014, <http://www.suedosteuropa.uni-graz.at/sites/default/files/publications/KeremOktem-Diaspora.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> Yaşar Aydın, ‘The New Turkish Diaspora Policy’, *SWP Research Papers*, 10 (2014), p. 5.

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.albassoc.org/chi-siamo/> (accessed on 16 May 2016). All the translations from Italian have been made by the author of this article.



the organization also according to Alba's president,<sup>16</sup> who lists among the organization's main activities its dinners and particularly the intercultural travels, made possible by exchange agreements with sister organizations in Turkey (which provided logistic support for travels to Turkey organized by Alba, while Alba provided support for the travels of Turkish entrepreneurs to Italy). This is not a surprise, since this kind of activities have always been a focus of the movement in Europe, especially in countries without a sizeable Turkish community.<sup>17</sup>

Among the organization's aims, its website also lists educational activities, 'which can help students to become grownup people which are knowledgeable, suitable to the contemporary world, able to talk and understand different languages and to interact in a multicultural and dynamic context; high morality people able to contribute to world peace'.<sup>18</sup> This statement is not made by chance if we consider both that education was the primary mission of the Gülen movement in the homeland and abroad, especially until the 1990s;<sup>19</sup> and the fact that Alba itself started at first to organize afterschool activities for Turkish students in Italy. In the following years, it became a full-fledged intercultural organization based in Milan and it expanded by opening local branches in three other northern Italian cities: Como (near Milan), Imperia (near Genoa) and Turin. According to my interviewees, the organization also tried to create a school (which, because of the scarcity of Turkish students in Italy, would be oriented towards the broader Italian population) but had to abandon the idea because of financial problems after the beginning of the economic crisis in 2008. Alba can be considered the most striking example of the internal diversity of the movement in Italy.

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<sup>16</sup> Most of the information included in this paragraph, where not otherwise declared, is based on my interview to Alba's president, released to the author in Rolo in May 2015.

<sup>17</sup> Berna Turam, *Between Islam and the State: The Politics of Engagement* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007); Nancy Gallagher, 'Hizmet Intercultural Dialogue Trips to Turkey,' in Sophia Pandya and Nancy Gallagher (Eds.), *The Gülen Hizmet Movement and Its Transnational Activities: Case Studies of Altruistic Activism in Contemporary Islam*, (Boca Raton, FL: Brown Walker Press, 2012), pp. 73–93; Jonathan Lacey, 'An Exploration of the Strategic Dimension of Dialogue in a Gülen Movement Organization in Northern Ireland,' in Weller and Yilmaz (Eds.), *European Muslims*, pp. 127–39.

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.albassc.org/chi-siamo/> (accessed on 16 May 2016).

<sup>19</sup> Berna Zengin Arslan, 'The Gülen Community Schools: The Politics of Science and Education' (Conference of the Italian Political Science Society (SISP), Perugia, September 2014); Bekim Agai, 'The Gülen Movement's Islamic Ethic of Education,' in M. Hakan Yavuz and John L. Esposito (Eds.), *Turkish Islam and the Secular State: The Gülen Movement* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2003), pp. 48–68; Yüksel A. Aslandoğan and Muhammed Çetin, 'Gülen's Educational Paradigm in Thought and Practice,' in Robert A. Hunt and Yüksel A. Aslandoğan (Eds.), *Muslim Citizens of the Globalized World: Contributions of the Gülen Movement* (Somerset, N.J.: The Light, 2007), pp. 34–61.

The creator and current president of Alba is a Turkish-born entrepreneur who has been active for several years in the construction industry in the Lombardy region; other entrepreneurs were also involved in the local branches: for example, the main sponsor of the Turin branch was a kebab-seller quite known in the city. On the other hand, the heads of some local branches (including Turin's, when the author of this paper first came into contact with the organization) were sometimes young Turkish graduates trying to get a PhD title in Italy, who were also specifically paid for their work in the organization (while most other interviewees maintained that their effort was entirely voluntary).

In terms of funding, according to Alba's president, the creation of the organization was made possible by the help of Turkish football players involved in the movement – such as Hakan Sükür<sup>20</sup> – who in the early 2000s were playing in Milan's team Internazionale. In later phases, its survival was possible thanks both to the effort of Gülen representatives in Italy (for the organization's ordinary activity) and to the help of Turkish entrepreneurs (for high-budget projects such as gala dinners and Turkish musicians' tours). Alba also evidently tried to act as a support point for Turkish entrepreneurs in Italy, as shown by the fact that the organization's former headquarters in Milan were also the headquarters of a Gülen-linked entrepreneurial organization. This role of entrepreneurs is consistent with the findings of other researches on Gülen organizations abroad, which highlight their role in funding the organizations, receiving in exchange logistic help for their business.<sup>21</sup>

As mentioned above, Alba's Turin branch was the first Gülen organization I got to know in 2010-11, when I was invited (probably as one of the few local scholars doing research on Turkey) to a gala dinner in one of the finest Turin hotels, and later to some academic events (once as a speaker) and iftar dinners. The organizations had a rather comfortable headquarter, with a small conference

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<sup>20</sup> Hakan Sükür can be regarded as a paradigmatic example for the evolution of the Gülen movement's relation with the AKP. After retiring from professional football, he was elected as an MP for Erdogan's party. Then, in late 2013, he abandoned the party becoming an independent MP. In 2016 the Turkish prosecutors investigating the failed coup have issued an arrest warrant for him on charges of being member of a terrorist organization (the Gülen movement).

<sup>21</sup> Elisabeth Özdalga, 'Worldly Asceticism in Islamic Casting: Fethullah Gülen's Inspired Piety and Activism,' *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies*, 9:17 (2000), pp. 83–104; M. Hakan Yavuz, 'The Gülen Movement: The Turkish Puritans,' in Yavuz and Esposito (Eds.), *Turkish Islam and the Secular State*, pp. 19–47; Helen Rose Fuchs Ebaugh, *The Gülen Movement: A Sociological Analysis of a Civic Movement Rooted in Moderate Islam* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2009).

room and a kitchen, in addition to the president's office and another nondescript room (which I inferred was also used for prayer).

In the past few years, however, the organization has been in a phase of restructuring and downsizing, already started before the harshest phase of crackdown on the movement in Turkey (according to Alba's president, also the Italian-Turkish entrepreneurial organization once headquartered by Alba has been closed because four of its five founders have returned to Turkey). According to my interviewees, this was due mainly to financial problems: both as a consequence of the turmoil in Turkey, which had reduced the inflow of donations from the homeland, and to the return of many immigrants to Turkey (although we may infer that after 2015-16 the direction of this flow, at least among Gülen followers, is likely to have changed again) allegedly as a consequence of the global economic crisis. However, it is also possible that the reason for the return to the homeland of some people was the fact that they had left the movement after the beginning of Gülen's feud with President Erdogan.

In any case, this circumstance clearly shows how the movement was dependent of resources from the homeland, despite its strong transnationalization. It is true that many funds for the Italian organizations (particularly Istituto Tevere) came from entrepreneurs in other European countries. However, that flow of resources has also dwindled, not only because of the weakening of the movement face to face the repression, but also because the remaining funds are often allocated according to new sets of priorities (focused on protecting and sustaining those members of the movement who have been sacked and arrested in Turkey, as well as those who have managed to flee the country). After the crackdown in Turkey, the Milan headquarters of Alba were relocated to a smaller office, while the other branches were all officially closed (although, during an interview released in May 2015, Alba's president expressed his intention to reopen them in the future). At the time of writing this paper (October 2017), even that new venue has been closed, and the website of the organization hasn't been updated for about a year and a half; however, according to its Twitter account, Alba has co-sponsored an interreligious dialogue event at the University of Milan in May 2017.

## 2. Milad

Milad is an Arab word meaning birth. According to my interviewees<sup>22</sup> the name was picked as both an homage to the figure of Jesus (regarded as a bridge between Christians and Muslims), and as an omen about the development of dialogue between different cultures. Milad is the name of two different – but closely related and interconnected – Gülen organizations in Italy, based in Modena and Venice. The Associazione Interculturale Milad (Milad Intercultural Association) has been created in 2004 (with the involvement of a number of graduate and post-graduate students living at the time in the region) as Associazione Educativa Modenese (Modena's Education Association) to be renamed Milad in 2010.<sup>23</sup> The organization is based in Modena, in the Emilia Romagna region, one of the main outlets of Turkish immigration to Italy. While it mentions as its main focuses of activity dialogue and education, it is very clear from the agenda of its activities that the organization is very closely focused on the Turkish community in Modena and its neighborhoods, and its relations with the local Italian society. This feature is evident, particularly, in some activities which diverge from the usual agenda of Gülen-related dialogue organizations, such as counseling activities for couples, consultancy services provided to Turkish immigrants in relation to bureaucratic procedures (such as the 2011 Italian census), as well as in the many cultural events organized in cooperation with local public administrations and associations not related to the Turkish community.

The work carried out in the organization was mainly voluntary – with a president and a board of 5-7 people – but a couple of positions requiring a full-time work were covered by salaried people. According to my interviewees, while the ordinary activities of the organizations were funded by local members, the wages of the full-time employees used to be paid – at least until the beginning of the current political crisis in Turkey – by friendly Turkish entrepreneurs. The involvement of the organization in the business networks of Gülen-related entrepreneurs seemed to be quite similar to the role played by Alba, with help and consultancy provided to Turkish entrepreneurs traveling to Italy, in exchange for subsidized intercultural travels to Turkey of Italian citizens.

The association also used to be involved in dialogue activities commonly found in the repertoire of Gülen-related organizations, such as intercultural travels, dinners, organization of concerts of

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<sup>22</sup> Where not otherwise specified, the information included in this paragraph is based on my interviews to a high-ranking official of Milad, and to the president of Istituto Tevere.

<sup>23</sup> [http://www.milad.it/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=1&Itemid=2&lang=it](http://www.milad.it/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1&Itemid=2&lang=it) (accessed on 29 September 2016).

Turkish artists of traditional music and distribution of ‘Noah puddings’.<sup>24</sup> It also organizes courses of Italian and English targeted to Turkish immigrants, as well as courses of Turkish aimed at the broader population.

The organization seems to have been very sorely affected by the current political crisis in Turkey, especially after the 2016 attempted coup: which is not surprising given its roots in the local Turkish immigrant community. According to my interviewees, most local Turks who did not belong to the movement’s inner circles have utterly stopped to attend Milad’s activities, either because they support the Turkish government’s positions, or because they are afraid of negative consequences of their participation. So, many activities have for now ceased and, although the organization’s headquarters still exist, they are also used as a refugees shelter, after an agreement with an Italian NGO.

On the other hand, the crisis has reportedly engendered a positive reaction in the local Italian community, which has expressed its support to the organization in many ways (for example, through the participation of Modena’s major and bishop to Milad’s iftar dinners). This support is quite significant, considering that there has been a degree of tension within the Turkish community of Modena (where we can also find a mosque run by representatives of the Diyanet, the Turkish Presidency of Religious Affairs, a body under governmental control). Indeed, on the night of the 2016 attempted coup, a group of people still unknown even carried out an arson attack against Milad’s headquarters.<sup>25</sup> Just like Alba’s president, the representatives of Milad also lament a loss of militants as a consequence of their definitive or temporary comeback to Turkey after the beginning of the economic crisis and the political turmoil. On the other hand, they are also concerned about a number of Gülen movement’s members who now would like to leave Turkey but are allegedly denied visa by the Turkish government.

As mentioned above, the name Milad was also adopted for another organization – which is however quite closely related to the one in Modena – based in Venice, the Associazione Dialogo e Cultura Milad (Association Dialogue and Culture Milad), created in 2009. The scope and aims of this organization are, however, quite different, since in the city there is only a small Turkish community. On the other hand, the local university hosts one of the main centers of Turkish studies in Italy. The

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<sup>24</sup> This practice, also adopted by Gülen organizations in other European countries, is not only focused on food sharing *per se*, but also aims at highlighting the common Abrahamic roots of the three monotheistic traditions.

<sup>25</sup> <http://gazzettadimodena.gelocal.it/modena/cronaca/2016/07/17/news/modena-attentato-a-circolo-turco-anti-erdogan-in-4-danno-fuoco-alla-sede-1.13830293> (accessed on 29 September 2016).

local academicians have indeed been crucial for the creation of the organization, whose activity is mainly focused on lectures and other cultural events targeted at the broader Italian population (although to this date the organization is the only Gülen group in Italy without both a website and its own social media accounts, which signals a very low profile).

### **3. Istituto Tevere**

The Istituto Tevere (Tevere Institute) was the last Gülen organization established in Italy, in 2007. Unlike Alba and Milad, it was created by two Turkish citizens studying at the Pontifical universities based in Rome. The current president of the organization (who is one of the two founding members, while the other is apparently no longer involved in the institute) explains that the name ‘Tevere’ was picked because they liked the river as a symbol of the meeting of different cultures, but also of Rome’s identity; while the denomination ‘institute’ was chosen because of the intention to focus not only on dialogue and intercultural activities, but also on research. Dialogue appears however to be the current main focus of the organization: which Tevere’s president explains quoting Fethullah Gülen’s words about the creation of ‘islands of peace’ where people from different upbringings, backgrounds and cultures can safely meet to find common points and create bonds. In terms of models, he mentions as sources of inspiration the Journalists and Writers Foundation based in Istanbul (which was the prototype of all Gülen dialogue organization) and the London-based Dialogue Society (where he had spent some time before the creation of Istituto Tevere); however, he also maintains that Christian dialogue-oriented organizations – such as the Centro Culturale Internazionale Giovanni XXIII, also based in Rome – have been a precious model.<sup>26</sup> Among these dialogue activities the greatest effort is spent in the organization of conferences, workshops, and meetings featuring both religious people and Italian and international scholars (including well-known academicians such as Jose Casanova) who deal with religion. Istituto Tevere is also strongly connected to interreligious networks, such as Religions for Peace (which includes Tevere’s president in the board of its Italian section), and hosts meetings between representatives of different religions (particularly with Christians, and Jews). Among its most frequent partners, we can also find some non-Muslim dialogue organizations, such as the Christian Focolare Movement and the Buddhist Rissho Kosei Kai. The Institute’s president indeed proudly mentions the organization’s good relations not only with Christian religious orders such as the Franciscans, but also with representatives of religious groups which are rarely included in the contacts of other Muslim and Turkish organizations, such as Buddhists and Alevis. The Tevere Institute also enjoys good

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<sup>26</sup> Interviews of the author to the President of Istituto Tevere, Rome, 21 May 2014 and 17 June 2016.

relations with both Rome's Jewish community and the US embassy at the Holy See, while in the agenda of its past activities we can rarely find other Muslim representatives (which Tevere representatives explain with the alleged religious nature of most Islamic organizations in Italy, while Istituto Tevere very proudly claims the label of secular organization).

Although it is not its main focus, the organization also works with Turkish, Turkic and Albanian students, by organizing fundraising for grants and courses of introduction to the Italian culture.

I had the opportunity to visit the headquarters of the organization (in Lungotevere, one of the finest parts of the center of Rome) twice between 2013 and 2014, once as an invited speaker, the other to carry out interviews. Istituto Tevere's public activities usually took place in a squared room with a very warm environment, with carpets and fine pieces of Turkish art and calligraphy; the guests sat on sofas and seats all around the walls, evidently set up to make the room look like a parlor rather than a conference room.

The organization, according to its president, was and is entirely based on voluntary work (at the time of my visits, the staff included the president, a female secretary and other voluntary assistants, mainly students, both male and female). Its funding, also because of the very small number of Turkish immigrants in Rome, was based on donations from Italian, German and Turkish Gülen entrepreneurs, which were raised also thanks to the forum provided by the Turkish Confederation of Businessmen and Industrialists (Tuskon – an organization gathering most Gülen-inspired entrepreneurs and businessmen, closed by the Turkish government after the 2016 attempted coup). Despite the ongoing crisis, the Tevere institute seems to be the only Italian Gülen institution which has neither changed its headquarters nor downscaled its activities (although they maintain that a downsizing or a partial change of mission might be possible in the near future if the current crisis continues).

### ***The Organizations in Context***

In the earlier phases of my research, when I found out that there were several Gülen organizations in Italy, I asked my contacts about the reason for this proliferation. The answer was that they were related to independent projects, and funded by different groups of entrepreneurs and other people willing to be involved in the fields of interreligious dialogue and cultural exchange. This, as I found later, was part of a set of standard replies often released by people related to the movement to external observers, when asked about the structure of the movement, the organizations' funding and similar issues. This set of replies includes the following statements:

- 1) Gülen organizations are not religious, they are civil-society-based associations aiming at intercultural dialogue and promotion of the Turkish culture.
- 2) The different Gülen organizations in a country are not coordinated by anybody, but fully independent from each other.
- 3) The work of the people involved in the organizations and their activities are mainly voluntary, and the income of the people involved is based on other sources of revenue, not necessarily related to the movement.<sup>27</sup>
- 4) The organizations's funding is based on voluntary donations of entrepreneurs for specific projects proposed by the organizations.

As a whole, therefore, the image of the Gülen movement that its members tried to convey is that of a very spontaneous, non coordinated and non hierarchical effort. As my research went on, however, I found out that this picture was only partly true, especially in terms of coordination between the organizations. For example, although I had been told by reliable sources that the activity of the movement in each country was coordinated by a national chairman, my Italian interviewees, as mentioned above, rejected that claim. However, as I became more acquainted with the movement and its people, especially during the organization of a conference in my university on Transnational Religious Movements, Dialogue and Development (with a main focus on Gülen in comparative perspective),<sup>28</sup> they became more open with me. So, in spring 2014 I was invited to a 'Turkish holiday' held in Rolo, near Modena, where some dozens people (including many families) belonging to the movement from different parts of Italy met every year. There, I was introduced to the Gülen coordinator for Italy, a medical doctor who had recently relocated to Italy from another European country. When I raised the issue of their past statements about the organizations' independence, they stated that he had been recently called by the organizations themselves, in order to get a better coordination among themselves.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> In the case of the Director of the Turin branch of Alba, however, I received a different answer, since he declared to be paid for his work in the organization.

<sup>28</sup> In the interest of full disclosure, the author must declare that, although the academic program of the conference was entirely funded by academic institutions and independent foundations not related to the Gülen movement, a dinner and a music exhibition organized *a latere* to the conference were organized by the Istituto Tevere. The conference sponsors can be found at the page <http://turin-rel.blogspot.it/p/sponsors.html>.

<sup>29</sup> He was evidently a recent immigrant in Italy, and didn't even speak Italian, so I have no reason to refute that claim.



Another point that convinced me that the organizations were indeed well integrated and coordinated were, moreover, the exchanges of people among them. The most striking example of this was my first Gülen contact in Italy, a young male graduate who in 2011 was the chair of the Turin branch of Alba. In the following years he moved to Rome, where he worked for some months at the Istituto Tevere, and finally to Venice, where he became chair of the local branch of Milad. This kind of relocation, as I found out, was not unusual, and also involved some of the younger undergraduates involved in the organizations.

Of course, the Gülen organizations are not only coordinated with each other but also well integrated in the global network of the movement: which was also crucial in terms of funding, since – according to my interviewees – all the funds not provided by the local entrepreneurs directly involved in the Italian organizations were provided by Turkish entrepreneurs from the homeland and from other European countries. They also told me that the Italian organizations were particularly well related to sisters organizations in Turkey, which helped them in fundraising and in the organization of events such as intercultural travels. When I became more acquainted with the movement, I also found out that within it there are also transnational informal networks of people sharing a similar orientation. For example, during the 2015 conference in Turin, it became quite clear to me that for my Gülen contacts the event had not a sheer academic value, but it was also an opportunity for people belonging to the ‘progressive’ wing of the movement to meet and to discuss the choices to make face to face the worsening situation in Turkey. This particular was later openly admitted by the chair of one of the Italian organizations.

As a whole, my observations and experiences seem to confirm the theses about the ‘concentric circles’ structure of the movement proposed by students of the Gülen movement such as by Berna Turam and Joshua Hendrick (this latter, for example, singles out four concentric circles that exist as ‘an ambiguous organization of graduated affiliation’ to Gülen: the *cemaat* (or inner core), *arkadaşlar* (friends), *yandaşlar* (sympathisers), and, finally, the outer ring of ‘unaware consumers’<sup>30</sup>. On the one hand, the image that the movement members try to convey (summarized by the four points sketched above) is quite standardized; on the other, once the observer is accepted as a ‘friend’, he/she starts to perceive different layers of organization, meaning and relations which do not necessarily contradict the former image, but surely nuance and enrich it. As highlighted by Turam, among the activities of the movement we can find some events (the dinners, the workshops,

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<sup>30</sup> Joshua D. Hendrick, *Gülen: The Ambiguous Politics of Market Islam in Turkey and the World* (New York: NYU Press, 2013), p. 122; Turam, *Between Islam and the State*.

etc.) which are quintessentially public, and marked by a more relaxed moral code, in opposition to the ‘private’ sphere represented by the meetings between members (*sohbet*) and the other activities involving those belonging to the inner circles.<sup>31</sup> According to the critics of the movement, this layered structure allegedly reveals an ‘hidden agenda’ and a ‘double face’ of the movement,<sup>32</sup> , while according to Turam, it simply reveals a concentric circles structure, with ‘different levels of front and back stages in the movement’.<sup>33</sup>

The gender issue, which will be specifically analyzed in the next paragraph is probably the most striking evidence of this multileveled structure.

### ***The Gender Issue***

The problem of gender unbalance has been highlighted by many students of the Gülen movement as one of the critical sides of a movement traditionally portrayed by many – even in the Turkish secular intelligentsia – as an alleged example of ‘enlightened’ Islam.<sup>34</sup> Broadly speaking, this issue is not only a problem of the Gülen movement, but involves a wider scholarly discussion about the role of women in Islamist and Islamic-oriented movements since the 1970s. Indeed, despite the conservative and often patriarchal worldview of such movements, in Turkey and abroad, and the usual male dominance within them, scholars have highlighted the massive female involvement, and the crucial role played by women in the rise of Islamic movements and parties (for example for the success of the Turkish Welfare Party in the 1980s and 1990s and, today, of the AKP). This circumstance also involves paradoxical consequences, with women often performing roles

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<sup>31</sup>Turam, *Between Islam and the State*; Bruinessen, ‘The Netherlands and the Gülen Movement.’

<sup>32</sup> David Tittensor, ‘The Gülen Movement and the Case of a Secret Agenda: Putting the Debate in Perspective,’ *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations*, 23:2 (2012), pp. 163–79.

<sup>33</sup>Turam, *Between Islam and the State*, pp. 59–63.

<sup>34</sup> Turam, *Between Islam and the State*; Sophia Pandya, ‘Creating Peace on Earth through Hicret: Female Gülen Followers in America,’ in Pandya and Gallagher (Eds.), *The Gülen Hizmet Movement*, pp. 97–116; Fran Hassencahl, ‘Framing Women’s Issues in The Fountain Magazine,’ in Pandya and Gallagher (Eds.), *The Gülen Hizmet Movement*, pp. 117–32.

previously limited to men, adopting new kinds of behavior, and relating to different, religious and non religious, actors, while officially adopting a conservative ideology about gender roles.<sup>35</sup>

The perception of this problem was very evident also in the words of some of the Gülen representatives in Italy, who declared to be aware of the urgency of the issue, but put the blame on the patriarchal legacy of traditional Turkish culture, rather than the ideology of the movement itself. When asked if they would accept a woman leading a Gülen organization, they responded affirmatively, and cited as a positive example the case of Austria, where the public face of the movement is a woman.

The answers of my interviewees took an interesting turn in the case of some young women involved in the activities of the organizations whom I had the opportunity to interview at the meeting in Rolo. On the one hand, they echoed the official position also expressed by the leaders of the organizations in terms of desirability of gender balance. However, when asked about their personal experience, although claiming that they felt not subordinate to men and that they planned to keep working also after marriage, they did not express any complaint about the predominance of men in Gülen organizations. On the contrary, one of them even signified its support for a division of labor between genders, claiming that in her opinion men were more suitable for directive roles.

My observations during Gülen events also clearly showed this division of labor, with men usually leading the organizations (all the Italian organizations representatives I came into contact with were indeed men: the national coordinator, the presidents of the associations, and the representatives of the local branches), while on the other hand, women usually served as secretaries and in other voluntary non directive posts. The same happened during the public events, when male Gülen members usually welcomed and introduced the guests and speakers, while women often served refreshments after the events. This, however, was not the rule, since in some cases women performed an active role in events, by introducing speakers, or reciting a short prayer before an iftar dinner. Moreover, there seemed to be no restriction on contacts between female members of the

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<sup>35</sup> Turam, *Between Islam and the State*; Jenny White, *Islamist Mobilization in Turkey: A Study in Vernacular Politics* (Seattle/London: University of Washington Press, 2002); Yeşim Arat, *Rethinking Islam and Liberal Democracy: Islamist Women in Turkish Politics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005); Hilal Ozcetin, ‘‘Breaking the Silence’’: The Religious Muslim Women’s Movement in Turkey’, *Journal of International Women’s Studies*, 11:1 (2013), pp. 106-119; Hürcan Aslı Aksoy, ‘Invigorating Democracy in Turkey: The Agency of Organized Islamist Women’, *Politics & Gender*, 11:1 (2015), pp. 146-170; Ayşe Gunes Ayata and Fatma Tütüncü, ‘Party Politics of the AKP (2002–2007) and the Predicaments of Women at the Intersection of the Westernist, Islamist and Feminist Discourses in Turkey’, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 35:3 (2008), pp. 363-384;

movement who attended the events (usually young students) and – both female and male – outsiders. In terms of dressing code, the Gülen-affiliated women I met were usually veiled, wearing a headscarf (*başörtüsü*), and a long colored robe (*pardesi*) – or, alternatively, large trousers and a coat – completely hiding their bodies except the face and the hands; however, in some cases, I also witnessed the presence of unveiled Turkish women.

As a whole, my impression was that the Gülen institutions in Italy were trying to strike a very delicate balance, trying to enhance the role of women (probably partly as a genuine effort, and partly in the attempt to dispel preconceptions about Islam and Turkish culture), while at the same time not entirely subverting a ‘traditional’ view of gender roles: a process which is probably bound to become more and more critical with the current phase of globalization and decentralization of the movement and its implantation in different social and cultural contexts.

### ***The Crackdown in Turkey and its Impact on Italian Gülen Organizations***

The Gülen members I met in Italy and abroad had always claimed that the movement and its organizations were apolitical. Insofar I have been able to verify, this appeared to be true in the Italian context, where the members of the movement didn’t appear to be looking for privileged relations with specific local political institutions and parties (except, in the case of the most community-oriented organizations, such as Milad Modena, to carry out projects targeted at the Turkish diaspora community). It was also true that in the late 2000s my interlocutors usually made no reference to Turkish politics, and the movement’s alliance with the AKP government. At the time, before the current crisis, the movement was not widely known in Italy. So, the Italian media also mostly neglected it and, when they mentioned it, they portrayed the movement as an example of ‘progressive’, enlightened Islamic movement. Scholars and analysts working on Turkey – with the exception of some with a very secularist worldview – also mostly took for granted the apolitical nature of the movement.

However, the situation changed when the Turkish government started to turn a cold shoulder on the movement and, particularly after 2013, started to crackdown on Gülen’s followers and activities. The members of the movement in Italy began thus to complain about the Turkish government and its leaders both in private conversations and on social media, with frequent condemnations of the alleged anti-democratic policies carried out by the Turkish administration. Leaders of the local organizations also complained about changes in their relations with the Turkish diplomatic representations in Italy and the Holy See, whose behavior had allegedly become less cooperative when not explicitly hostile towards their institutions: for example, according to some of my interviewees, Turkish diplomats started pressuring other countries’ colleagues for them to cancel

invitations to representatives of the Gülen movement to official events. At the same time, the Italian media started to mention the movement more frequently (but still often with very little knowledge of facts), depicting it as a political organization opposing Erdogan's authoritarian turn, or sometimes (following the Turkish government's version) as a dangerous extremist Islamic group. Academicians and other observers of Turkish affairs also started to cover more critically the movement and its activities at home and abroad. All these trends have become more intense after the 2016 attempted coup, that according to the Turkish government was allegedly masterminded by Gülen (a circumstance denied, however, by Gülen himself and his followers). In any case, the event, and the harsh crackdown on the movement in Turkey following it, have had deep consequences on the Italian branches of the movement and its members.

When asked about the indirect impact of the crackdown on their organizations, the Gülen representatives in Italy were quite open in admitting that the feud between the movement and the Turkish government has further worsened a situation already worrying as a consequence of the economic crisis. On the one hand, as already mentioned above, the flow of resources from the homeland has significantly downsized, mainly because enterprises which were traditionally controlled by the movement are currently being taken over by the government or forcibly shut down. Moreover, the funds from Gülen-inspired entrepreneurs in Europe and other areas are currently used mainly to help members of the movement who have fled Turkey or are still living in the country without a job and being denied a visa. This shortage of funds is clearly shown by the decrease in the number of Gülen institutions, which has very severely affected, particularly, Alba: when I first got in contact with the movement, the organization had four branches, in Milan, Como, Imperia and Turin, and was making plans to further upgrade their activities (for example, in 2013-4 the organization's representatives in Turin talked about the idea to open a new headquarter closer to the city center). Now, the offices have all been closed, and although the organization still exists in Milan, it has closed even the small office it has maintained for a while after leaving its previous headquarters. On the other hand, Milad has turned its headquarter in Modena into a shelter for foreign refugees, through an agreement with an Italian NGO. According to my interviewees, the organizations have also been affected by a shortage of people involved, with many members (especially those belonging to the outer circles, who attended Gülen events only occasionally) distancing themselves from the movement since the start of the feud with the Turkish government and the crackdown on the movement. The Gülen representatives in Italy also lament a pro-Erdoganist orientation among many non-Turkish Muslims living in Italy, which has further worsened the movement's intra-religious relations with other Islamic diaspora groups, which were already not always good. We have noted above that the tensions are particularly strong in contexts

marked by a sizeable Turkish community, such as Modena, where the movement's headquarters have even been targeted by an arson attack.

This downsizing of the movement has apparently spared the Istituto Tevere, which is currently still quite active in terms of events (both intercultural and interreligious events, and academic lectures), and has virtually become the public face of the movement in Italy. On the other hand, Alba has apparently cut its lectures program, which was quite significant until 2013,<sup>36</sup> to focus on rarer intercultural events which mainly take place in proximity of Christian or Muslim holidays such as Christmas and Ramadan, while Milad's program is still more lively, but as usual mainly focused on local intercultural events about Turkish culture, kitchen and music.

## **Conclusions**

As shown above, in the mid-2000s the Gülen movement has put into place an ambitious plan of growth in Italy which was even disproportionate to the real Turkish presence in the country. It is also quite remarkable that the organizations – although often within a quite predictable repertoire of activities – have shown a high degree of adaptability, with the Tevere Institute and Milad (Venice) mainly acting as academic institutions focused on interreligious and intercultural dialogue, Milad (Modena) working as a community-oriented organization focused on the well being and the integration of the local Turkish community, and Alba acting as a mix of the two models.

On the other hand, in the past five years the movement in Italy has clearly entered a phase of downsizing, with the Istituto Tevere emerging as the only national dialogue organization, while Alba has apparently scaled down to a mainly local profile – a dimension which Milad has instead pursued from the beginning – focused on small-scale dialogue events and education projects. This is partly explained by the organizations' representatives with the exodus of many Turkish immigrants back to the homeland (which was portrayed by my interviewees as a general trend among Turkish immigrants, not specifically related to the Gülen movement),<sup>37</sup> but also, more importantly, with the dwindling inflow of resources from the homeland as a consequence of the rift with the Turkish government. As shown above, the organizations have also been more directly hit by the current

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<sup>36</sup> See: <http://www.albassoc.org/relatori/>.

<sup>37</sup> An exodus which is only partly confirmed by the numbers, since Turkish nationals have indeed slightly decreased in the regions where Alba and Milad are based, but they have increased in other regions, with the overall figure substantially stable in the past five years ([http://dati.istat.it/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=DCIS\\_POPSTRCIT1](http://dati.istat.it/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=DCIS_POPSTRCIT1)).

crisis in Turkey, especially in contexts (such as Modena) where a sizeable immigrant Turkish community exists.

This problematic situation seems to imply some relevant consequences for the Gülen movement in Italy:

- First, they cannot rely anymore on a significant inflow of resources from the homeland. As a consequence, the Gülen organizations located in a country without a sizeable Turkish community, such as Italy, will have to downsize, or to rely on funds from western European entrepreneurial networks or utterly new sources.
- Secondly, since – at least in the current situation – the organizations are becoming increasingly alienated from the bulk of the Turkish immigrant community (and, apparently, also from the bulk of the larger Muslim community), they'll have to rely more and more on their ties with the broader Italian and European society: which will also imply a change in their focus, their practices and their aims. In turn, this will also imply other adjustments, for example in terms of gender balance (by giving more prominence to women in the organizations' charts and in public events and by making more blurred the gendered division of labour within the movement) to make the movement more compatible with the broader European civil society and more appealing to the public opinion, and to contrast the conservative social policies enacted in the recent years by the Turkish government.
- Finally, again as a consequence of the current Turkish situation, the pretence to be apolitical that the Gülen movement has traditionally carried out is becoming very hard to maintain: both because of the current alliance between the movement and other sectors of Turkish opposition, such as part of the political left; and because of the need to find allies within western societies. Particularly, the accusations against Fethullah Gülen to be the mastermind of the July 2016 attempted coup have changed the image the movement in the eyes of many western observers, from that of an apolitical religiously-oriented organization focused on dialogue to that of Erdogan's political opponent: which might entail a new set of political opportunities as well as problems for the movement and its development outside Turkey.

In sum, what the analysis of the Italian case clearly shows is the fact that the movement has entered an utterly new phase of its life, marked by very hard challenges to its very existence, but also, probably, by opportunities to create new ties and also a partly new identity. The Gülen movement has already shown in the past a high degree of adaptability, from the repression in the early 1990s to the honeymoon with the Erdogan government in the mid-2000s. Therefore, it is very likely that it will be able to change again its features in the coming years, although the direction of that change is

yet not entirely clear. Surely, if Turkey's current government and its policies toward the movement will not change in the coming years, the movement will be further seriously downsized, and it will probably manage to survive only in those countries which do not get along well with the Turkish government, and where a fabric of friendly Turkish diaspora entrepreneurs still exists. It is also very likely that the number of its institutions will be drastically cut, to convey resources on those organizations which will be regarded as strategical for the aims of the movement. These latter will probably also become more and more political, and develop ties with other diaspora groups opposing Erdogan, and with the European governments maintaining more critical stances towards the policies currently carried out by the Turkish government.