

# Desecuritisation through Hermeneutic Dialogue: the Gülen Movement in Turkey

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This paper examines the dialogue activities of the Hizmet or Gülen Movement (GM)<sup>1</sup> through the lenses of securitisation theory and Gadamer's 'hermeneutic dialogue'. As the theoretical framework of the study, we have adopted the concepts of 'hermeneutic dialogue' and 'desecuritisation' in tandem with one another as non-violent means of conflict resolution.

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Keywords: Desecuritisation, Hermeneutic dialogue, Resecuritisation, Minorities, Gülen Movement.

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- 1 The Hizmet or Gülen Movement, which began in Turkey as early as the 1970s, is an international civic movement with educational, charitable, and dialogue initiatives across the globe (Çetin 2010). Yavuz regards the Hizmet Movement as the biggest and most far-reaching civic movement in Turkey (Yavuz 2003:132). In parallel with this understanding, regarding its role in social issues in Turkey, Koç states that due to its size and influence, the Hizmet Movement had become an actor not only in the Kurdish conflict, but in social and political matters in contemporary Turkey until 2016. It had engaged in every level of social life in Turkish society (Koç 2013:181). Sociologist Helen R. Ebaugh, (2010) in one of her interviews, states that 'it is one of the largest and most influential social movements not only in Turkey, but probably in Muslim countries in general' (cited in Koç 2013:132). In discussing the objective of Hizmet and Gülen's works, Wanda Krause argues that 'the movement have aimed to mend the tensions and fissures specifically along racial and ideological lines on both practical and theoretical levels that are emerging in the globalizing world' (Krause 2007).

There are various other opinions on the movement, ranging from the objective to the biased. Some read the Movement as a missionary movement with an 'hidden Islamist' agenda and with the aim of disseminating Islam to the globe (Balçı 2003) or ultimately aiming to create an Islamic state in Turkey (Sharon-Krespin 2009; Turam 2006). Contrary to this view, for some Islamists the movement is 'too liberal,' 'too soft' (Akyol 2011: 216). While for yet others Hizmet is a Sufi sect which has modernised its methods to fit the contemporary context, without the master-disciple relationship and centralisation (Mandaville 2007).

Among this diversity of views on Hizmet, Pew research rightly argues that Hizmet does not easily fit into any given category and classification of current movements, particularly

The paper argues that dialogue activities as exhibited by the followers of the Hizmet Movement have created an environment for '*hermeneutic dialogue*' and facilitated the desecuritisation of securitised identities and of the cultures of minorities in Turkey. This discussion will help to examine the limits of the ability of a civic body to remain civic and hopes to contribute to the normalisation of minority identities in countries like Turkey, where there is an on-going struggle between democracy and autocracy.

This is a belated article. Its research materials were collected in the summer of 2013<sup>2</sup> and the paper itself was written in 2014. However, unexpected developments and the securitisation of the movement by the state (Demir 2014) required this research to be put on hold. Then in the summer of 2016 a coup attempt was staged by some rogue elements within the Turkish army and thwarted. However, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan accused the Movement of masterminding the coup attempt, confiscated all its assets and operations in Turkey and arrested anyone explicitly or allegedly affiliated with the movement. According to many observers, this has been an excuse for the Erdogan regime to cleanse the state and bureaucracy of any opposition and establish its own cadres within the state and economic sphere (Jacinto 2017; BBC 2017).

This article sees a need to separate bureaucratic extension, which refers to members of Hizmet within the bureaucracy and state machinery – nowadays dubbed 'the parallel state' by those who detest the movement – from the *civilian Hizmet*. As for the former, it is hard to monitor its activities and collect empirical data. In relation to this bureaucratic aspect, the movement has been criticised even by its own sympathisers for being nationalist and statist (Gurbuz 2015; Istanbul Enstitüsü 2014; Dönmez 2018). Civil or *civilian Hizmet* has been the subject of many studies (Ebaugh 2009; Ergene 2011; Yavuz 2013; Tittensor 2014 and Lacey 2014). Its bureaucratic extension has also become the subject of a number of studies that have scrutinised it from a critical angle. However, the major difference between the two is that the latter has always lacked empirical data (Dalay 2014). This is especially evident in those works that came out after the July 2016 coup attempt (Aydintasbas 2016; Yavuz 2016).

This separation is important and meaningful especially since the 2016 failed coup attempt in Turkey. Some argue that the dialogue activities of the movement in Turkey

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in the Muslim world (Pew Forum on Religion). All in all, the aspect of the Movement we observed is a societal movement, a network of educational and dialogue institutions spread across the world and inspired by the Islamic Sufi tradition which embraces all humanity.

- 2 We would like to express our heartfelt gratitude to Rev. Father David Wiseman who made the trip possible.

have been a cover for its ‘infiltration’ into the state and ‘illegal’ activities ‘within’ the state (Aydintasbas 2016; Yavuz 2016). This paper is not about examining the credibility of these arguments. We refer this discussion to relevant works carried out by those experts on the ‘exclusive’ political context of Turkish politics and the state structure (Park 2016; Phillips 2017; Jenkins 2016). However, we argue that even though some ‘within’ the movement might have used the credit of Hizmet to cover such ‘wrongdoing’, it would be unfair to accuse millions of Hizmet followers in many countries and their ‘good practices’ of being a cover for such activities. This feels especially true after observing the case of this article, located in the dialogue activities of the movement in southeast Turkey (2013).

It can also be argued that through this bureaucratic extension the nationalist mindset of the Turkish state might have infiltrated the strategic mindset of the movement and might have led to some actions that contradict the movement’s teachings and its empirically observable *raison d’être*. Some even argue that it was not the movement but the ‘state [that] infiltrated into the movement’ (cited in Dönmez and Ahval 2018). This point of Erol Mutercimler, ex-naval officer and currently columnist, is worth highlighting.

As an answer to the question of why the state has not kept its operations against the movement limited to its bureaucratic aspect but extended them to civil activities, our insight is that the ‘normalisation’ of minorities and recognising and celebrating ‘pluralism’ has never been seen as something desirable by the Republic of Turkey but they are seen as a threat to the ‘unity’ of the state and homogeneity of the nation. After a short period of desecuritisation of Turkish politics in the first decade of the twenty-first century, now we witness, as Caman (2019) puts it, the ‘re-securitization of Turkish politics’. Since the beginning of the second decade of the twenty-first century we have observed a return to the ‘factory settings’ of the Republic. Within this context, dialogue spaces have been targeted and not only minorities but also any effort to normalise minorities have again been seen as a ‘threat’ to the ‘national’ unity of and the sanctity of the state. Therefore, any movement contributing to the normalisation of minorities or enhancing freedoms, if acting out of the control of the Turkish state machinery, could be seen as a threat and, by all relevant channels of the state, would be dragged into the realm of security.<sup>3</sup> In other words, they would

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3 In this period of resecuritisation many human rights activists/philanthropists protesting for freedoms and against state oppression such as Idil Eser and Taner Kilinc of Amnesty, and Osman Kavala have been jailed (<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/02/turkey-outlandish-charges-against-osman-kavala-and-15-others-must-be-dropped/>). NGOs like Open Society are forced to cease their operations in Turkey <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2018/nov/26/george-soross-open-society-foundation-to-pull-out-of-turkey>.

be *securitised*. This shows that in Turkey the 'success' of any civic movement in terms of its contribution to social harmony depends on its [hierarchical] relations with the state apparatus.

## Securitisation and Desecuritisation

In the theory of securitisation, 'security' is seen not as an objective condition but as a 'fruit' of a social process (William 2003). In other words, from a constructivist perspective, it is a 'created reality' within the 'right' context, as it is 'context specific'. Therefore, threats to security are socially constructed as well. Security is a kind of negotiation between the ruling elite and people, the audience. In some cases, it might be seen as a fruit of 'social engineering'. This means that some elements, personalities, or developments might be deliberately constructed or labelled as a threat by the power holders, or, as in our case, generally by the state elite to claim the right to implement unusual extraordinary measures. In the words of Waver, 'a state representative moves a particular development into a specific area, and thereby claims a special right to use whatever means are necessary to block it' (Waver 1995:55). To put it differently, these groups can construct fear towards particular issues or groups for several reasons: for example, in order to enforce some emergency measures on migrants, relevant actors might indicate that immigration is a threat to some important object that needs to be secured (the referent object) such as the economy (Huysman 1995; 2000).

According to Buzan (Buzan et al. 1998:33), securitisation is framing/labelling something as a threat and then utilising a 'speech act' to prioritise the issue over other matters. Generally, the object that is securitised poses a threat to the 'survival' of the referent object, mainly the state. Thus, the threat has been regarded as 'existential.' Therefore, all measures are to ensure 'survival.'

In some other cases, the identity of certain groups (Williams & Michael 2003), environmental issues, some religious matters might be 'securitised' as well. Interestingly, as an act of securitisation, 'speech' is pointed out, with reference to the 'speech act', borrowing from the language theory of Austin (Buzan et al. 1998:25). The speech itself is seen as an 'act'. Related to this, Matt McDonald points out that here 'speech acts are conceived as a form of representation that don't simply depict a preference or view of an external reality. A parallel illustration here would be that of a marriage, in which saying 'I do' at a particular moment and context creates the marriage itself, bringing it into being.' In parallel with this interesting analogy, according to the Abrahamic religions, God/Allah/Jehovah created the world with the power of a 'speech act', by uttering the expression 'let there be light' (Genesis, OT) or 'let it be!' (Qur'an). However, some level their criticism at Austin for seeing security as merely a 'speech act' and aside from speech act suggest observing televisual images and other materials as well (Williams & Michael 2003).

The concept of *desecuritisation* is the reversed process of securitisation, which is to remove the perceived threat of an already securitised issue. It means the normalisation of materials that are perceived as a threat. The freedom of speech and televisual images are seen as a means of *desecuritisation* as well. For some, visuals have even more influence than words to shape the perception of the audience. For example, John Berger (1972: 1) argues that 'seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognises before it can speak'. In line with Berger, Fyfe and Law (1988: 2) suggest that 'human beings come to know the world as it really is for them' via 'depiction, picturing and seeing'. When we look at the application and aims of 'dialogue activities', their aim is either to prevent unfair securitisation of certain groups or to desecuritize already unfairly securitised groups in the eyes of the relevant audience. We accept that the term 'unfair' is problematic, however instead of attempting to define it, we will look at particular cases.

The term dialogue, which is used within the Hizmet or Gülen Movement, corresponds to the phrase 'desecuritisation' in terms of its results. Dialogue is defined as a process of different social parties coming together and the term is distinguished from debate and discussion as it does not have the aim to promise or offer any solution to a problem. Instead, it dignifies and puts stress on the efforts of both sides of the conflict/problem to 'listen with empathy' in an atmosphere where each side has equal status (Yankelovich 1999: 41). According to Yankelovich, there are a number of prerequisites for constructive dialogue, namely listening with empathy, including those who disagree in the dialogic process, and equality among the participants (Sleep and Sener 2013). In a process of dialogue there are no hierarchical relations between the sides, as the function of the organiser is only to be a platform, which brings the different sides together in a 'space for dialogue', in which power should be ideally diffused for each side to be able to speak about important sensitive issues hold as matter of security.

Dialogue and 'desecuritisation' are tools of non-violent conflict resolution: a non-violent approach to conflict resolution in the Gülen movement is embodied in [hermeneutic] dialogue and desecuritisation. Gülen and the Movement utilise speech acts and visual images to non-violently solve social problems which could result in violent conflict, or, as in the case of recent developments, has already resulted in violent conflict in the Turkish state's dealing with the Kurdish question. To put it differently, the movement instrumentalises *desecuritisation* as a means to conflict resolution. 'Dialogue' is one of the words most associated with the Gülen Movement as an international civic movement. The term has specific meanings within particular contexts and usages. However, when we look at the dialogue practices of the movement, particularly in Turkey, we see the platforms or environments created by the movement are well suited to 'hermeneutic' dialogic engagement and they also

facilitate desecuritisation. This is especially evident in issues related to minorities in deeply divided societies. The events organised by the movement help those securitised (meaning labelled as a threat) groups, particularly minority groups to be normalised in the eyes of the hosting or dominant groups. In the words of a Christian priest: 'being in the same photo with them [Hizmet's dialogue volunteers] is changing our image in the mind of millions in Turkey' (Mersin Interview).

### ***Hermeneutic Dialogue as a Tool of Desecuritisation***

The roots of many conflicts lie in history and tradition, which are constructed by the 'texts' that inform the understanding of their participants and construct deep rooted animosities.

Oliver Ramsbotham, a well-known name in the literature of conflict resolution, views 'dialogue' as a key means of conflict resolution and peace building. Ramsbotham looks at Gadamer's thoughts and philosophy and attempts to convert his ideas and concepts into tools for conflict management and resolution.

We are already part of a history that shapes us (*Wirkungsgeschichte*), and all our interpretations take place in language within which – however 'forgetful' we may usually be about this – our own socially conditioned being is already constituted. Understanding is relational. We don't discover truth from outside as individual investigators. It reveals itself from within as we encounter each other in dialogue (Ramsbotham 2015:141)

Ramsbotham particularly focuses on the concept of 'hermeneutic dialogue'. He underlines that in Gadamer's work 'hermeneutics' means 'conversation between interpreter and text'. By text we mean any written, spoken or symbiotic discourses dominating and shaping the meaning of our fore-understandings. He underlines three key points of Gadamer's work to understand 'hermeneutic dialogue'. These are 'prejudice,' 'horizon,' and 'question.'

'Prejudice' is 'the fore-understanding that we already bring with us as interpreters [...]' as 'we are immersed in history and tradition.' 'Horizon' is about the perception or interpretation informed by the 'prejudice,' which is in many cases limited and 'beyond which it is impossible to see'. When it comes to 'question,' it appears when 'we are pulled up short by a text, or another that stands against us and asserts its own rights against our proto-assumptions and interests'. Gadamer puts this as 'the first condition of hermeneutics' (Gadamer 2003: 299). Going beyond this horizon enlightened by our 'prejudices,' requires participating in the process of 'questioning,' which is 'dialectic.' In Gadamer's words 'dialectic' is 'the art of conducting real conversation' (Gadamer 2003: 366).

It is hoped that this hermeneutic dialogue will lead to *understanding* through a ‘fusion of horizons’ that will first put its participants in an atmosphere ‘between strangeness and familiarity’ and then elevate the sides of the conflict to see beyond and come up with a new narrative which challenges the texts or official narratives feeding conflicts to hand down from generation to generation to resolve the conflict. This shows that, if provided, the environment allows participants from different sides to ‘question’ and a dialogic encounter opens the doors for ‘hermeneutic dialogue’. In this article, we argue that the environment provided by these dialogue organisations was opening the doors of ‘hermeneutic dialogue’ for those taking part. However, one of the other conditions of this is that all participants need to accept that their understandings are ‘dominated’/informed by ‘prejudices’ as Gadamer underlines: ‘a person who does not admit that he is dominated by prejudices will fail to see what manifests itself by their light’ (Gadamer 2003: 360).

And even in the long run we see the potential for allowing a fusion of horizons, which may be seen in future generations to come. This is because as Ramsbotham highlighted, ‘human understanding in its deepest workings is best seen as a fusion of horizons mediated in and through language’. A good example of this is the European Union (EU) project and conflicts between Germans and French people. The dialogue attempts gave birth to the EU project, which allowed Germans and French people to ‘question’ their ‘prejudices’ and fuse their horizons and come up with a new narrative, a new European identity.

## **Background of the Securitised Context: Turkey**

In the case of Turkey, the existence of ethnic minorities has been denied and they have been forced to assimilate their differences into the Turkish culture by agents of the state. To ensure this, images of difference were constructed as a threat to the unity of the state in the eyes of the people. When it comes to the religious minorities, they have always been approached with suspicion and seen as ‘collaborators’ of exogenous powers. The first decade of the twenty-first century saw the emergence of a new narrative about minorities under the reformist AKP government from 2002 to 2013. However, this trend has changed and the following years have witnessed a return to the old policy of securitisation of minority identities.

In 1920, the Ottoman Empire was defeated and forced to sign the Treaty of Sevres, marking the end of the First World War. The treaty envisioned a dismembered and smaller state for the Ottomans. It presumed an independent state on the basis of ethnicity and identity on the multi-ethnic and multi-faith land of the Empire. Thus, in the minds of the elites, the treaty contained the hidden agenda of the West to dismember the ‘Turkish land’ (Sevres Syndrome).

After the War of Independence under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal, the Republic of Turkey was founded on the principle of a modern, secular nation state from the ashes of a multinational polity, the Ottoman Empire. The treaty of Lausanne was signed in July 1923, replacing the Treaty of Sevres. This treaty, unlike Sevres, did not envisage any Kurdish state and recognised the National Pact Borders of Turkey (Misak-i Milliye Sınırları), excepting Mosul. It settled the borders of Turkey, except in areas of some minor uncertainties, such as Mosul and Antioch/Hatay (Oran 2004; Zurcher 2004; 2011; Lausanne, Section I: 2-11).

In all its strategic state-mind, traditionally Turkey has a very sceptical political culture. As Robins points out, Turks are distrustful of their adjacent countries (Robins 2003). It was easy to find reflections of this scepticism and lack of trust in daily life. There are common sayings in Turkish, such as 'Turkey is a country surrounded by the sea on three sides and by enemies on four sides'; 'There are no friends of Turks except Turks'. These expressions are the remnants of the 'Sevres Syndrome', which was used to explain the fear of being invaded by the neighbouring 'enemies' [external and internal] and being broken into pieces as predicted in the Treaty of Sevres, which never came into force (Kirişçi 2006; Park 2005). This metaphor reflects the state's traditional perspective on international relations and security culture. Turkey's 'neighbourhood policy' and its approach to its religious and ethnic minorities have been formed under the influence of this historical context.

The founding fathers of the Republic adopted the state structure, institutions and ideology of France as an 'ideal' model and embarked upon a homogenous nation-building process within the national borders. These founding fathers and their followers, called Kemalists, have seen socio-political pluralism as an existential threat to the state they have been building. They wanted to create a nation state which is reflected in the well-known state motto, 'Happy are those who say "I am a Turk."' Being a Turk was not enough for those who wanted to be happy: alongside being a Turk, one also had to be a Sunni Muslim, and a secular, non-practising one. Yilmaz has dubbed this typology 'Homo LASTus' and discussed the reason the secularising state also tried to socially engineer this religious (good) citizen identity in addition to the best citizen (see Yilmaz 2018). Those staying outside of this typology have been seen and constructed as a threat through different channels of official communication such as history text books.

From a critical perspective, the period witnessing the spread of the dialogue activities of the Hizmet Movement widely and visibly across to Anatolia corresponds with the reformist years of the governing AKP, from 2002 to 2013. In those years, the party passed many reformist policies to fulfil the Copenhagen Criteria of the EU, which strengthened democracy in Turkey. The government was also reforming the state and opening space for civil society in compliance with Turkey's EU accession process



and regulations. Some argue that these reforms were instrumentalised by the AKP to survive and stay in power. They presented a democratic image that also helped them to side-line the Kemalist military (Karaveli 2016; Hale and Ozbudun 2009; Dagi 2008).

However, Turkey's collapse into authoritarianism in recent years inevitably has also had direct bearing on domestic politics, which led to withdrawal from the EU accession process and reversal of the reformist approaches towards minorities. Since the Gezi Protest in 2013, and especially after the thwarted coup attempt of July 2016, religious minorities have been re-securitized and are being referred to as responsible for any malignancy and negative developments from the economy to security. In other words, the old narratives about religious minorities re being re-employed (Smith, Sage and Charter 2018). However, since 2011, with the changing internal power structure and regional and global developments, the AKP under Erdogan has established its own reign as the new sovereign – dubbed by Yilmaz and Bashirov (2018) 'Erdoganism'. Since any critical voice has been securitized, this was observable in the Gezi Park Protest in 2013. Minorities have been scapegoated again and pictured as 'collaborators', 'traitors' and any opposition or critic is accused of being affiliated with them. There have been many TV programmes on pro-government media outlets presenting influential opposition figures' family trees either as descending from an Armenian or any other ethnic or religious group. The names of these ethnicities and faith groups have been employed by the AKP government to demonise its political rivals and critics. The US State Department International Religious Freedom Report 2017 underlined that discrimination against religious minorities has intensified since the thwarted coup attempt in July 2016.

### ***Dialogue Between Faith Groups: Minorities in Turkey in Perspective***

Within this context, one of the most securitized issues has been the rights of minorities. Non-Muslims have been targeted as the collaborators and the Trojan horses of external enemies in official history (Anadol 1998; Baydar 2002; Biberyan 1966; Milas 1991; 1996; 2006). Muslims from ethnic minorities and their languages were perceived as a threat to the unity of the state and were also seen as a 'card' which can be used by external powers to manipulate and harm the Turkish state. They have been used as scapegoats in every negative issue. These depictions of minorities facilitated a negative image in the minds of the majority to normalise the use of extraordinary measures towards them.

In the early years of the Republic of Turkey, especially after 1925, some terms were securitized or constructed as existential threats for the sake of building a Western-style nation state. Ergil explains the ruling elite's mindset very well, as he argues that the elite assumed that being united entails being the same in terms of language, cultural

expressions, and religious conviction. Thus, the populace inherited from the Ottoman Empire were put through an assimilation process. The Ottoman State had a pluralist society of varying ethnicities, religions, sects, and languages. After the Turkish Republic was founded, minorities in Istanbul were given some cultural rights in the Lausanne Agreement, but some of them were subjected to the population exchange which was accepted in Lausanne; thus, they were excluded from the decision-making process. All the other fragments, which were left out of the definition of citizenship framed by the founding elite, their requests for recognition by the state, and their political demands were labelled as existential threats to the unity of the nation state. Furthermore, these claims were assessed in terms of national security.

Non-Muslim minorities in Turkey suffered greatly from the biased state approach and negative perceptions towards them. They were seen as traitors and co-conspirators of exogenous powers who want to 'weaken' Turkey. Because of this biased perception, they have suffered a lot in Republican history and even before, as a result of these sufferings, the majority of them had to leave for good. For instance, in Istanbul during the 1950s, they constructed stories about non-Muslims in general, and Greeks or the *Rum* in particular, which resulted in incidents of destruction and confiscation of shops and properties belonging to them in Istanbul. This was the case in the well-known 6-7 September incidents (*6-7 Eylül Olayları*) in 1955, when non-Muslims were deliberately chosen as scapegoats and their shops were ransacked in Taksim, Istanbul. Following this event, the majority of them had to leave (Benlisoy 2000).

Non-Muslim minorities have a centuries-long history in Asia Minor. The Ottoman State maintained its multicultural heritage by safeguarding the multi-ethnic and multi-religious composition of the peoples of Anatolia. The non-Muslim minorities were exempt from military service and were required to pay the poll tax. Although it could be argued that they were second-class citizens compared to the majority population, they were nonetheless free to maintain their distinct identities, maintaining their religious beliefs and practices, and living in autonomy (Oran 2004; Aktar 1997; 2006). However, when the Union and Progress Party came to power in 1908, this multicultural reality began to be ignored and a transformation from multiculturalism to a monocultural, 'monolithic' structure began. The Young Turks ('Les jeunes Turcs'/'Jön Türkler') were a nationalist movement which accommodated Armenian, Greek, Kurdish and Jewish intellectuals in its fold in the beginning. With the increasing impact of nationalism, the movement parted ways with the minorities. The Union and Progress Party orchestrated the deportation of approximately 1.5 million Armenians in 1915, causing most to perish, and left many uprooted from their homelands (Aktar 1997; 2006). The nascent Turkish Republic, led by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, inherited the nationalist stance of the Young Turks as their central ideology (Zurcher 2011).

In 1923, the population exchange between Turkey and Greece took place, during which about 1.5 million Greeks were deported to Greece and large numbers of Muslim Turks living in Greece were deported to Turkey. After these steps, the state also 'expropriated' the properties of non-Muslims, forcing them to leave Turkey, then applying a wealth tax to extort their money and properties during World War II (Aktar 1997).

These actions of the state, first under the Young Turks, then under the new Turkish Republic, largely securitised the remaining non-Muslim population in southeast Turkey and in Istanbul. However, there was a great impact too on the Turkish majority population, who came to view non-Muslims as a threat, which widened the gap between the majority and minority populations. Therefore, desecuritising the relations between the Muslim and non-Muslim segments of the population has remained necessary to normalise the relations between different parts of the society and to prevent any further social tension and fractions.

It may reasonably be claimed that the Turkish language still exhibits many examples of securitisation. For example, when we were children, many of us [Turkish or Turkified people's children] did not know that the word *Ermeni*, 'Armenian', is the name of a people because people would use the word to swear at someone. The Armenian, Rum (of Greek origin or Turkish Greeks) or even Arab ethnicities have been used interchangeably with the word *hain* (traitor). Ninety years since the war, this legacy is still alive and people with Armenian, Greek, and other non-Muslim origins are seen through the lens of suspicion, even to the point of being seen as *hain* (treacherous) and therefore discriminated against by the state. Thus, the majority of them have left the country while the remaining ones prefer to disguise their identities in public because of this misperception (Milas 1991; Aktar 1997). During our research trip, we were told lots of stories of how these people were discriminated against or treated badly. It is as if they inherited this label of *hain* by birth.

We think the existing and prevailing stories of non-Muslims in Turkey have been the main reasons for their being perceived as scapegoats and as a threat. Therefore, the way to change this perception would be telling [inventing] a new story away from previously told negative narratives.

## **Attempts at Desecuritising Minorities in 'Tents' for Hermeneutic Dialogue**

The Gülen movement, especially since the 1990s, has organised many events, creating spaces for hermeneutic dialogue and by positive representation of the 'other'. In this case we argue that the events were facilitating *normalisation* of the 'other', in our case, religious minorities. The movement has been active since the 1990s with a civic

organisation under the name of the Journalists and Writers Foundation (JWF or 'Gazeteciler ve Yazarlar Vakfı' in Turkish).<sup>4</sup> The foundation organised many semi-academic conferences and workshops addressing the issues related to pluralism, freedoms and human rights issues. Later, these meetings paved the way for the establishment of the Abant Platform<sup>5</sup> under the JWF to discuss social, political and economic problems of Turkey.

Issues discussed at Abant meetings, the participants' backgrounds, and their horizons in relation to the issues discussed – all these came together to create suitable environments for *hermeneutic dialogue*. In Uğur's words, 'intellectuals with sharply different ideological affiliations' were being invited to an intellectual retreat and they were discussing the issues not only during the panels in an academic context but also during breakfast, lunch and tea breaks in a friendly environment. The 'meetings have helped to soften the ideological tension and polarisation in the society' (see Uğur 2013:47). The declaration document, presented at the end of these two- or three-day meetings, demonstrated a degree of *fusion of horizons* on the issues discussed. These meetings became the background for many friendships between intellectuals from different ideological, religious and political camps. From this point, one can argue that *friendship* as a safe institution itself became the most important and effective tent of a *hermeneutic dialogue* and that Abant was the place for establishing such friendships between intellectuals representing different camps of Turkey's society.

We argue that these activities helped build environments that removed the barriers between groups and challenged the existing perceptions of enmity towards one another through *fusion of horizons*.

Alongside the Abant Platform, the Intercultural Dialogue Platform (IDP), as one of the six platforms under the JWF, has particularly focused on dialogue between religious groups and organised events, bringing members and representatives of these groups together. In its lifetime, the IDP organised six big events (in Urfa, Istanbul, Tbilisi, and Moscow) from 2000 to 2006 and many other small events. The Platform also opened many branches in cities like Mersin, Antioch/Hatay, Urfa, Antep and others. These meetings included: April 2000 in Urfa and May 2004 in Mardin:

4 The JWF was founded in 1994 with Fethullah Gülen as its honorary president and together with all its platforms ceased its operations after the July 2016 coup attempt.

5 The name of the *Abant* Platform comes from the name of a lake by which the first meetings were held, a place which has been used as the venue for several of the platform's events. Since its first meeting in 1998, there have been more than 20 meetings on issues such as Islam, democracy and secularism; minorities; the Kurdish question, etc. After July 2016, like all other affiliated organisations in Turkey, Abant and JWF had to cease their operations in Turkey.

*Harran Meetings: In the footsteps of our father Abraham, I and II*; in January 2004 and 2005 in Istanbul: *Peace Prayer, I and II, Common values of three Abrahamic Religions*; and many other similar activities aiming at bringing together representatives and members of the three Abrahamic religions dominating Anatolia. Having scrutinised its activities we argue that the IDP provided those groups and people with a proper atmosphere for a hermeneutic dialogue. The platform and all its branches together with the JWF ceased all its operations in Turkey after the July 2016 coup attempt.

Considering its loyalty to the state, with this approach, the movement should have worked with the conviction that the outcomes of these constructive dialogues would increase the 'sense of belonging' of ethnic and religious minorities to the country, in contrast with the traditional assimilationist policy of the state. However, there are critical works underlining that there were and are competing views within the movement, explained in the beginning of this article as *bureaucratic* versus *civil* (Dönmez 2018; Bacik 2018). While some see these activities as a cover or public relations work and subscribe to the state's mindset in relation to minority rights of some others, we believe the majority in the movement are strong believers in the pluralism, liberal ideas and minority rights that are in compliance with the religious interpretation of the Movement (Kurucan and Erol 2012).

## Historical Background to Dialogue Initiatives

The movement's activities in Turkey illustrate clear examples of its functioning as a *desecuritisier* or as a medium of *desecuritisizing* actors. In other words, the empirically observable activities of the movement facilitated restoring a positive image of minority groups that had been constructed as a threat to the 'unity of the state' within the historical context. The way to change this perception would be to tell a new story, away from the previously told negative narratives. Therefore, Hizmet's dialogue activities became salient in the 1990s for the purpose of reconciliation.

Firstly, Gülen engaged with the representatives of the Christian and Jewish communities in Turkey and visited Pope Jean Paul II in 1998. He met the Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew in 1996, and met with the highest representative of the Sephardic community in Turkey in 1999. After these efforts, 'tolerance dinners' were organised and representatives of minorities were invited to these gatherings. Therefore, Gülen inspired the dialogue initiatives with the minorities and he was the first practitioner of these initiatives himself. Thus, it can be said that he started the community's process of normalisation of the non-Muslim minorities by his own example and practice.

The first foundation that openly promoted dialogue between different faiths and cultures in Turkey was the JWF. Founded in 1994, it has two main principles:

respecting differences and coming together. In addition to respecting differences and promoting dialogue, the foundation also works to enhance the culture of living together. It is also interested in the issues that concern journalists.

In 2013 in Mersin, *MEKADIM* (the dialogue organisation in Mersin) welcomed us and we had the opportunity to observe their dialogue activities.<sup>6</sup> We visited the Syriac Orthodox Church and the Latin Catholic Church of Mersin. They mentioned their previous dialogue events as well. For instance, during Ramadan, with Mekadim's leadership, the churches hosted a Sahur and Iftar dinners and invited the neighbourhood and the leading figures of the city such as the city Mayor.

During the Sahur meal, for instance, people from all walks of life come together and they mix with the Christian members of the society to partake of the same food. On another occasion, they cooked Ashura (a dessert known as 'Noah's pudding') and delivered it to people at the city centre, among other similar events.

Being in the same picture with these people normalises them. After seeing, hearing about and observing these events, David Wiseman remarked: 'the work of MEKADIM is central to establishing the trust and confidence for minority communities to engage together.' There were similar emerging narratives in Hatay, Urfa, Mardin and Maras, between Muslims and non-Muslims, Kurds and non-Kurds, Alevis<sup>7</sup> and Sunnis.

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6 During our visit, we observed that these dialogue activities are creating new stories based not on animosity but friendship. Our trip was facilitated by Hizmet volunteers and dialogue organisations affiliated with Hizmet in the region. We visited Marash, Antep, Mardin, Urfa, Hatay and Mersin.

7 The Alevis are a broad minority ethno-religious group in Turkey who bear similarities with the majority Sunni Muslim population, with some significant differences. There are Alevis of Turkish and Kurdish ethnic origin and they have a strong folkloric tradition. Alevis retain their distinct beliefs that resemble aspects of the Shia sect (such as the special position of Ali, the Prophet's nephew), while most of them view these differences in cultural rather than religious terms. Some Alevi groups are completely secular, not viewing Alevism as a religious identity. Alevis were also suppressed during the early years of the Turkish Republic, along with other minority ethnic groups. The majority of the Kurdish groups who were quelled during the Dersim Massacre were Alevis. While the majority Sunni population was later allowed to have religious education and instruction by state-appointed religious instructors through the Diyanet, Alevis had no such means. Since Alevis have historically conveyed their teachings through oral transmission, the fact that the state disregarded religious education in Alevi beliefs has further weakened the bond of Alevis with their own traditions, teachings and beliefs. For the securitization of Alevis, de-securitization and re-securitization in the Kemalist and Erdoganist eras, see Yilmaz and Barry 2019.

### **Creating Dialogue Spaces or Tent of Hermeneutic Dialogue**

The Hizmet Movement contributed to a project in recent years for *Alevi-Sunni* dialogue. *Cemevis*, the places of worship and religious gatherings for *Alevi*s, have still not been recognised by the state as places of worship. However, there were joint initiatives with the support of the Gülen community to open a compound, which was going to include a *cemevi*, a mosque and a dining hall that would serve free food to people in need. Plans were being drawn up to build the compound in the Mamak district of Ankara. Creating such ‘dialogue spaces’ is very important in order to reconcile hostile or biased groups. Ironically, the foundation stone of the project was laid by AKP ministers in September 2013 and announced by the state-run news agency Anadolu Ajansı as very good news, quoting the Minister attending the ceremony as follows ‘*Inshallah* [God willing] once the project has been completed, all tongues and hearts will supplicate to the Divine’ (AA 2013). These places can be a kind of natural reconciliation centre. Unfortunately, the Turkish government halted this project and attempted to demonise it by naming it a ‘FETÖ project’ (the label being used by the government to demonise the movement). Later, in April 2017, the government converted the building into a health centre because it did not fit in with the state agenda (Sozcu 2017). However, it still remains as a good illustration of a space for ‘hermeneutic dialogue’ and the de-securing dialogue method of the Gülen Movement.

This project can alternatively be seen as an image produced by Hizmet as a *desecuritisation* means. The fact that the project was being funded through Hizmet by the businessmen supporting the movement, the majority of whom are Sunni Muslims, normalises the image of this compound in the eyes of the Sunni followers of Hizmet. Also, building such a sanctuary would provide a dialogue space, a tent between Sunni and Alevi Muslims in the long term. Also, it should be noted that such places could play a crucial role in the deconstruction process of existing stories regarding the Alevi or vice versa and reconstructing as friends and neighbours the Alevi in the eyes of Sunnis, and the Sunnis in the eyes of Alevi.

Such places might be examples of Habermas’ ‘communicative space,’ spaces free from power relations. Of ‘communicative spaces’ Tamara de Souza argues that:

A communicative space is more inclusive [...] allows for inclusion of members from the dominant public [...] it is an arena where actors from the margins and actors from the dominant public can interact with each other in meaningful ways, including discussion, confrontation, and disclosure (de Souza :293).

I witnessed that Alevi are hesitant to engage with Sunni communities because of their potential assimilationist agendas. For instance, in the Maras’ Pazarcık district, the director of the *cemevi* expressed these feelings in the following words: ‘Our main

reservation is being [forced to] converted to the Sunni creed. That is why we have problems engaging with the Sunnis. If we engage in dialogue with Hizmet, we fear that they might expect something from us.' However, Hizmet's unique accommodationist approach was made discernible in a short time. For example, during my visit to the region where the Alevi live, I heard in some places that Hizmet is actively assisting the construction of *cemevis* in Alevi villages with moral and material support.

*The Dede* of the *cemevi* stated that '*Hocaefendi* [referring to Fethullah Gülen] is someone who tries to explain [sic] us to the larger society, tells them that we, Sunnis and Alevi, are brothers [...]. *Hocaefendi* is a great scholar, we have a peaceful relationship, love and respect for Sunnis and Alevi [...]. He tries to deemphasise Sunni and Alevi concepts, and emphasises our brotherhood [...]. We ask him to tell the larger society about us, and to explain us to the Sunni society and to the world [...]. *Hocaefendi* removes prejudices about us, when he explains Alevism to others. He explains that we are of the same religion, and Alevism is part of Islam. We Alevi expect the Sunnis to recognise us and respect us.'

## Conclusion

This paper has attempted to examine the contribution of the Hizmet Movement to the normalisation of minorities in Turkey, which has been struggling between democracy and autocracy. After 2011, with the changing internal power structure and regional and global developments, the AKP under Erdogan established its own reign as the new sovereign. Since then any critical voice has been securitised and dealt with in the realm of security with the means of security. This was easily observable in the Gezi Park Protests in 2013, where participants were called 'terrorists' by the government. Any critical movement has been scapegoated again and again and pictured as 'collaborators' and 'traitors', and any opposition or critics alleged to be affiliated with minorities, mainly Armenians and other non-Muslim minorities.

This paper has also raised the issue that there are competing views within the movement about its civil aspect and bureaucratic extension. The activities and objectives of its civil Hizmet, which is empirically observable, could be, in some cases, on a collision course with its bureaucratic extension, although some argue that it is a cover for the bureaucratic extension. Some have depicted this bureaucratic extension as infiltration of the movement into the state, though it is not visible and they have not produced any empirical data. However, this article adopts the argument that this bureaucratic branch could have had channels that allowed for the introduction of the strategic statist mindset into the movement. This is well manifested in issues like minority rights, especially Kurdish political rights.

The more the movement approached the government, the more it made concessions in



its civility and the more it was securitised as a result. Because its bureaucratic extension facilitated rapprochement between the state and the movement, it also ironically led to the securitisation of the movement by the state. It appears that this rift within the movement will continue to deepen and widen. From a normative perspective, the future of the movement will rely heavily on its ability to marginalise its bureaucratic extension, as many of its insider critics underline.

This article has also argued that the events and meetings organised by Hizmet's dialogue organisations created an inclusive environment facilitating 'hermeneutic dialogue' between participants in Turkey.

It was observed in events organised by the movement and during a field visit in 2013 that the dialogue activities of Gülen or the Hizmet Movement in Turkey were attempts to facilitate the emergence of environments for *hermeneutic dialogue* that allowed their participants to deconstruct existing culturally and officially loaded stories about religious minorities and to *desecuritize*/normalise them by constructing new stories in a process of fusing the horizons to go beyond the official horizon, which was left limited on purpose, presented by the state. In these newly reconstructed stories, the minority groups and their members are regarded as 'friends,' 'neighbours' and 'fellow citizens' in contrast to the securitising images of the 'traitor,' and 'public enemy'.

When it comes to what this case study can tell us in relation to other cases, it is clear that operating as an NGO within an authoritarian regime, in the field of conflict resolution, is highly challenging if not impossible. In other words, the success of an NGO in desecuritisation depends on the free space it is allowed to act in by the authorities. If the NGO goes beyond its designated space, it can face securitisation itself or losing its civil aspect by resigning itself to the authority. This might be a good indicator of the common fate of civil societies in authoritarian regimes.

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