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Türkiye’s Hizmet Schools: Once a Point of Pride, Now a Government-Labelled Threat ^[1]

The Hizmet project is a private educational initiative and diplomacy instrument that has morphed from a point of pride for the Turkish government into a threat.

The project is associated with Fethullah Gülen, a political opponent of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Recently Hizmet and Hizmet-related structures have been declared terrorist organizations by the Turkish government.

A 2023 study shows that before it was deemed radical, Hizmet was viewed favorably by the Turkish government. Since the 1980s, Hizmet has established educational institutions in numerous countries and territories around the world.

At the outset of its public dispute with the Turkish government in the 2010s, which sought to shut down the educational institutions of the “Gülenists,” the Hizmet organization was estimated

to have a global membership of between 200,000 and six million.

The wide variety in estimates can be ascribed to the decentralized structure of the Gülen movement, which is depicted as a global community with a large number of "subsidiary" organizations, including private schools. At its peak, private schools associated with the movement were reportedly located in 160 countries worldwide.

The establishment of Hizmet schools has contributed to the promotion of Turkish culture, language and the Turkish vision of Islam among students. These schools use a variety of languages for instruction, including English, Turkish and the official language of each respective host country.

In the early 2010s, relations between the Hizmet movement and the Turkish leadership experienced a sharp decline. One possible reason was the competition for political leadership in Türkiye.

Since 2016, the Turkish government implemented a policy of reassigning control over and closing Gülenist schools abroad. While Gülen schools have been closed before, such as in Uzbekistan in the 1990s (due to suspicions of spreading religious ideologies harming national security of the host state), these closures were mostly at the initiative of the host country. In contrast, the Turkish government is behind recent closures.

The Hizmet issue has yet to be resolved by the Turkish government. Therefore, ongoing observation of the situation may reveal new aspects related to public diplomacy and education diplomacy in particular.

Interestingly, as part of its policy, the Turkish government has chosen to utilize the Maarif Foundation, an organization responsible for opening educational institutions that compete with Hizmet schools. Additionally, the foundation has been tasked with taking over the Gülen schools as part of the government's plan.

According to a recent study, it remains to be seen whether the Turkish government's efforts to close and reassign Gülen schools have been successful. While some countries, including 25 African nations, Pakistan and Venezuela, have closed Hizmet schools since 2016, others have not yet taken such action. The disparity points to an ongoing conflict between the Turkish Government, represented by the Maarif, and the Gülen movement, represented by Hizmet. According to available information, it appears that Hizmet schools continue to operate in approximately 60 countries worldwide.

It should be noted that disagreements among organizations have the potential to affect the perception of Türkiye or its government in several ways:

- The existence of controversies between institutions administering educational institutions may lead external parties to question the government's stability and ability to maintain order.

- When a school is transferred to Maarif, it is expected that the newly reopened and rebranded institution will offer education that is of equal or higher quality than what was provided during its time under the Hizmet. Otherwise, reputational losses are unavoidable since the quality of education is also a part of Türkiye's image. It is important to remember that schools serve as a direct representation of the country to the local population.
- For many years, Hizmet Schools have provided education and training to professionals and academics in various cities and countries. As graduates of the school, these individuals have a vested interest in the relationship between their homeland and Türkiye. It is important to consider the potential impact of any sudden closure or transfer of these schools, as it could potentially harm Türkiye's reputation and the loyalty of the already established pro-Türkiye elites.
- In certain instances, educational institutions may be unfairly characterized as “terrorist,” which can be a source of great distress for alumni. This is particularly true in nations where Hizmet schools were not heavily influenced by any particular ideology. Such labels have the potential to erode the allegiance of pro-Turkish leaders who were educated by Hizmet, and these perceptions may subsequently impact their actions.
- Ankara's attempts to exercise direct control over schools may have an adverse effect on Türkiye's reputation among the local population where the schools are situated. This could be perceived as an interference in domestic politics, as was the case in Mongolia.
- It is noteworthy that Gülen's schools were referred to as “Turkish schools” among locals, which had a direct impact on Türkiye's image among the local population. The term “Turkish school” was utilized not only by students. According to the proposed model of information circulation between the mass and specific public in the case of education diplomacy, it can be inferred that the perception of the school as “Turkish” and its association with 'success' was prevalent among students, parents, and relatives. This was due to the awareness that the child was learning and performing well, acquiring knowledge, languages and achievements. For the Turkish government, it may be both a challenge and risk to re-write or transfer positive associations to re-opened schools under Maarif administration. Failure to do so could cause deterioration of the Turkish government's image in the eyes of the local publics.

Türkiye and its current government have both benefited and faced challenges from the Hizmet schools. On one hand, the schools have contributed to the development of human capital, improved Türkiye's image and established valuable connections abroad. On the other hand, the conflict between Hizmet and Maarif has had significant negative consequences for Türkiye's reputation.

The Hizmet issue has yet to be resolved by the Turkish government. Therefore, ongoing observation of the situation may reveal new aspects related to public diplomacy and education diplomacy in particular. Other nations can benefit from learning from Türkiye's experience regarding Hizmet schools and implement measures to avoid similar risks.
