



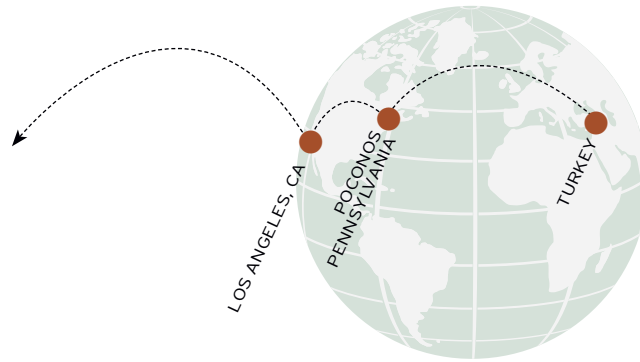
Fifth-grade teacher Teri Jackson, right, works with students at a Magnolia campus in Los Angeles.

PHOTOGRAPH / ANN CUSACK; LA TIMES



TURKEY'S FIGHT AGAINST U.S. CHARTERS

An autocrat declares war
on high-performing
American schools



ON A WARM DECEMBER EVENING IN ANAHEIM, California, in 2015, an out-of-town lawyer stood for public comment at a local school-board meeting and urged members to deny a proposed charter school. Magnolia Public Schools, which operates 10 charters in California, was hoping to open a new science academy. The attorney, John Martin of Amsterdam & Partners, cautioned the board against the proposal, citing Magnolia’s “misuse of public funds and hiring practices.”

He also noted his role as a representative of the Republic of Turkey, and Magnolia’s “suspected ties to the Gulan movement,” official meeting minutes show—a misspelled but unmistakable reference to the controversial, pro-democracy Turkish imam living in self-imposed exile in the Pocono Mountains of Pennsylvania: Fethullah Gülen.

“Everyone was like, ‘You’re kidding, right?’” said Caprice Young, Magnolia’s chief executive officer at the time. “You came all the way from Turkey to oppose this little charter at Disneyland?”

It was a surprising venue for an international skirmish in the growing battle between Gülen and Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, dueling Islamists who have been gathering support while growing in opposition to one another in recent years. Gülen has been holed up in the Poconos for nearly two decades, as his supporters have built social-service organizations, tutoring centers, and schools throughout Turkey and 140 countries around the world. In the United States, Gülenists have opened an estimated 100-plus charter schools, including the high-performing Harmony Public Schools network in Texas, making the affiliates one of the largest charter operators in the country.

However, followers of Gülen reportedly also have amassed considerable political power within Turkey, including among the police and judiciary, and were accused by Erdoğan of leading an

by MENACHEM WECKER



attempted coup in 2016. They have been denounced as terrorists by the Turkish government, and critics of the movement describe it as a cult that uses its overseas programs as a source of funding for political operations inside Turkey. Meanwhile, Erdoğan and his government, which initially enjoyed the Gülenists' support, have become increasingly authoritarian, consolidating power in a new, wide-ranging presidential role: closing down independent media outlets and jailing journalists, forcing critics from their jobs, and demanding that Gülen be extradited by the United States.

And that brings us back to Amsterdam & Partners, an international crisis law firm with offices in London and Washington, D.C., hired to undermine Gülen's influence in the United States and abroad by investigating and attacking American charter schools said to be linked to the cleric.

But none of this was obvious to Magnolia's executive director on December 9, 2015. Why was the government of Turkey so obsessed with a charter that would educate 400 kids a year in Anaheim? Young couldn't shake what was literally a multimillion-dollar question. Why did the president of a nation of about 80 million, a longtime U.S. ally with a GDP of roughly \$850 billion, care about this little charter school?

"Doesn't he have more important things to do?" she wondered.

Hizmet or HAZMAT?

How did a Sufi Muslim cleric from Turkey get involved in the U.S. charter movement? Like many aspects of the Gülenist movement, the specifics and origin story are difficult to pin down.

The global Gülenist movement is called "Hizmet," the Turkish word for "service," and professes its goals to be peace, democracy, interfaith dialogue, and universal access to education. The focus on education was inspired by a lack of opportunity for children from poor areas of Turkey, supporters say. At the core of the Hizmet movement is "better opportunities for everybody," said Y. Alp Aslandogan, executive director of a New York-based umbrella organization for Gülen-inspired groups, the Alliance for Shared Values.

As Gülen supporters fanned across the globe, so did schools said to be affiliated with their movement. The 10 schools that Magnolia operates are said to be part of a larger network of schools throughout the United States and across the world run by supporters of Gülen. An accounting for the scope of these charters in the U.S. is necessarily sketchy and the subject of some approximating—not least because school leaders typically do not acknowledge any official links between their programs and Gülen.



Caprice Young, former chief executive officer of the Magnolia Public Schools, wondered: why did the Turkish government care so much about a small charter school in Anaheim?

In recent years, a spate of media organizations has attempted to map the reach of the alleged network, including by tracing immigration visas, charters' dealings with Gülen-linked companies, and in some cases, interviewing former teachers and students about their view of the association. A 2011 *New York Times* story tallied 120 in 25 states, making them "one of the largest collections of charter schools in America." More recently, *Politico* estimated the network has grown to about 200; a *Washington Post* op-ed counted 167. A tabulation purported to be comprehensive was published in 2017 by Amsterdam & Partners; however, since the firm was being paid by the Turkish government for its work, its 650-page *Empire of Deceit* is hardly a neutral source.

It's similarly challenging to precisely track the lobbying war over charter schools that has erupted between the Gülenists and Turkish government on U.S. soil, though federal filings required by the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) reveal a money trail. Turkey paid Amsterdam & Partners at least \$1.25 million through January 2018: \$50,000 per month from December 2015 until June 2017, as well as two additional payments of \$150,000 each in November 2017 and January 2018. (At least according to FARA paperwork, Amsterdam hasn't been paid since January 2018.) During the most recent span, from November 2017 to January 2018, Amsterdam & Partners also sent \$348,904 in other funds to firms to which it contracted out work. Those payments included: \$50,000 to Delve LLC for research; and payments for "provision of government relations and advisory services" to Advanced Advocacy (\$101,642), Arnold Public Affairs (\$30,000), 5W Public Relations (\$32,316), Stroud Communications (\$7,446), and the Madison Group (\$120,000). The Turkish

PHOTOGRAPH / AP PHOTO: KICHIRO SATO

Gülenists have opened an estimated 100-plus charter schools, including the high-performing Harmony Public Schools network in Texas, making the affiliates one of the largest charter operators in the country.

government has made payments to other firms in 2018, filings show, but they did not immediately appear to be related to charter schools.

Interviews shed some light on where some of the funds may have gone. After the Anaheim hearing in 2015, for example, a local PR strategist called Young to ask her why Martin wanted to pay him \$15,000 a month to help shutter Magnolia, she said. Other professional contacts reported similar encounters, she noted, and she reads the filings as a map of the direct path from Turkey’s representatives meeting with elected U.S. officials to donations to those officials.

For example, a Los Angeles–based lobbyist, Maureen Kindel of the Kindel Gagan firm, reported meetings and political donations on behalf of Turkey regarding the reelection campaign of the former Los Angeles school-board president Steve Zimmer, who eventually voted to shut Magnolia schools. FARA filings show that on September 28, 2016, Kindel met with Zimmer to discuss Magnolia on behalf of Turkey; the following day, September 29, she donated \$1,100 to “Steve Zimmer for School Board 2017.” Kindell later contributed an additional \$2,200 to that same campaign, on October 7 and December 6, 2016. Kindell, contacted via e-mail, declined to comment.

Young called the contributions “an absolute quid pro quo.” Kindell “went from meeting with Steve Zimmer to giving \$1,100 to his school-board race to him voting against our charter a week and a half later,” she said.

Such votes were not the only challenge Magnolia faced under pressure. The “constant” media inquiries that Magnolia fielded regarding its audits necessitated hiring a crisis communications firm, which ultimately cost around \$500,000, Young said. And when the organization borrowed money for a new building, its 5.5 percent interest rate was higher than expected, which Young attributed to its damaged reputation.

Is the Magnolia network affiliated with Gülen?

“Absolutely not,” Young said. “And all of the many audits have found no connection, period.”

Scrutiny and strong performance

The U.S. charters have attracted attention for the strong performance of some campuses and alleged financial irregularities at others. They have also invited questions about the role of religion on campus, since many of the schools sponsor instructors from Turkey, a constitutionally secular nation where 98 percent of citizens identify as Muslim. Aslandogan and other Hizmet supporters note that schools in the U.S. said to be affiliated with the movement are independent and answerable to boards, regulated by local districts and state education departments, and subject to federal rules when grant monies are involved.

Founded in 2000, Harmony Public Schools, which operates 54 Texas charters, touts a 100 percent college-acceptance rate. Harmony campuses regularly appear at the top of school-quality rankings; in *U.S. News & World Report’s* most recent “Best High Schools” report, seven Harmony schools earned gold medals—ranking among the top 500, or 2 percent, of all 20,500 evaluated high schools. Twelve more earned silver medals, placing them in the top 13 percent nationally. In 2017, the network was one of three finalists for the prestigious Broad Prize for Public Charter Schools, an annual award for the nation’s top-performing charter-school system, awarded after an exhaustive review of data on each system’s success in serving low-income students and students of color.

Other schools linked to Gülenists make different headlines. A 2014 FBI raid of 19 schools in Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois



Turkish cleric Fethullah Gülen lives in self-imposed exile in Pennsylvania, while his supporters have opened an estimated 100-plus charter schools in the United States.

associated with Concept Schools, which was founded in 1999 by Turkish immigrants and is said to be Gülen-inspired, was reportedly focused on the charter group’s financial dealings with its technology vendors. Critics allege other problems at Gülen-linked schools, including failing to properly



accommodate students with disabilities, abusing special travel visas to bring Turkish nationals to the United States, skimming from school budgets to funnel money to Gülen, and indoctrinating students with Islamic teachings.

State, district, and federal investigations and audits have provided fodder for some of those claims. For example, the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights found in 2014 that students with disabilities and English language learners were underrepresented at Harmony Public Schools, and the office and charter operator agreed to revise admissions and enrollment policies in order to ensure equal access to those students. Also in 2014, the Office of the Oklahoma State Auditor and Inspector reviewed three schools in Oklahoma City and Tulsa said to be linked to Gülen and found a discrepancy of nearly \$1.2 million in rent payments, as well as a foundation that appeared to be supported by school funding rather than serving as a source of funding for the school. One transaction stood out: the school paid \$175,000 from public funds to sponsor an out-of-state event, which "did not appear to have a legitimate school purpose or benefit the Dove Charter School students of Oklahoma," the audit found.

Turkey's charge against Gülen is that the exiled cleric receives kickbacks from every school his supporters operate, including through a network of affiliated education-management companies, said Robert Amsterdam, founding partner of Amsterdam & Partners. Some of those claims also have been echoed in state and federal investigations, according to news reports.

One organization linked to Gülen, Apple Educational Services, has been flagged by the Office of the New York State Comptroller for questionable contracts with Gülen-linked schools, and another, Terra Science and Education, has rented several properties to Gülen-linked schools and profited from those agreements, a 2017 investigation by the *Times Union* (Albany, NY) found. That same year, CBS News reported that the FBI is investigating whether Gülen supporters are skimming money from charter schools in the United States, and interviewed former teachers who claimed that school leaders demanded kickbacks from their taxpayer-funded salaries. School leaders denied the allegations and claimed the teachers were working on behalf of the Turkish government.

Parental review

International lobbying war aside, what do parents and families think of the charter schools? In interviews, parents who were recommended by the schools offered strongly positive reviews.

When Shanila Baig hears claims about Gülen-linked charter schools like the one her teenage son attends, the president of the parent-teacher organization at Harmony School of Innovation in Sugar Land, Texas, scratches her

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head. Baig's son, an 11th-grade student on the honor roll, had been bullied at his public elementary school, and his boredom there fueled behavioral issues, she said. Having heard good things about Harmony, Baig transferred him as a fifth grader to Harmony Science Academy, which then went from kindergarten to sixth grade, where he learned to read, and, after an initial struggle, conquered his disciplinary issues. In seventh grade, he enrolled in Harmony School of Innovation, which serves grades 7-12. Not only did it provide weekly therapy sessions, Baig said, but after a year, her son and the therapist agreed his behavior had improved so much that subsequent sessions would waste time.

An accountant by training, Baig has volunteered to help with the school's books. She figures she would know if the Harmony School of Innovation was laundering money, but hasn't seen any evidence it has, and believes that criticisms are politically motivated. She also rejects the idea that Harmony is peddling sharia ideology to unsuspecting children. After all, it has an open-door policy for visitors, within reasonable security limits. Guests have the opportunity to speak with whomever they'd like. The school employs several Turkish teachers, including some who wear headscarfs in accordance with cultural and religious customs, but they are a minority of the staff. And just about every year when a parent asks her why Harmony can't set aside a place for Islamic students to pray, she politely informs them that it's not an Islamic school. There is such a school, with an adjacent mosque, less than a mile away.

"If you really feel so strongly, send your kid to an Islamic school. This is a public school," she said. "You can go pray all day. They'll take you."

Manny Iglesia has a similarly positive impression of another Gülen-linked charter: Magnolia Science Academy 2-Valley in the San Fernando Valley region of Los Angeles. He has sent four children to the grades 6-12 school; his youngest is now in the 9th grade and he has a child in 10th grade. Both of his two oldest children graduated the school as valedictorians, he said. Iglesia, who is Presbyterian, is convinced they were not being indoctrinated in Islamic teachings. He has been impressed with the school's ability to communicate regularly with parents, helped by its small size, and its commitment to math and science; his three sons and daughter have earned high marks.

Along with other Magnolia Public School campuses,

Magnolia 2 has faced criticism and been threatened with closure. The Los Angeles Unified School District voted not to extend its charter in 2016, but the school successfully appealed that decision to the local county board of education, and remains open. A chief complaint: over several years, the school group had spent an estimated \$929,000 in taxpayer dollars to cover visa costs for 138 overseas teachers, spouses, and children, nearly all of whom were from Turkey. Ninety-seven eventually worked for Magnolia schools.

Iglesia's impression is that while some of the teachers and staff might be Turkish, the school's staff is diverse and includes teachers from Vietnam and the Philippines, where his family is from. Those who have made the most effort socially to get to know him have been Turkish, but Iglesia

January 2018 broadcast about the Gülen movement by VICE News, parent Gwendolyn Muok expressed skepticism about the Syracuse Academy of Science, her daughter's former school.

"They brag about 98 percent of their kids being accepted to college. But when you look at it, how many of those kids actually make it through the first year?" she said. "I think the goal of the school is to get the taxpayer dollars to help fund their movement. And our kids are paying the price for it."

A pair of outsized opponents

Both sides in the conflict between Gülen and Erdoğan seem to agree on one thing: theirs is a David-and-Goliath-type of battle. But when it comes to who is the outmanned underdog and who is the bullying giant, a blame-shifting tug of war quickly takes on a he-said, she-said tone.

To Aslandogan, head of the pro-Gülen Alliance for Shared Values, Amsterdam's decision to work for Erdoğan is like working for Hitler or Mussolini. Erdoğan, he said, has citizens jailed, tortured, and killed: "[he] is doing all of that, and Amsterdam, by serving such a person, is doing something unethical."

For his part, Amsterdam said Turkey's president is misunderstood. "He's not the antichrist," he said. In addition, Americans have no moral standing to criticize Erdoğan, who opened Turkey's doors to take in 3.5 million Syrian refugees, especially as the U.S. works to separate immigrant families on its own southern border, he said. According to Amsterdam, Erdoğan had a stellar pre-coup reputation, and the ensuing state of emergency, which has lasted too long, is drawing to a close. Attacks from Gülenists are a distraction, he said.

"Whether or not you like the Italian government, you still need to explore what the Mafia is doing in the United States. Whether or not you like the Russian government, does that mean we are not going to look at Russian organized crime in the United States?" Amsterdam said. "Gülen is at the same level as Russian organized crime, and we need to wake up before this guy is teaching a million American students. Right now, he's teaching 80,000."

Gülen's supporters dismiss these charges as conspiracy theories and, in turn, question the millions of dollars that they say Erdoğan has spent lobbying against American charter schools. But Gülen critics turn that focus around, and say the movement's criticism of Erdoğan is intended to deflect attention from a troubling and murky network of schools, media holdings, and other organizations. The charters, they claim, are one of several reliable sources of billions of dollars each year, funding a global political



Robert Amsterdam speaks at a 2018 press conference in Istanbul, Turkey.

dismisses the idea that there's any kind of religious or political indoctrination. Having previously worked for 15 years in Saudi Arabia, Iglesia was happy to comply when his son's Magnolia teacher asked for Iglesia's prayers ahead of a student competition.

"I'm Christian. I'm not Muslim. He asked me to pray for them during the competition and travel," Iglesia said. "They're not focusing on that aspect in the school. It's more the academics and the well-being of the kids."

Other parents have a more critical point of view. In a



Turkey's charge against Gülen is that the exiled cleric receives kickbacks from every school he operates, including through affiliated education-management companies.

syndicate that threatens the stability of an important U.S. partner and NATO ally since 1952.

While this political conflict may be of clear consequence in Turkey and abroad, its relevance to students in the United States is less obvious. As with all charter public schools, local boards of education and other authorizing agencies have a singular task: to ensure that schools meet standards for performance, both academic and operational. Their primary questions should be whether students are succeeding and if taxpayer dollars are wisely spent. Determining whether a particular school's existence fuels a simmering conflict in Asia Minor is no job for a local board of education, in Anaheim or anywhere else.

Capitalizing on a broader debate

Complicating matters, efforts to discredit Gülen-linked schools have become enmeshed with general criticism from opponents of charter schools—a not-coincidental connection. Amsterdam and his colleagues have capitalized on an ongoing debate questioning the performance of charters in general.

In Ohio, FARA filings show Amsterdam & Partners has paid \$57,000 to ProgressOhio Education (sometimes listed as ProgressOhio) through late 2017 to investigate Gülen-linked schools in the state. There are more than a dozen Horizon Science Academy charters in Ohio operated by the Gülen-linked Concept Schools organization. ProgressOhio has often expressed skepticism about charters as part of a broader commitment to politically progressive causes, and has acknowledged that one of its long-standing goals is to scrutinize Horizon's performance. The payments were made for "Provision of Public and Media Relations and Advisory Services," FARA filings show.

"ProgressOhio is a liberal political activist funded largely by teachers unions, and apparently foreign interests like this Turkish dictator. They are committed to ending the ability of parents to have a choice in what kind of public school setting their children can attend," said Mark Weaver, a Concept Schools spokesman. "Nearly every reporter who covers them understands ProgressOhio's political leanings. They have also been debunked in some of the information they give to the press."

ProgressOhio contends that its activities are driven by an interest in student performance at Ohio schools, not

Turkish politics. For example, according to former executive director Sandy Theis, the organization's investigation into Gülen-linked schools in Ohio occurred two years before Amsterdam & Partners hired it to contribute to a wider probe of the schools throughout the United States. As for the origin of the funding, "ProgressOhio gets money from lots of sources," Theis said.

Schools linked to Gülenists also have been featured in the wide-ranging debate over charter schools in California. In 2017, the state chapter of the NAACP introduced a resolution calling for forensic audits of all Gülen-linked schools and management companies by local, state, and federal entities, according to Julian Vasquez Heilig, the chapter's education chair and a professor of educational leadership and policy studies at California State University, Sacramento. The resolution, published by Vasquez Heilig on his website, describes the schools' actions as "targeting the African American and Hispanic communities" and "replacing fully qualified American teachers" by recruiting and sponsoring the immigration of Turkish teachers under the federal H1-B visa program for skilled specialized workers. The broader concerns echoed those expressed by the national NAACP in 2016, when it called for a moratorium on charter school expansion nationwide. However, the organization recently struck a less critical tone, with NAACP president Derrick Johnson publicly acknowledging "really good best practices" at some charter schools.

Despite the often-difficult politics surrounding charters, demand remains strong, said Nelson Smith, former president and chief executive officer of the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. He predicted that Turkey will continue to pursue schools said to be affiliated with Gülen, particularly given Erdoğan's expanded political powers.

"The schools have to succeed," he said. "They have to be really good, follow the law, and provide a great education. The proof is in the pudding."

That sounds much like the challenge facing charter schools generally. And for campuses where students thrive, both the larger debate over charters and international jockeying over the future of the Republic of Turkey seem very far away.

Fatih Ay, chief executive officer of Harmony Public Schools in Texas—the Broad Prize finalist with the 100 percent college-acceptance rate—shrugged off the debate when asked, via e-mail, to comment.

"We have experienced tremendous success where it counts most: in the difference we make in the lives of Texas schoolchildren," he wrote. "This latest volley of attacks is as much puzzling as it is unprecedented."

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