

LOBBY WATCH



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Harmonic Convergence:

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Texas and Turkey Probe Muslim Leader's Followers Feds, Texas Senate Investigate Turkish Charter Schools

U.S., Turkish and Texas officials all are investigating followers of a Turkish Sufi Muslim leader who promotes education and moderate Islam from exile in Pennsylvania.¹

Exiled Fethullah Gulen's followers helped install Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan in 2003. That government now is purging its ranks of Gulenists, who recently [led](#) anti-corruption probes against the Erdogan regime.² Meanwhile, U.S. government investigations of publicly funded charter schools founded by Gulen's followers in the USA are starting to attract the attention of Texas officials.

Last month the FBI raided a Baton Rouge charter that buys support services from Houston-based Harmony Public Schools, Texas' No. 1 charter chain.³ The raid prompted Dan Patrick, the charter-championing chair of the Texas Senate Education Committee, to announce forthcoming hearings on Harmony.

Founded by Turkish immigrants in 2000, Harmony charters have been dogged by Gulen controversies despite the fact that they do not teach religion and their students test well.⁴

Harmony downplays or denies Gulen ties.⁵ Yet Gulen himself emphasized these ties in 2007 to obtain a special U.S. visa for an "alien of extraordinary ability." The [Philadelphia Inquirer](#) reported that Gulen successfully made this case to a federal judge by arguing that he "has overseen the establishment of a conglomerate of schools throughout the world, in Europe, Central Asia, and the United States."⁶

Other visa controversies surround U.S. charter schools founded by Gulen followers. Citing alleged shortages of qualified U.S. teachers, they have obtained thousands of H1-B visas for mostly male Turkish nationals to teach in Texas and other states. In 2009 Gulen schools claimed more of these visas than Dell or Google did. U.S. diplomats in Istanbul expressed recurring concerns about all these Gulen school visas in cables released by WikiLeaks.⁷

For several years U.S. Education, Labor and FBI officials also have been investigating allegations that some Turkish teachers in the USA have been forced to kick back part of their salaries to Gulen's Hizmet movement.⁸ An Ohio audit cited Gulen-tied schools that lacked proper licensing

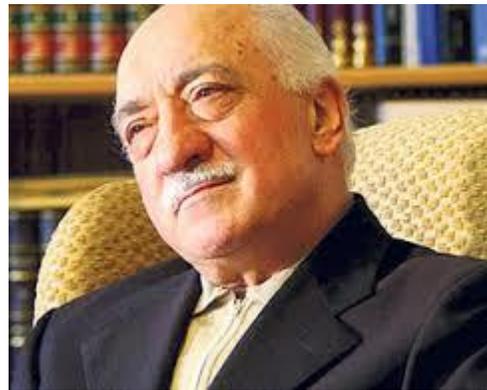
and improperly spent public funds on legal, immigration and travel costs for those who did not work at its schools.⁹

Harmony critics charge that this recipient of more than \$100 million a year in Texas taxpayer funds uncompetitively awards school contracts to Gulen followers for construction, technology, uniforms, lunches and services.¹⁰

Some evidence supports Harmony's claim that it is a victim of xenophobia. "If Gulen's control can reach across the seas to Turkey," MerryLynn Gerstenschlager of the conservative

Texas Eagle Forum warned Texas lawmakers in 2012, "how much easier would it be for him to ask allegiance from the impressionable children educated in Turkish charter schools within our borders?"¹¹

Charters require greater public trust than traditional private schools. Be they Christian, Muslim or completely secular, schools that expend public funds should procure goods and services through open and competitive bids, hire people in the community and stay in harmony with U.S. labor laws.



Fethullah Gulen

Notes

¹ The Golden Generation Worship & Retreat Center in Saylorsburg, PA.

² "Prosecutor Overseeing Turkish Graft Inquiry Is Removed From Case," *New York Times*, December 27, 2013. "Raids Highlight Split in Turkey's Ruling Party," *Wall Street Journal*, December 18, 2013. Interestingly, Gulenist prosecutors intensified their anti-corruption probe after Erdogan announced plans in November 2013 to close Turkey's private college-prep schools—more than a quarter of which are Gulenist. Foreign policy is another point of contention. Gulen reportedly sympathized with Israel's 2010 raid of a Turkish ship carrying aid to Gaza and reportedly opposes Erdogan's support of Syrian rebels. Last summer Erdogan also lost support of liberals and secularists, who opposed government plans to convert an Istanbul park into a shopping mall.

³ "Houston Operator's Ties to Charter Questioned," *Austin American-Statesman*, December 17, 2013.

⁴ "Could Other Schools Learn Charter Lesson?" *Austin American-Statesman*, August 19, 2013.

⁵ "Harmony Schools Causing Discord," *San Antonio Express-News*, December 31, 2011.

⁶ "U.S. Charter-School Network with Turkish Links Draws Federal Attention," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, March 20, 2011.

⁷ "Harmony Schools Causing Discord," *San Antonio Express-News*, December 31, 2011. "WikiLeaks Files Detail U.S. Unease Over Turks and Charter Schools," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 4, 2011.

⁸ "WikiLeaks Files Detail U.S. Unease Over Turks and Charter Schools," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 4, 2011.

⁹ "U.S. Charter-School Network with Turkish Links Draws Federal Attention," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, March 20, 2011.

¹⁰ "Charter Schools Tied to Turkey Grow in Texas," *New York Times*, June 6, 2011.

¹¹ "Eagle Forum Takes On Harmony Charter Schools," *Houston Chronicle*, February 20, 2012. Gerstenschlager advocated legislation to require charter school operators to be U.S. citizens. She acknowledged that Harmony doesn't teach religion but warned that Turkey's Prime Minister supports Hamas. This overlooks a key schism between Erdogan and Gulen, namely that the exile appears to oppose Turkish militarism and to favor a stronger alliance with the West. Prime Minister Erdogan also invokes xenophobia, blaming Israel, the United States and Pennsylvania-based Fethullah Gulen for recent backlashes against his government.