

TURKISH IN THE LANGUAGE OF THE QUR'AN: *HIRA'*

Paul L. Heck

Abstract

When it comes to the Gülen movement, scholarly attention is often given to its attitudes towards non-Muslims, its willingness to operate within secular environments, and its rapprochement with the material achievements of the West, as well as its own network of educational institutions. As a result, less attention is given to its interest in connecting with the larger Muslim community beyond its own internal associations. The Gülen movement is, however, aware of the need to situate itself and publish its ideas within the wider *ummah*.

Hira magazine, a relatively new venture of the Gülen movement (first issue Dec. 2005), is chiefly intra-Muslim in its aims and aspirations. The magazine is published in Arabic and features articles written by both Turkish and Arabic writers; a lead article by Fethullah Gülen opens and sets the tone of each issue. The magazine acts to bring the intellectual outlook of the Gülen movement to the Arab world, serving as a cultural bridge between Turks and Arabs, as a forum in which pressing issues in contemporary Islam can be aired and treated by leading Muslim thinkers, and as a tool for the global Muslim community to consolidate a renewed vision of its relation to the intellectual and socio-political realities of the modern world.

This paper recounts the establishment and development of *Hira* magazine, focusing on the calibre of its themes and contributors, and also its reception in the Arab world as evidenced in local Arab media as well as by the comments of those in charge of the magazine. Finally, a critical assessment is offered of the overall vision of the magazine, its presentation style, material content, and religious perspective, as well as its potential to speak effectively to the global *ummah* as a leading voice for the future of Islam.

In late 2005 the Gülen movement launched a new religious initiative, a magazine by the name of *Hira'*. A quarterly magazine of which seven issues have appeared to date, *Hira'* treats a range of topics: education, science, religion, art and culture, philosophy, civilization, history, poetry, and above all the psychological and spiritual formation of the human soul—all through the lens of Islam. The emphasis on the interior life make sense of the magazine's name, *Hira'*, which refers to the cave near Mecca on Jabal al-Nur—"Mount of Light"—where the Prophet Muhammad would go for meditation and contemplation and revelations from God through the mediation of the Angel Gabriel. The magazine, with offices in both Istanbul and Cairo, is published in Arabic and features art and poetry as well as articles by various Arab and Turkish intellectuals, scholars, and *littérateurs*. A lead article by Fethullah Gülen opens and sets the tone of each issue. It is worth noting that the Arab figures assembled by the magazine represents some of the most highly respected Muslim voices in the Arab world today.

Here, then, is a Gülen initiative that is intra-Muslim and directed at the global *umma* beyond the movement's own institutions and organizations. It seeks to engage Arab society, Muslim Arabs first and foremost. When it comes to the Gülen movement, scholarly attention often focuses on its willingness and desire to engage non-Muslims and western intellectual and cultural life and, also, its ability to coexist with secularism. This magazine suggests that the movement is also interested in creating a bridge between the Turkish and Arab spheres of the *umma* and that it is aware of the need to bring its outlook to the wider concerns and discussions of the global Muslim community today. Certainly, attempts have been made in the past to build bridges between Turks and Arabs. Muhammad Rashid Rida (d. 1935), for example, proposed a political bridge, i.e. a post-Ottoman caliphate that would embrace Turks and Arabs in a single political framework. It was not feasible, even if a noble idea. In contrast, the bridge that the Gülen movement seeks to build is decidedly spiritual—and, in that sense, more likely to succeed.

The magazine's message, emphasizing the formation of the soul and addressed to Muslims primarily, is at the same time oriented to the world in its global aspects. It is therefore appropriate to locate the magazine, which largely mirrors the thinking of the Gülen movement, alongside three other prominent forms of globalizing religiosity in contemporary Islam.

The first is Wahhabism, which seeks to purify Islam of all human elements and innovations and so guard against the possibility of Islam falling into error and infidelity itself. Modernity is here shunned as a positive source of human achievement.

The second is Tablighism (Tablighi Jama'at), which is related to Deobandism, the madrasa-network in South Asia that seeks to preserve Muslim identity through exact study of hadith, i.e. the reports of the Prophet's sayings, deeds, and decisions as normative model of Muslim life. Tablighism, which is quite active in the Arab context, such as Morocco, is a global revivalist movement that seeks to strengthen Muslim commitment to the ritual practices of the faith, not only prescribed daily prayers but also collective reading and identification with the lifestyle of the first Muslims. Although dissimilar to Wahhabism in many respects, Tablighism also has a negative view of human history, its realities and its imperfections, leading to disconnect between Islam's religious experience and the challenges of the current human condition.

The third is Jihadism, a religiosity of conflict. Fighting infidel enemies of God, identified with today's global powers, is the highest religious virtue, and Muslims who do not fight the enemies of God—or ally themselves with them—are reclassified as enemies of God

themselves.

This brief summary of globalized Islam is not to overlook 1) the many other Muslim movements that operate largely within a national or regional context or 2) the bulk of Muslims who do not align themselves with any movement at all but simply do their best to follow the teachings of Islam as passed down by their predecessors in the faith. The point is transition in the Muslim world on a global scale. The Gülen movement can be generally classified as a fourth form of globalizing Muslim religiosity, which I call reformed Sufism.

Sufism has many sides to it and has undergone development over the centuries. Historically, as a social institution in Muslim society, it has focused on a saintly character whose function was not only to instruct his disciples in the ways of noble character (*makarim al-akhlaq*) and to model them himself but also to mediate heavenly mysteries to them and even intercede for them before the throne of God. Networks of this kind of Sufism still exist and even flourish regionally and trans-regionally. The Barelwi movement is one example, with origins in the shrine culture of South Asia and a significant presence in the UK. Sheikh Nazim is another example, with followers in both the Middle East and Europe. This kind of Sufism, however, has faced a degree of criticism from contemporary Muslims who look askance at its hierarchical concept of religious authority. This is not to say that Sufism in its traditional form is anti-modern in outlook but that its structure, a hierarchy of intercessory saints, has been challenged in this democratic age.

The Gülen movement—and other examples of reformed Sufism—have for the most part abandoned this hierarchical structure while retaining the spiritual knowledge (*'ilm laduni*) of Sufism along with the doctrine (*'aqida*) and law (*shari'a*) of Islam. The concept of human guidance (*irshad*) is not rejected but rather the idea of human intercession (*shafa'a*), obviating the need for a saintly hierarchy in a formalized sense. Also, reformed Sufism has responded to modernist and fundamentalist charges against Sufism—of being antiquated and anti-modern in its otherworldly preoccupations—by refashioning itself as rational and activist but still spiritual. In other words, the essential religiosity of Sufism that operates both within and beyond the visible boundaries of Islam is still intact. The world beyond the pale of Islam may be problematic but it is not condemnable per se. Islam in its particular beliefs and practices is still the central departure point and central reference point, but it is not the only one or perhaps even the final one. The religious goal here is not at all the discarding of the very particular ritual and moral duties prescribed by divine law, *shari'a*, but rather the attainment of insight into divine reality, *haqiqa*, which is unbounded and informs all existence. Thus, in contrast to Wahhabism, Tablighism, and Jihadism, Sufism as advanced by the Gülen movement has a positive view of the world entire. The internal workings of the universe—science, history, politics, art and culture, philosophy—are not something Muslims should fear or stuff into an Islamized box but rather engage positively in view of the spiritual insight of Islam.

In line with the reformed Sufism of the Gülen movement, *Hira'* aims not to discuss the latest developments in the various branches of learning, knowledge, and science directly. Rather, it seeks to inform the Muslim mind with a spiritually enriched perspective of the world, which, in turn, can be brought to bear on the various branches of learning, knowledge, and science. The Moroccan scholar Farid al-Ansari sums this up (no. 1): “How much we need a rereading of Islam today... a reading that brings the Muslim to God before a reading that leads him to criticize himself, social injustice, and political tyranny and that makes him in his religiosity an enemy of religion whether he realizes it or not.” Here, I believe, al-Ansari is referring to

the other forms of globalized religiosity noted above. They all have a religiosity that demands perfection of the world as the standard by which religion is validated. As a result, they invariably end with a negative view of a world that stubbornly refuses to conform perfectly to the ideals of religion.

The prophetic cave of Hira' —and the magazine too (!)— shows that something more is needed for religion to realize its purpose: spiritual insight that rejects the notion that material reality is final measure of the worth of religion. This is not to say that religion is to have no impact on worldly life. The spiritual insight that a religious formation of the soul affords believers is to be brought to bear on *all aspects of existence*, so as to inform them with an otherworldly perspective that does not violate their autonomy but rather enhances understanding of their purpose. Islam is to touch all things human and worldly but is not reducible to them, in line with the qur'anic teaching that God's signs (*ayat*) are to be discerned in human souls (*anfus*) and worldly horizons (*afaq*) and not only in scriptural verses. It is about a dynamic engagement of the heavenly with the earthly realm and not the collapse of the two into a single entity.

Again, the central goal of *Hira'* is to move Muslims beyond defensiveness by teaching a religiosity that can confidently interact with modernity. This is what Gülen means by *rabbaniyya* (no. 7), the engineering of the soul for the sake of its harmonious integration with others and society as a whole, effecting its salvation *within* the sometimes troubling specificities of modernity and endowing it with a prophetic heart that puts concern for others before self. The failure of this mission, *rabbaniyya*, would be a betrayal of the *umma*, and the furthering of its spiritual activism will permit the *umma* to rediscover itself, restore its global relevancy, and make Muslims worthy to be God's caliphs, i.e. His delegates on earth (Gülen, no. 4).

Such a mission, however, is not meta-religious but arises within the boundaries of Islam. The particulars of Islam—Ramadan, Hajj, etc.—are not mere ceremony and ritual but occasions filled with divinely inspired sounds and images meant to awaken the spiritual consciousness of Muslims (Gülen, no. 1 and no. 2). Key to Muslim life is the ability not simply to undertake religious duties but to experience the foretaste (*dhawq*) of the hereafter that they anticipate, ensuring existential satisfaction as opposed to dissatisfaction even amidst the realities and imperfections of this world. The point is that religion is not just about divine command but also symbolic meaning, such that the duties of religion become indispensable vehicles for the spiritual transformation of the soul and the dispersal of its egoistic tendencies.

Islam here is not just about *shari'a* as standard of Muslim actions but also *haqiqa* as standard of Muslim souls. Indeed, realization of *haqiqa* is a necessary preliminary to correct performance of *shari'a*, lest one's religiosity be driven by materiality instead of spirituality. It is for this purpose that Gülen dwells on the necessarily pre-existential nature of the Prophet Muhammad as revealer of *haqiqa* and not only conveyor of *shari'a* (no. 5). The fact that here the Prophet is mediator and intercessor of divinely imbued existence gives all Muslims a sense of responsibility before divine truth but also raises questions that it would seem Gülen has only begun to explore about the inherently hierarchical nature of religion. It is not only the case that divine truth must be prophetically revealed. It must also be manifestly preserved by those worthy of inheriting the heavenly mystery (*warathat al-sirr*) and of assuming authority (*walaya*) over its correct expression in this world.

The production of this heavenly-earthly dynamic is possible only with the formation of the soul. *Hira'* does not therefore focus on theological disputes, which never end decisively. There are articles, e.g. by the Egyptian Zaghul al-Najjar, proposing that the latest findings of

science confirm the revelations of Islam, such as the statistical improbability of the world, in all its minutely complex detail, coming into existence on its own (no. 7; see also his article in no. 6, which comes close to collapsing religion and science into a single framework with the claim that modern science is proof of the Qur'an's divine origin). Also, given the common allegation that Sufism did not form part of the religious heritage of the first generations of Muslims (*al-salaf al-salih*), it is important—for *Hira'* to communicate its message credibly across the *umma*—to demonstrate the place of Sufism in early Islam. *Hira'* accomplishes this task convincingly with the pen of a scholar of impeccable shari'a credentials, the Syrian Muhammad Sa'id Ramadan al-Buti (no. 5), who links his argument for Sufism's place in early Islam to the example of Badi' I-Zaman Sa'id Nursi, a figure whose commitment to the cause of Islam is indisputable.

Still, the approach of *Hira'* is not so much to convince the mind with theological argumentation as to evoke a heavenly horizon in the human psyche (*wijdan*), addressing readers at the visceral more so than the rational level. As suggested by Farid al-Ansari in an article on the doctrine of Islam (no. 5), there is inherent deficiency in a religiosity limited to scholastic disputation and theological definition. The tendency among Muslims today, he claims, is to engage in doctrinal debate about the implications of monotheism without actually entering into a dynamic engagement with it in their hearts. Allah—monotheism—is not simply object of rational speculation, which invariably falls short in its attempt to capture the ineffable character of divinity in human words, but more fundamentally object of passions and emotions. It is not enough to know monotheism but rather to identify with it psychically in what al-Ansari calls a covenant of love between God and His servants. This, he says, is the secret of the hadith that states that those whose confession of monotheism is backed by a *desire* for the face of Allah are assured of entering paradise.

The presentation of the magazine and not only the content of its articles seeks to appeal to the Muslim psyche and remind it of the heavenly desire within that can only be fulfilled in a realm beyond the material one. The visual image is a highly effective means of mediating spirituality in a way words are not, even for the highly educated and not only for the illiterate. *Hira'* devotes important space for pictures that bespeak heavenly aspirations, stirring not simply intellectual rumination but psychic identification, awakening the soul to its desire for spiritual reality as reflected in the visual imagery and assisting it in the process of finding contentment and satisfaction not in material reality per se but rather in a spiritually transfigured view of it. Indeed, as Farid al-Ansari demonstrates in an article on aesthetics in Islam (no. 1), this is the goal of religious art in contrast to the elitist and self-referential tendencies of modern art: to induce through calligraphic, geometric, vegetal and other forms of mosque design a sense of being in the heavenly court. As he argues elsewhere (no.2), the beauty of the world and the beauty of humanity have a place within the spectrum of religion and cannot therefore be set in opposition to it—and that on the basis of evidence from the Book of God and Sunna of the Prophet. In this sense, things worldly and human—art and architecture, emotions, intellect, psyche—can act as sites for the manifestation of divine beauty (*jamaal*). It is, of course, highly significant that al-Ansari and other contributors to *Hira'* show the revealed basis for the place of worldly and humanly beauty in the divine economy, since it is exactly this that the other forms of globalized religiosity noted above reject—the idea that existence has a positive place in Islam. Again, this is reformed Sufism, advancing not by hierarchical fiat but 'ilm-based argument, i.e. demonstration rooted in Qur'an and Sunna.

There are other compelling ways that *Hira'* presents its unique religiosity by appealing to the psyche and not only the intellect. For example, much use is made of poetry and poetic imagery.

Scattered across the pages of *Hira'*, for example, are several poems of the Moroccan Hasan al-Amrani that speak of prophecy and love in a single breath. In a very interesting article, the Turkish Isma'il Lutfi Joqan analyzes the different ways in which the Prophet Muhammad experienced sorrow (*huzn*), offering believers a model by which to link human feeling to religious experience, binding the psyche more closely to God (no. 5). The Moroccan Ahmad 'Ibadi goes so far as to suggest a science of identification (*'ilm al-ta'assi*) with the Prophet, complete with rules and conditions (no. 7)—something with significance at a moment when many a Muslim seek to identify with the Prophet in a very literal sense, resulting in disconnect with modern realities.

Two critical observations: Several articles exhibit a bit of the obsessive antagonism towards the West that can be found in some Muslim circles. The West as a whole is characterized as a black hole of materialistic impulses with no appreciation for spirituality or religiosity of any kind. This anti-westernism might be a strategy for *Hira'* to appeal to the strongly anti-American sentiment in the Arab world, but it risks undermining the universal religiosity that the magazine claims for Islam. Why not speak simply of materialism without attributing it to the West as source, since, after all, it is no longer possible, if it ever was, to identify it exclusively with the West? There is currently a great need to get beyond reducing others to categories. Materiality is not exclusive to the West no less or more than spirituality is exclusive to the East, and one can find various forms of corruption in eastern societies no less than in western ones. There are materialistic and spiritualistic impulses in both East and West. It is more truthful to abandon tendencies to divide East and West into antagonistic categories.

It is certainly permissible—even vital—to criticize the moral shortcomings of government policies, whether governments in the West or governments in the East. In this globalized age, however, western civilization can be tagged as spiritually and ethically bankrupt no less or more than eastern civilization. Muslim attempts to locate the tyranny of the West—real or perceived—in its cultural and spiritual heritage are no less hypocritical or unfounded than non-Muslim attempts to link democratic shortcomings and terrorist activities—real or perceived—in the East in its cultural and spiritual heritage.

Second, *Hira'* is silent on politics. Why? Its religiosity is well-grounded in the heritage of Islam and could offer a welcome contribution on Muslim understanding of the nature and purpose of politics by recovering the great insights of Islam's tradition of political thought. By avoiding politics, *Hira'* risks irrelevancy for an Arab audience that desperately seeks a way for Islam to guide it beyond authoritarian rule, sectarian conflict, and Jihadist activity. One important element in Islam's tradition of political thought is mercy (*rahma*) as a public interest (*maslaha*) and not only a spiritual virtue. Forgiveness, as the moral fruit of mercy, has vital import for the public welfare of Arab society today. The aim of *Hira'* of speaking Turkish in Arabic, i.e. the language of the Qur'an, is highly relevant in this sense. Arab society still has a strong feeling of injustices committed by Ottoman rule. This is not at all to connect these injustices to the religious outlook of *Hira'* but rather to suggest that backing this outlook by *aksyon* would connect the magazine and its purpose more dynamically to the concerns of Arab society. Fethullah Gülen could effectively do this, devoting an issue of *Hira'* to this theme, including a statement of apology and hope for forgiveness for the excesses of Ottoman rule. Or, alternatively, the magazine could devote some of its articles on history to a careful treatment of some of the problematic sides of Muslim history and the place of Ottoman rule in it. (Two articles on Ottoman history seem to be defensive of Ottoman rule). Seeking forgiveness by exploring history is a strategy that has been used by other religious leaders, including popes, and can be an effective way to mediate a profound religiosity of the

type represented by *Hira*'. The evidence suggests that the ideas of Nursi have been favorably received in Arab society, from Morocco to Syria. It may be useful to think of a way to consolidate these ideas with *aksyon* as heralded by the appearance of *Hira*'.

This has been a general overview of a new Gülen initiative. The magazine has caught the attention of the Arab press and Arab intellectual circles to a degree, but it is still too early to assess its impact on Arab society as a whole. Is it having effect? It has to—for the sake of the Muslim world it addresses but also for the entire world. It represents the type of religiosity that must succeed for the sake of global solidarity. And to judge from the history of the Gülen movement, it will.