

Article

Travel as *hicret*: (Re)Framing Experiences of Exile in the Gülen Community in Brazil

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Abstract: This article analyzes how members of the Gülen community in Brazil have mobilized the Islamic tradition in order to make reason of critical changes in their lives, since July 2016 failed coup in Turkey. This community is part of the Gülen Movement, a transnational Turkish Islamic network that operates mainly through educational and cultural activities. The Movement's charismatic religious leader, Fethullah Gülen, was held responsible for the failed putsch and its participants have since been persecuted by the Turkish government both at home and abroad. The article shows how Gülen's discursive articulation of the notions of *hizmet* (religious service) and *hicret* has been mobilized by his followers settled in Brazil as an Islamic framework that provides them with moral reasoning to carry on in what they define as the Prophet's path. It also shows that changes in economic and political context may lead to different motivations and objectives in one's trajectory, producing a reconfiguration of meanings related to travel, migration and diaspora.

Keywords: Gülen Movement; transnational movement; Islamic movement; Islam in Brazil; Anthropology of Religion; migration

1. Introduction

In the Islamic tradition, travel is an important means of connecting with God. Travel is in one of the five pillars of belief, the *hac* (pilgrimage to Mecca); in the doctrine of *hicret*, migration of the faithful when unable to practice their religion freely in their land; in the Quranic *sura* "The Night Journey" (*Al-Isra*) (Quran 17: 1), which narrates Prophet Muhammad's miraculous travel from Mecca to Jerusalem, from where he would have ascended to the heavens (*Al-Mi'raj*); and in the Hadith literature, which ties the physical act of travel to the search of knowledge and institutes the search of knowledge as an obligation upon every Muslim: "Seek knowledge even in China", Muhammad exhorted his people (Gellens 1990, p. 53).

Therefore, travel as pilgrimage, migration, and search for knowledge occupies a special place in religious imagination among Muslims. However, travel may also relate to meanings that are not contemplated by the Islamic doctrine, when religious motivations are articulated to other driving-forces, as such as economical and professional motivations (Eickelman and Piscatori 1990, p. 5). It is important to look at the complexity of personal motivations, which may combine diverse systems of social and cultural values (e.g., religion, ethnicity, nationalism, political ideology, and economical strategy) and cannot be reduced to conscious choices (Schiochet 2011). Moreover, motivations and objectives may change throughout the subjects' personal trajectories and may vary according to context. Radical changes in context may even produce new reasons for travelling and result in different experiences of movement in the life of one same subject.

The present article analyzes the reconfiguration of meanings related to travel among members of a Turkish Muslim community in Brazil. This community is constituted by participants of the Gülen Movement (named after its charismatic religious leader, Fethullah Gülen), which can be described as

a transnational Turkish Islamic network that operates in around 140 countries, mainly, through educational and cultural activities. The article focuses on a period of critical change in followers' economic, social, and political situation, when they became one of the target groups of Turkish government persecution, in the aftermath of July 2016 failed military coup in Turkey. Having previously exerted considerable political influence in Turkey, the Gülen Movement lost its social prestige and economic power both within and beyond Turkish borders. Many participants had to flee the country; while others, who had migrated by choice before the failed putsch, are unable to return. They became forced migrants, and some have applied for asylum in various countries, including Brazil.

If this conjuncture has engendered experiences of loss of diverse kinds (personal, material, and symbolic), it has also enabled a reconfiguration of the ways in which the subjects perceive themselves in relation to the broader Turkish diaspora and their role in global society. The interpretative framework for the reconfiguration of meanings related to travel is constituted by Gülen's repertoires on the Islamic history, particularly on the formative period of Islam, and its imagined connections to the history of his own movement. Based on ethnographic fieldwork with the Gülen community in Brazil, conducted mainly between March 2015 and December 2017, this analysis highlights the intimate ties between reasons to migrate and context, showing that changing circumstances may be arenas for reframing perceptions on migration, exile, and diaspora¹. As demonstrated by (Geertz 1973; Victor 2005), changing circumstances tends to produce a general crisis, which can be defined as an experience of instability characterized by tension, suffering, and a feeling of unfairness, but also by moments of reflexivity and change. All the proper names in this article are pseudonyms, so the anonymity of my interlocutors is protected.

In order to contextualize the ethnographic field and data presented here, a brief outline of the evolution of the relations between two key notions to the Gülen Movement, "*hizmet*" (religious service) and "*hicret*" (migration), will be offered. The Turkish word "*hizmet*" comes from the Arabic "*khidma*", which means "divine service" (literally, "service", "favor, or "obligation"). In the context studied it means "religious service" and is the term used by the community members to refer both to the Islamic movement in which they are participants as an imagined global community—the Hizmet Movement, as they call it—and to the morally invested actions in which they engage in order to implement their religious leader's "civilizational" project. Those actions have an individual dimension, that of self-fashioning, and a collective dimension, that of community building and the spreading of Gülen's worldview throughout the globe. This article focuses on the collective dimension of spreading Gülen's message, where *hizmet* meets *hicret*. "*Hicret*" is the Turkish version of the Arabic word "*hijra*", which can be literally translated as "departure", "emigration" or "flight" and refers primarily to Prophet Muhammad's migration from Mecca to Medina in 622 A.D. (Masud 1990).

2. Traveling from Turkey to the World: A Brief Narrative on the Gülen Movement

Historically, the emergence of the Gülen Movement fits within the broader context of religious reform that spanned Muslim-majority countries throughout the twentieth century and intensified in the 1990s. More specifically, it pertains to the process of religious renewal in Islam that marked the public space in Turkey in the mid-twentieth century, with the loosening of the authoritarianism of the Kemalist ideology². The end of a 25-year imposition of secularizing policies that aimed at confining Islam to the private sphere meant, *inter alia*, the expression of religiosities in the public

¹ I have been in contact with the Gülen Movement in Brazil since 2012, but started fieldwork after initiating my PhD program in 2013. Between 2016 and 2017, I also made short ethnographic incursions to Turkey, Argentina, South Africa, and the US, including Gülen's home complex in Saylorsburg, Pennsylvania.

² Kemalism is an ideology that refers to the vision of Turkey's founder and first president, Mustafa Kemal, "of a culturally uniform and Westernized secular society in which state institutions and the military play a special tutelary role as guarantors of Kemalist democracy", and whose solidarity is based on the assumption of a "racial unity" (White 2013, p. 3).

space and the social, cultural, and political mobilization of religious communities (Vicini 2013; White 2013; Findley 2010)³.

One of the religious communities that benefited from the possibility of political and cultural mobilization and became the representative of the religious reforms was the Nur community, formed by disciples of the religious leader Said Nursi (1873–1960). Nursi offered a project of modernity alternative to that presented by the Kemalist state, in which he reconciled religion and science, showing the possibility of an Islamic modernity. The notion of *hizmet* as a “religious service” provided by the Muslim devotee to his community (in the sense of his surroundings) in the form of social activities and works towards the moralization of society was part of Said Nursi’s repertoire (Vicini 2013; Agai 2002; Findley 2010).

After Nursi’s death in 1960, the Nur community continued to expand and split into different groups, one of which became the Gülen Movement. Fethullah Gülen came into contact with the writings of Said Nursi, brought together in the work known as *Risale-i Nur* (Epistles of Light), around 1957 and became an active participant in the Nur community (Agai 2002). His ideal of *hizmet*, whose greatest differential over that of Nursi is the emphasis on “action” (*aksiyon*), and the concepts that underlie it begin to form at that moment (Agai 2002). Despite their particularities, due to the construction of the Islamic tradition in Turkey, the project of both shares with those of other religious communities, mainly Sufis, the focus on the moral reform of the individuals as a condition and the only possible way for the moralization of society.

In the history of the Gülen Movement, the period beginning in the late 1960s and ending in 1983 is marked by the formation of Gülen’s thought and the religious community (*cemaat*) around him (Yavuz 2003b). At that time Gülen elaborated the formation project of what he called a “new generation”, formed by “ideal humans” (*ideal insanı*) who will be the progenitors of a “new era”, “the age of belief and moral values, an age that will witness a renaissance and revival for the believers” (Gülen 2006, p. 81). The “ideal human” is the result of the perfection of one’s own life, through discipline, a sense of responsibility, and commitment to social action (Balci 2003; Yavuz 2013c). If, for Muslims, the Prophet is the personification of the “perfect man”, for Gülen and his followers, *hizmet* is the path to this perfection, since it is a way of emulating the Prophet.

From 1983 on, due to the economic liberalization policies of the then Prime Minister Turgut Özal, the Movement expanded its formal education project within Turkey by opening numerous schools and preparatory courses (*dershane*) (Findley 2010; Tittensor 2014). The creation of foundations (*vakıf*) and associations (*dernek*) allowed the Movement to decentralize and expand; at the same time, the end of the state media monopoly opened the door to its growth in the media sector. This second phase of the evolution of the Movement, which may be extended until 1999, witnessed a substantial growth within Turkey through investments in several sectors such as the financial, media, and educational ones. Physical movement came to be an important means of taking “action” in the accomplishment of Gülen’s nationalist project of reforming Turkish society.

A combination of internal political conflicts and a propitious external context marked the subsequent years and a third phase in the Movement’s history. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Gülen’s followers seized the opportunity and expanded their educational model to countries in Central Asia that had historical and cultural connections with Turkey, such as Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, then to the Balkans. The success of these first initiatives encouraged the opening of what would amount to about 1000 educational institutions in more than 140 countries, consolidating the Gülen Movement as a (primarily) transnational educational movement. However, it is worth noticing that the network spreads unequally around the globe and concentrates mainly in countries in Central Asia and the Balkans, but also in Africa (such as Nigeria, Kenya, and South Africa) and the United States see (Hendrick 2013). Since the late 1990s, the Movement has also been present in South America (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Venezuela, and Colombia), where its

³ While the concept of “secularism” refers to the idea of separation of religion and state, in the Turkish political system it adds another sense, that of laicism. One of the founding principles of the Turkish secular state, laicism refers to a secular lifestyle and subordination of religion to the state (White 2002; White 2013).

communities are relatively small. In these countries, the Movement basically operates in the educational sector, through its own schools and cultural centers see (Dumovich 2018).

Therefore, travel gained new contours, as it included migration across nation-states' borders and required personal will to leave one's homeland, albeit usually temporarily, in the name of the cause of *hizmet*. This third phase is, thus, marked by a diasporization of Gülen's followers, giving their movement a transnational figure and reinforcing its missionary character. Gülen's writings and sermons on the theme of *hicret* aimed at mobilizing his followers to leave Turkey in order to volunteer in his movement's educational network. At the same time, Gülen's nationalist vision of "*hizmet*" as a service to Turkey leaned toward a universalist humanism, in which Islamic concepts were articulated to human rights, democracy, and economic liberalism⁴.

The softening of Gülen's nationalist verve in favor of an internationalist perspective, however, is also linked to the Kemalist establishment's opposition campaign, which came to view Gülen as a threat to the secular state after the so-called "soft coup" of 1997. Although Gülen had supported the coup, in an attempt to gain legitimacy vis-à-vis the military state, he was accused of being reactionary soon after (Yavuz 2003a, p. 202; Vicini 2014; Tittensor 2014). The campaign against Gülen reached its climax when some recordings of his sermons were edited in a way that sounded like a call to overthrow the government and then were disseminated on a national network (Vicini 2013; Vicini 2014). He received an arrest warrant on charges of plotting the overthrow of the Turkish government, taking refuge in the United States in 1999 (Yavuz 2003b; Vicini 2014)⁵. Despite the withdrawal of the accusations against Gülen, he remained in the US.

It was during the first years of exile that Gülen articulated the concepts of *hizmet* and *hicret* in order to insist on the importance of the latter to the fulfillment of the former. Leaving Turkey to perform *hizmet* in other countries was considered an initiative of the "ideal human", indicating a high level of commitment and willingness to self-sacrifice. *Hicret* assumed the sense of renunciation of material life and of total submission to God: to perform *hizmet* in the space of *hicret* is to renounce life in Turkey in order to bring Turkey to the world. Therefore, my interlocutors compare themselves to "volunteer ambassadors", reproducing an analogy made by Gülen himself: "Hocaefendi says that we are like 'volunteer ambassadors', we represent our country and Islam outside of Turkey, with love for our country. This has to be done with faith and action", Havva, a Mathematics teacher around 34 and a follower since high school, explained to me in one of our many conversations⁶.

In the early 2000s the Gülen Movement was considered to be the largest and most powerful religious movement in Turkey and the most influential Turkish Islamic movement in the world (Findley 2010; Vicini 2013; Tittensor 2012; Hendrick 2013; Yavuz 2003a, 2003b; Agai 2007), consecrations that could be extended until the middle of 2016. Because there are many forms and levels of belonging and participation, it is difficult to estimate a precise number of participants. In addition, there is no formal affiliation, i.e. no documentation that indicates or proves participation. According to scholarly researches on the Movement, it would be possible to estimate a rough number of six million participants until 2011 e.g., (Vicini 2013, p. 24; Findley 2010, p. 389).

On 15 July 2016, a military failed coup in Turkey made Gülen once again target of state control. He was promptly accused by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of having engineered the failed putsch, accusations he has since denied. In a few days, the Turkish president instituted a state of emergency for three months and renewed it seven times, ending it on 18 July 2018. The two year-long state of emergency resulted in the arbitrary dismissal of around 130,000 public sector workers, the

⁴ It is worth pointing out that, although the globalization of the Movement has made Gülen's message increasingly inclusive, his writings and sermons that circulate inside the Movement remain grounded on a nationalist perspective, where Turkish-Islam and "Turkish culture" would be not only unique but also superior to other religions and cultures.

⁵ The official justification for Gülen's self-exile was medical treatment.

⁶ "Hocaefendi" is the term used by followers to refer to Fethullah Gülen in a respectful and reverent manner. It may be translated as "esteemed teacher" or "master," but carries the sense of "supreme religious authority" (Yavuz 2003a, p. 20; Findley 2010, p. 386; Hendrick 2013, p. 2).

closing down of more than 1.500 organizations and foundations, and the detaining of over 150,000 people, from which many were released and more than 50,000 are estimated to have been pending prosecution or trial. (Amnesty International 2018; Morris 2018).

Many, although not all, of those dismissed from their jobs and of those detained are alleged to be supporters of Gülen⁷. Financial institutions, schools, universities, and preparatory courses controlled by Gülen's followers have either been closed or have undergone administrative government interventions (*kayyım*) (Öztürk and Gözaydın 2017; Research Turkey 2017). Besides these measures, the Turkish president labeled the transnational movement led by Gülen as a "terrorist organization" and since the failed coup d'état has requested the extradition of the religious leader to the United States government, so far unsuccessfully.

Gülen interprets this new political panorama in Turkey from an Islamic framework, articulating a Quranic terminology related to the concept of *hicret* to the changes in his movement's situation. In his approach, *hicret* is defined as "sacred emigration", which was fulfilled in its full sense by Prophet Muhammad and has since been an example of action "to those who would follow his footsteps" (Gülen 1994). Emigration from Turkey is then elaborated as one of the consequences and therefore an evidence of the commitment to the cause of continuing the Prophet's mission, or *hizmet*.

From July 2016 onwards, therefore, it is possible to establish a new phase in the history of the Gülen Movement, still without clear contours, but certainly inaugurated by a second diasporization of its participants. This second diasporization, however, has a different nature from the previous one, for it has been marked by loss and forced migration. The fourth phase of the Gülen Movement's chronology has strengthened the relation between *hizmet* and *hicret*, and from participants' perspective it has also proven the timeless connections between themselves and their religious leader and Muhammad and his companions. In this context, the exile of the charismatic religious leader has been interpreted by his followers (and by himself, although indirectly) as the perfect example of what it means to perform *hizmet* in the space of *hicret*. If followers define Gülen's exile as the proof of his being right and emulating the Prophet, they feel that by following their religious leader they will come closer to God.

3. The Prophet's Path: Performing *hizmet* in the Space of *hicret*

The failed coup and its outcomes produced a collective crisis, which can be described as an experience of instability characterized by tension, suffering, and a feeling of injustice. This experience demanded for a religious rationalization of the events and their outcomes, one that would be grounded on the shared system of values and ideas that constitute the notion of *hizmet*⁸. Through the mobilization of Islamic symbols Gülen provided his followers with moral coherence and an image of order with which account for pain and bafflement. In one of his weekly sermons, entitled "Living abroad, migration, martyrdom, and service" (*Gurbet, hicret, şehadet ve hizmet*), which was delivered about a year and a half after the failed putsch, Gülen explained to his audience:

(...) there has (sic) always been two forms of migration. One is 'voluntary migration'. Migration by choice is a form of migration whereby the individual voluntarily travels to the four corners of the world in order to spread the majestic name of Muhammad and to provide an environment for the flying spirit of Muhammad to take wing. (...) For 20 or 30 years, they strived to wave raise their flag wherever they visited (Gülen 2018).

Gülen illustrated his utterance with accounts of some of his followers' experiences in the accomplishment of their divine mission outside of Turkey. As did Prophet Muhammad himself, those followers left home and everything they knew in the name of God. Then, he added: "Sometimes,

⁷ The purge widened as to also include other proscribed groups in Turkey, such as the Revolutionary People's Liberation Party-Front (DHKP-C), the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), and the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK), as reported by (Amnesty International 2018). Opposing journalists and media outlets also became common targets of the aforementioned crackdown (Amnesty International 2018; Morris 2018; Shaheen 2018).

⁸ Here I draw on (Geertz 1973) discussion on religious systems and their responses to critical social events.

Allah grants some individuals the reward of two migrations at once (...) It is now the time of ‘forced migration’. (...) The whole world got to know you because of this ‘forced migration’” (Gülen 2018). Comparatively, forced migration is superior to voluntary migration, because, according to Gülen, the former type is both a test and an opportunity given by God to His servants so they can teach the world about their moral values through action and representation (*temsil*).

However, not all participants in the Gülen Movement in Turkey suffer political persecution or threats to their physical integrity, since in some cases there is no way of knowing whether an individual is, in fact, a follower of Gülen. As there is no formal affiliation, in cases in which there is no way to link the individual to any institution, association or foundation of the Movement, the suspicion of participation may result in loss of employment and social marginalization, but not specifically in life danger. In these situations, the forcing aspect of migration may be moral and/or emotional. The subject is impelled to migrate by the feeling of belonging to the group of followers of Gülen, the “family” he has chosen; by the moral desire or imperative to continue on the “righteous path”; or even by the intimate realization that life is only possible through *hizmet*. Gülen’s speeches on forced migration are also aimed at reaching out to those potential migrants, who are called to join their community in the space of *hicret* as a “lost sheep”. After all, anyone who refuses to make *hicret* weakens the cause and strengthens the enemy. Thus, forced migration overlaps with obligatory migration, and Gülen’s followers are taken as the ones who like the Prophet and his companions formed the primordial Muslim community.

In order to understand how Gülen’s followers mobilize the mythical time of the Prophet’s *hicret* as a framework for making sense of critical changes in their lives and how they articulate this religious imagination in their daily life, the next session will turn to ethnographic data and analysis. But, first, it is necessary to introduce the Gülen community in Brazil.

4. The Gülen Community in Brazil

Between the middle of 2016 and the end of 2017, more than 20 families and 10 businessmen arrived in Brazil seeking refuge. They had fled mostly from Turkey, but also from countries that allied with the AKP government in anti-Gülen measures, such as Venezuela and Somalia⁹. There is a tendency among these forced migrants to see Brazil as a temporary destination or stepping stone to other countries, such as the US, Canada, Argentina, and Chile. They enter Brazil with a tourist visa and within three months are supposed to apply for refugee status in Brazilian Foreign Department; a few try to get a permanent visa for foreign investor, which requires proving an investment equal or superior to R\$ 500,000.00 (around USD 135,000.00)¹⁰. Even though Brazil does not offer any integration policy for refugees, in my interlocutors’ opinion this country hosts them easily and safely. Personal relations or business connections also constitute reasons for choosing the Gülen community in Brazil among others in followers’ global network.

By December 2017, the Gülen community in Brazil counted between 280 and 300 members, including families and university students¹¹. Between 2004 and 2016, members settled in four of the

⁹ Venezuelan president Nicolas Maduro visited Erdoğan in October 2017, when they signed bilateral agreements, including in the security sector. See, for example: <https://www.voanews.com/a/venezuela-nicolas-maduro-turkey-recep-tayyip-erdogan-meet-european-tour/4059398.html>; http://www.eldiario.es/politica/Maduro-Erdogan-acuerdan-relaciones-turcovenezolanas_0_694331441.html and <https://www.efe.com/efe/espana/mundo/maduro-y-erdogan-acuerdan-una-nueva-era-en-las-relaciones-turcovenezolanas/10001-3400917>. Somali government has been Erdoğan’s ally in his effort in extinguishing Gülen’s influence outside Turkey. Right after the attempted coup of July 2016, Somali government ordered the closure of schools and a hospital linked to the Movement in Mogadishu. See, for instance: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-somalia-turkey-military/turkey-opens-military-base-in-mogadishu-to-train-somali-soldiers-idUSKCN1C50JH>.

¹⁰ According to Brazilian official exchange rates in 16 February 2019.

¹¹ The intense flow of people between Turkey, Brazil, and a number of other countries makes membership number imprecise.

main Brazilian cities: São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Brasília, and Belo Horizonte. Community institutions included a cultural center in each city; a chamber of commerce, two Islamic centers (also called mosques by some) and an international school in São Paulo. In addition to its own institutions, the community has established partnerships with private and public Brazilian institutions, especially educational and cultural ones, such as universities, schools, and cultural centers, but also with trade and business associations.

The various activities organized, promoted, and sponsored by the community act as strategies to publicize the Movement, the figure of Fethullah Gülen, and an idealized “Turkish culture” (shaped by their own representations of Turkish Islam¹²) within specific groups in Brazilian society. These activities aim to generate “social capital” by establishing and cultivating ties with whom community representatives consider “opinion-makers” in different sectors of the host society—such as academic, mediatic, political, and cultural ones—and, to a lesser degree, a more diffused public¹³. This co-optation occurs at the ideological level, through the mobilization of moral values, but also at the level of gift giving through the establishment of a system of exchanges, in which gifting and counter-gifting are made through kindnesses, banquets, travels, supports, and favors¹⁴. The activity strategies aim at the accumulation of economic, symbolic, and social capital, but less as the ultimate goal and more as a means to achieve religious goals.

Most members contribute actively to community building and to the implementation of what they call *hizmet* in Brazil. Male members usually work for the community’s institutions, for which they received their monthly income from a common fund. After the financial crisis that fell onto the community, however, many male members, as well as some female members, have resorted to alternative ways of survival, opening Turkish cafés and restaurants, grocery stores, jewelry business etc. Almost every woman contributes with their voluntary work, except for the ones who work as teachers at the Gülen Movement school or the community’s cultural centers, a job that is rather paid for. However, since the financial crisis they too have been working as volunteers.

Concerning the approximately 40 male and female university students under community’s management, motivations for traveling may be of a different kind. A few students did not participate in the Movement before being part of the Gülen community in Brazil, where they came into contact with Gülen’s ideas for the first time. These students indicated motivations related mainly to individual growth and personal fulfilling to leave Turkey, such as a desire to travel to other parts of the world as a means through which shape themselves as cosmopolitan Muslims. Knowing another country, meeting different people, and learning a second language are commonly seen as an opportunity for social distinction or simply for having a lifetime experience. A reason why they seek to fulfill these desires under the care of the Gülen Movement is that it provides them with an appropriate moral environment, that is, a space circumscribed by the normative and practical framework of the Islamic tradition from which they can experience the world.

Most of the 40 students, however, were already participants of the Movement when they left Turkey in order to perform *hizmet* in Brazil. They usually got to know the Movement and Gülen’s ideas whether from their relatives or from a teacher or colleague in high school or a preparatory course. Like the students who were not followers before coming to Brazil, they were also motivated by personal interests and in-worldly desires, but there is a tendency to understand these personal motivations from a moral framework that combines religious beliefs and nationalistic values. These students believe that it is their religious duty to represent Islam outside Turkey, especially in countries where *hizmet* (both the movement and its message) is still unknown. Therefore, for them making *hicret* in order to do *hizmet* is engaging both in self-development and in the moral transformation of global society. Leila’s assertion on the reason why she and her counterparts must

¹² Gülen’s thought is deeply shaped by representations of Turkish Islam that combine a Turkish national identity and a Muslim identity. See, for example, (Yavuz 2003a; Turam 2004; Özdalga 2006; Vicini 2013).

¹³ The concept of “social capital” was formulated by Pierre Bourdieu (1980, p. 2) as “the set of present or potential resources that are linked to the possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relations of knowledge and recognition”.

¹⁴ The notion of systems of exchange as mobilized here relates to the gift economy described by (Mauss 1950).

make *hicret* is an example of the religious and nationalistic reading of travel that circulates within the community: “We could have been born in any country, but we were born in Turkey. Why? In order to serve Allah [...] we have this responsibility, it is like a religious obligation we have”. Leila was then a 21-year-old Biology student in a private university in São Paulo, who first heard about Gülen’s ideas from her brother-in-law.

An important as pervasive motivation among followers in Brazil, whether male or female, student or not, relates to affection and even love for the charismatic persona of their religious leader. Many of my interlocutors, both men and women, declared a deep love for their Hocaefendi. Havva, like Burhan, 30, and Mehmet, 35, told me they love Gülen more than their own father, and from several followers I heard that “above Hocaefendi, there is only the Prophet and Allah”. This emotional motivation combines with both mundane and religious motivations, for the more active and successful in *hizmet*, the closer to Gülen and hence to God.

While the early 2010s was a thriving period for the Gülen community in Brazil, things changed radically in the second half of 2016. Although political conflict between former allies AKP and Fethullah Gülen began in 2011 and intensified in 2014, it was the advent of the failed coup in Turkey on 15 July 2016 that had a strong impact on the community, including the personal lives of its members. According to community members, many of the businessmen who donated scholarships and funded the Movement’s activities in Turkey and elsewhere, including Brazil, were arrested and their property confiscated.

Those anti-Gülen measures profoundly affected the financial resources of the Gülen community in Brazil, which, unlike most of its counterparts around the world, depended heavily on the remittance of money from such institutions and businessmen based in Turkey. For that reason, the material structure of the community suffered a retraction and its members had to look for alternative ways for earning their income outside the community. Furthermore, within a few months, everyone had their lives directly or indirectly affected by the Turkish government crackdown. Many have had relatives and/or friends arrested; the previously intense flux of people, cultural artifacts, and ingredients between Brazil and Turkey ceased to fuel the community; and a few students were not able to return to Brazil from their July 2016 vacation at home in Turkey. In addition to that, community members have hosted friends and acquaintances who arrive from Turkey or elsewhere in a refuge situation, sometimes devoid of any resources or in need for medical treatment, as I could observe.

5. *Hizmet* and Its Intersections: Diaspora, Forced Migration, and *hicret*

As the conjuncture of the post-coup events has been interpreted from an Islamic framework, the ideal of *hizmet* and its articulations to perceptions on travel have been reconfigured to accommodate followers’ new reality and account for experiences of loss and suffering.

It is interesting to notice that before the anti-Gülen measures taken by the AKP, the term diaspora was not a self-descriptive concept used by members of the Gülen community in Brazil. According to the general view, “diaspora” carries a negative connotation, because it is associated with forced displacement, victimization, and loss. Likewise, terms such as “migration”, “asylum”, and “refuge” are associated with minorities, while the community’s discourses about itself, which are meticulously produced and reproduced by its representatives, used to describe a powerful, influential, and internationally recognized civic movement¹⁵.

Although their distinctiveness had a religious moral dimension, it was also grounded on social prestige and political and economic power. However, after the failed coup and its effects on his movement, Gülen’s speeches have emphasized the religious moral dimension of his message. The emphasis on the religious moral dimension of *hizmet* assumes the form of analogies that evoke a mythical past composed by both the Ottoman Empire, what Gülen calls the “glorious past” of the Turkish nation, and the Prophet’s *hicret*. Such analogies, in which relations of similarity are

¹⁵ When speaking of Gülen’s exile, the terms used by his followers are “in retreat”, “reclusive” and, above all, “self-exiled” in the US, emphasizing the “choice” factor in his decision to leave Turkey back in 1999.

constructed by comparisons more or less implicit, approximate past and present, connect characters and events from the Islamic history to Ottoman personalities and experiences, whose heirs would be himself and his followers.

This change of focus from a diffuse distinctiveness to a particularly religious and moral character has enabled the emergence of a “diasporic consciousness” (Clifford 1994, p. 312) among members of the Gülen community in Brazil. As they experience a tension between loss and hope, a feeling of solidarity with other diasporic groups in a situation considered similar to their own tends to be produced. For example, requests for refuge in Brazil from new members of the community have generated a solidary stance towards Syrian refugees both in this country and in Turkey¹⁶. But this identification is not only due to the fact that they share with these Syrians the status of “refugees”, but mainly in the way they imagine them: Sunni Muslims fleeing a dictatorial and unfaithful government that massacres its own people. Fatma, a university student in Psychology, confided to me her change of attitude, which she had outlined in a conversation we had months before:

You know what I thought about the Syrian refugees in Turkey [...] that has changed a lot. Before, I did not like them, I did not like the fact that they were going to Turkey, to cause problems in my country. But now I understand, because we are in the same situation, we are being oppressed and we need to flee our country.

Fatma’s parents and siblings were one of the 20 families that fled from Turkey and arrived in Brazil seeking refuge in early 2017.

Self-identification with the broader Turkish diaspora and also with refugees from other “origins”, however, is relative and partial because it depends on the context and mobilizes only certain aspects considered relevant as “things in common”. In relation to the Turkish diaspora in general, Gülen’s followers’ migration would be different in nature, insofar it would be forced. Still according to their perspective, they would differ from other refugees for being forced out of their country because of persecution for their moral convictions (they would hardly use the word “political”); while other refugees were forced to leave their country due to war, like Syrians, or due to “terror”, like Kurds¹⁷.

While, prior to July 2016, community members understood migration already in terms of *hicret*, it was seen as a way of emulating the Prophet in the journey towards God, the changing context after the failed coup made their migration not only the reproduction of the original *hicret* but also the proof that their path is the Prophet’s path. For my interlocutors, the concept of migration has merged with the notion of *hicret* as the original forced migration, which has been reenacted by themselves in the present time. Performing *hizmet* in a difficult situation has been considered a necessary means through which purify their hearts and the movement, since self-sacrifice and suffering are seen as genuine experiences of piety and closeness to God. This reading of the events was exemplified by Nilüfer, a woman around 35 who is an active participant in the Gülen Movement since high school:

Doing *hizmet* when everything was fine was very easy for everybody, there was no real sacrifice. Now, with all the difficulties, it is very hard to do *hizmet*, we need to make a lot of sacrifices [...] it is the price to pay for being in the right path. The same thing happened to our Prophet, you know. All the prophets suffered, they left everything, to approach God, you understand?

Nilüfer claimed that self-sacrifice and suffering lead to closeness to God because the person in pain turns to Him to ask for forgiveness and strength to go on, that is, she realizes she needs Him. Nilüfer told me that when everything changed in her life she became more devoted to her religious duties; she has prayed more frequently and hence she has been closer to God.

¹⁶ In Brazil, Syrians represent the nationality with the greatest number of recognized refugees, counting 39% of a total of 10.145 refugees from diverse nationalities, according to 2017 data from CONARE. Available online: http://www.acnur.org/portugues/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/refugio-em-numeros_1104.pdf.

¹⁷ It is interesting to note that Turkish refugees of Kurdish origin are sometimes portrayed as victims of “terror” perpetrated by their own ethnic group in Turkey, rather than as victims of persecution by the Turkish state.

Havva, the Mathematics teacher abovementioned, also reproduced a common narrative in the community: “What is happening in Turkey now happened in the history of mankind, with Muslims and their rulers from the beginning of times. That’s why I have 100% faith in the word of Hocaefendi”. For Havva, as for other community members, they would be living a recurring historical process that began in the formative period of Islam. Erdoğan is then compared to Yezid, the *halife* (*khalifa*) who ordered the assassination of Hussein, grandson of Muhammad: “Every age has its Yezid, our age has Erdoğan”, elaborates Havva and many others of my interlocutors¹⁸. When interpreting their persecution by a powerful ruler as a repetitive event in the history of prophecies, followers create a connection between Gülen and Muhammad, and between themselves and Muhammad’s companions.

Another interlocutor, Ipek, who is a 22-year-old Pedagogy student in a private university in São Paulo, told me that in her opinion it was actually positive for the Movement to have been through those problems, because it is “clean and pure” now. According to her account, when the Movement had a lot of money and social prestige, many people used to say that they were participants in order to have personal gains by entering its educational or business network. Now, the difficulties have repelled those people whose intentions were false, while only the true ones have stayed, those with “pure” intentions. From her perspective, the changing context has had a cleansing and purifying effect on the Movement. “Now we are really free, free to do *hizmet* only for God”, she concluded.

The aforementioned statements exemplify the pervasive interpretation within the Gülen community in Brazil of the reversal in the political, economic, and social condition of the Movement. For many, it has been a divine trial and also a blessing, making them more motivated to continue in their mission.

6. Conclusion: *Hicret*, Away from Turkey and Closer to God

In the religious imagination of followers of the charismatic religious leader Fethullah Gülen, the concepts of *hizmet* and *hicret* are intimately related. From the formative years of Gülen’s thought to the expansion of his movement to the political persecution of his followers, both the notions of *hizmet* and *hicret* evolved and were influenced by political, economic, and social developments in and outside Turkey. The concept of *hizmet* was first mobilized as a “service” to Turkey and focused on the project of raising a new generation educated in religion and modern science within Turkish society. As the religious community around Gülen gained new proportions in number, activities, and institutions, physical movement became one of its features, although still circumscribed by Turkish borders.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Gülen’s followers crossed national borders, taking *hizmet* to Central Asian countries, broadening the scope of their movement, yet keeping it close to Turkey, the focal point from where their civilizational project departs. In the following years, the idea of *hicret* served as an Islamic framework from which experience migration, motivating followers to leave Turkey and consolidate their network as a transnational religious movement. At the same time, Gülen’s ideals provided followers with Islamic moral reasoning for seeking in-worldly achievements. Thus, traveling for religious purposes mingles unproblematically with mundane motivations, such as individual growth, economic investment, professional success, and social prestige within the Movement’s structure. Until the failed coup of July 2016, *hicret* was yet a question of individual initiative towards the accomplishment of *hizmet*, placing the follower one step further on the Prophet’s path to God. A comfortable socioeconomic status and balanced political disputes kept Turkey both a hub and a yearning final destiny of followers’ travel.

When AKP’s government persecution on the Gülen Movement converted participants’ voluntary migration into forced migration and prevented them returning to Turkey, the place they call home, Gülen provided them a framework from which make reason of their changing reality.

¹⁸ My interlocutors, however, talk about the assassination of the “Prophet’s family”, avoiding the name of Hussein, for this personage of the Islamic history is linked to Shia Muslims, whom the followers of Gülen do not want to be mistaken for.

Through the religious notion of *hizmet* social marginalization, financial difficulties, and persecution can be rationalized as the evidence of a divine mission. Even more, the ideal and performance of *hizmet* have accounted for the transformation in the condition of their exile, enabling actualizations and experiences of *hicret*.

Some scholars have already pointed to the Movement's flexibility to adapt to different historical, political, and cultural contexts, as well as to local specificities see, for example, (Balci 2003; Tittensor 2014; Hendrick 2013). However, this malleability has often been treated in terms of Gülen's discursive strategy for conforming to different audiences, or of his followers' strategic endeavors towards the realization of well-defined objectives. While not denying the instrumentality of Gülen's discursive practices nor of his followers' actions and behaviors, this article aimed to highlight the complexity of personal motivations and the fluidity of personal objectives, which might change according to context and throughout the subjects' biographies.

Perspectives on travel are open to reconfiguration inasmuch experiences of *hicret* change according to context, both inside and outside Turkey's borders. The present article showed that the current critical conjuncture of the Movement strengthened the relation between travel and migration; the connections between *hizmet* and *hicret*; and the timeless spiritual closeness between Muhammad and the original Muslim community, back in 622, and Gülen and his followers at the present. Moreover, this context of loss and suffering engendered a reconfiguration of motivations and objectives, and led to the production of a diasporic consciousness and also a solidary stance in relation to other groups in a refuge situation.

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