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Fethullah Gulen: The Islamic scholar Turkey blames for the failed coup

By [Valerie Strauss](#) July 16 at 10:17 AM



Turkish Islamic preacher Fethullah Gulen is pictured at his residence in Saylorsburg, Pa., in 2013. (Selahattin Sevi/AP)

The man that Turkey's leaders have blamed for a failed coup attempt by a group of army officers is an Islamic scholar named Fethullah Gulen, who lives in self-imposed exile in Pennsylvania and who has inspired a network said to include more than 160 charter schools in the United States.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan says that the coup attempt Friday was the work of army officers who are followers of Gulen, who had once been an ally but whose movement has become critical of the increasingly authoritarian regime.

The Gulen movement denied involvement in the coup, but Secretary of State John F. Kerry on Saturday was quoted as saying the United States would support investigations to determine who instigated the attempted coup and where its support originates. He said he anticipates questions will be raised about Gulen.

[Turkey foils bloody coup attempt, closes in on remnants of renegade forces]

Although Gulen lives on a secluded compound in Pennsylvania, he has maintained influence in Turkey through followers in the judiciary and police. Turkish media reported Saturday that 2,745 judges had been removed because of suspicions that they have links to the Gulen movement.

His followers have also opened many private schools around the globe, including more than 160 science-, math- and technology-focused public charter schools with different names in numerous states around this country.

The publicly funded charter schools — unofficially known as the Gulen charter — are thought to be operated by people, usually Turks, in or associated with the Gulen movement. Among the leading schools in the network are the Harmony schools in Texas, which have won millions of dollars in grants from the U.S. government and are among the highest-achieving in their communities. (There is also a Harmony charter school in Washington.)

These schools deny any relationship to Gulen — who is said to adhere to a moderate form of Islam — and the movement denies any relationship to the schools. But Sharon Higgins, an independent researcher on the

Gulen movement who [has written extensively about it](#), has said that it is common for officials at the charter schools to deny any connection. She said there are more than 160 Gulen-inspired charters in the country now, making it one of the biggest U.S. charter school networks.

The charter schools have sparked controversy over the years, with accusations that the Turkish leaders of many of these schools favor Turkish-run businesses when handing out contracts, even over other businesses that come in with lower bids; that they hire large numbers of foreign Turkish teachers on H1-B visas, and that some of them promote Turkish culture through curriculum and cultural exchanges. Critics say that these schools are linked to the Gulen movement and that their refusal to admit it reveals a lack of transparency. In a 2010 story about the Gulen network, USA Today reporter [Greg Toppo wrote](#):

“... documents available at various foundation websites and in federal forms required of non-profit groups show that virtually all of the schools have opened or operate with the aid of Gulen-inspired “dialogue” groups, local non-profits that promote Turkish culture. In one case, the Ohio-based Horizon Science Academy of Springfield in 2005 signed a five-year building lease with the parent organization of Chicago’s Niagara Foundation, which promotes Gulen’s philosophy of “peace, mutual respect, the culture of coexistence.” Gulen is the foundation’s honorary president. In many cases, charter school board members also serve as dialogue group leaders.

Education officials who are familiar with them say the schools aren’t trying to proselytize for Gulen’s vision of Turkey. While Turkish language and culture are often offered in the curriculum, there’s no evidence the schools teach Islam.

In 2011, the New York Times [reported on the Harmony charter school](#)

network in Texas:

The growth of these “Turkish schools,” as they are often called, has come with a measure of backlash, not all of it untainted by xenophobia. Nationwide, the primary focus of complaints has been on hundreds of teachers and administrators imported from Turkey: in Ohio and Illinois, the federal Department of Labor is investigating union accusations that the schools have abused a special visa program in bringing in their expatriate employees.

But an examination by The New York Times of the Harmony Schools in Texas casts light on a different area: the way they spend public money. And it raises questions about whether, ultimately, the schools are using taxpayer dollars to benefit the Gulen movement — by giving business to Gulen followers, or through financial arrangements with local foundations that promote Gulen teachings and Turkish culture.

In 2013, a group of Turks — who operated the Chesapeake Science Point Public Charter School in Anne Arundel County, Md. — attempted to open a charter school in Loudoun County, Va. The application was denied after hearings by the school board at which numerous people testified against the proposal and questions arose about curriculum and other operational issues.

One of the witnesses at the hearings testified that she and her husband had worked at a Gulen-inspired charter school in Ohio, which was opened in Dayton with the help of one of the Loudoun charter applicants, Fatih Kandil. She said her husband, a Turk, had been involved in the Gulen movement and that Turkish teachers at the Ohio school had to turn over 40 percent of their salaries to a secret fund used by the movement. In January 2013, Sinan Yildirim, listed as one of the

members of the proposed Loudoun school's initial governing board, was asked (by me) whether he and his fellow applicants were connected to Gulen and he answered: "We said no. They said yes. If they claim something they have to prove. And they can't prove it."

This past May, the Turkish government hired a law firm to file a complaint with the Texas Education Agency against the largest charter school network in the state, the Harmony schools, [according to the Dallas Morning News](#), which reported:

The firm, Amsterdam & Partners, filed a 32-page complaint ... with the state that details "some very concerning issues and some apparent illegal or improper conduct related to these school operators," said John Martin, senior counsel for the firm. Among the allegations: Harmony hires under-qualified Turkish teachers and steers business to companies run by Turkish nationals, including some former Harmony employees.

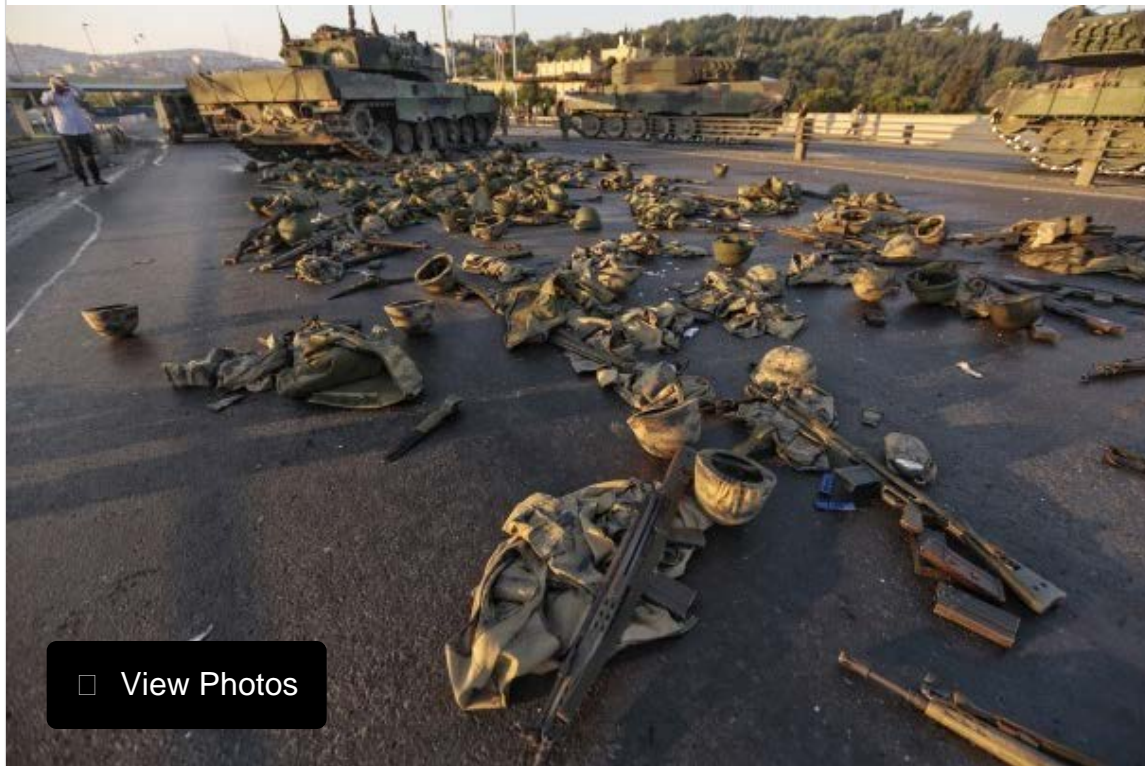
Soner Tarim, Harmony's chief executive officer, called the complaint "ridiculous and baseless." He said it's a politically motivated attack by Turkey's president, whom he says most Turks living in the U.S. don't support. Many allegations are old and have been addressed, settled or dismissed, he said.

How did Gulen get to Pennsylvania?

He first applied for a special visa to come into the United States more than 10 years ago, but the Department of Homeland Security denied it. A lawsuit challenging that decision was filed in 2007 in U.S. District Court in Philadelphia, saying that Gulen was "head of the Gulen Movement," and an important educational figure who had "overseen" the creation of a network of schools in the United States as well as in other countries, the Philadelphia Inquirer [reported in 2011](#). He was

granted a green card in 2008.

The scene in Turkey after an attempted coup



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Valerie Strauss covers education and runs The Answer Sheet blog.

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