An Introduction to the Nur Community of Turkey
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Abstract: The renewer (mujaddid) of the previous century had been Mevlana Khalid; the renewer of this century was not Said Nursi but his Treatise of Light Risale-i Nur. The Risale-i Nur has become the tool that pulls diverse groups together. After the Quran and Prophetic traditions, Nursi’s writings are the most read books in Turkey. The development and distribution of this way of thinking and its implication for matters of faith continued with the emergence of various publishing houses, organizations, foundations, educational institutions, press and media, publications and journals, and academic studies. Such a structure exists because the necessity of grasping belief logically takes precedence over other forms of worship or practices of faith. The influence of the Nur movement has increased even as the movement frequently has fragmented. This paradox indicates the flexibility and broad range of the Nur idiom. The fragmentation has led to fierce competition among Turkish political parties to court the followers of the various Nurju groups. The Nur movement also found some of its strength in republican failures. Outstanding among these was the inability of the secular republican ideology to replace Islam as a world view. The Nur movement’s ability to direct its operations through a cultural framework partly imposed by the Turkish republic, together with its rhetoric which incorporated a strain of Islamic mysticism, answered the operational mode and the spiritual demands of a Turkish clientele.

Keywords: Nursi, Nurju, Risale-i Nur, Gulen, Serif Mardin

I. Introduction
Said Nursi (d.1960) left behind a collection of about 130 works entitled Risale-i Nur (The Tractates of Light). His views on society, humanity, nature, and the destiny of the world, and his interpretations of Quranic verses in the light of modern science, powerfully impress his disciples. It is a characteristic of the various Nursi groups that when meet, they reverently absorb themselves in Nursi’s writings, as though inhaling them for inspiration. The Nuris believe they have a universal mission. They have opened private high schools in other countries, such as in the former Islamic republics of the Soviet Union, and in Australia. They like to recall that the Ottomans were once a great world power. They look to the Ottoman time as a period of splendor in both religion and politics. Their contemporary efforts are directed to recapturing that spirit of greatness and authority.¹ The Nursis are primarily intent on saving the faith, especially in the modern age. For instance, they wish to use science as an aid in proving the truth of Allah. The text-based nature of the movement makes it unique; since Nursi’s death in 1960, no one has succeeded him, and the movement remains very much centered around his writings. The Nur movement’s emphasis on text naturally has resulted in its involvement in the publishing and printing businesses.

II. Manpower of Nurjs
The Nur (or Nurju) Movement is the leading Islamic movement in Turkey, comprising about a dozen communities² with followers estimated to number between 2 and 6 million.³ Some have even cited the movement as encompassing nearly ten percent of the Turkish population. However, since the entry requirements to Nurju circles are very loose, there is a constant movement of members from one circle to another. In Turkey, the Nur movement acquired its most striking universalistic characteristics between 1950 and 1975.⁴ Serif Mardin comments on the ambiguous nature of the movement’s boundaries:

“The social characteristics of its earliest following, just as those of its present votaries, are difficult to pinpoint. Since it does not operate on the model of a traditional Islamic sect, but claims it is a medium for the ‘dissemination of the truth of the Quran’, its boundaries are diffuse: every person who joins in the task of dissemination is ipso facto a disciple. There are no initiation rites and there is no formal organizational structure; a precise count of the membership is, thus, impossible”.

Nurju networks in politics, media and education empower the community in public life. This movement did not take the form of an organized political party and never took on the formal organizational structures of a Sufi order. Instead, it was a “faith movement” that involved publishing organizations and groups of people inspired by Said Nursi’s writings collectively known as Risale-i Nur. In that sense, it has been the first and unique text-based Islamic movement in Turkey.

Whether one lives within the Jamaat community or is only involved in it, the movement is a place the students turn for aid. Furthermore, Ablas (older sisters) in the group provide guidance to the younger girls. The movement was overwhelmingly composed of men, though it continues to be true in the present as well but women’s groups later formed, nevertheless, it continues to be a male-dominated movement. In opting to be a part of the Nur movement, therefore, one also bows to the movement’s standards, submitting to its judgment. Indeed, the acceptance of such judgment is one aspect of being associated with a given identity. The Nurju grouping that prospered in the second half of the 1980s and the 1990s did so among small-scale merchants and the expanding professional groups in Turkey. There are several reasons for this mushrooming of traditional and modern Islamic networks. A club like arrangement of Nurju Dershanes (Nur Study Circles) as centers for the exchange of legal and business advice has contributed to the spread of the Nurju Dershane network throughout Turkey, particularly in those major cities experiencing economic growth.

III. Methodology of Nur Jamaat

Nursi founded the Nur community, in which the central form of religious activity is reading and reproducing the ideas in Risale-i Nur. After Nursi’s death in 1960, his followers divided into subgroups and have developed various forms of Islamic activism in politics, publishing, education and media. After the 1980s, the followers of the charismatic preacher Fethullah Gulen (b.1941) became the leading group among Nur communities. The Gulen Community focuses on educational activism by founding summer camps, student dorms, high schools and universities. There are more than 500 high schools, with more than 100,000 students in ninety one countries around the world, associated with the Gulen Community. One-fifth of these schools are in the Newly Independent States of Central Asia. Their schools are being established in India as well.

IV. Political involvement of Nurjus

The Nurju movement has gone through important phases since the 1960s. In the early 1970s, some Nurju groups began to side with the National Salvation Party (Milli Selamet Partisi), which was founded with the support of the Naqshbendi order. Another important split occurred in the aftermath of the military coup of 1980 between those who supported the coup (the group around Mehmet Kirkinci, Mustafa Sungur and Bayram Yuksel) and those who positioned themselves against it (the Yeni Asya group around Mehmet Emin Birinci, M. Nuri Gulec Firinci and Mehmet Kutlular). Those organized around Yeni Asya newspaper, have supported Centre-right parties such as the Democratic Party and True Path Party. A group under the leadership of Fethullah Gulen, associated with the newspaper Zaman (Time), increased its influence especially in the 1990s by accommodating with the secularist military and bureaucratic elite and adopting a Turkish nationalist position.

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V. Tariqats of Nurjus

Although the Nurju movement did not have a Tarikat structure, the disciples of Nur (Nur Talebeleri), as they called themselves, formed a network dispersed all over the country. A person became a Nurju (“Nurju”, follower of the Nur movement) by joining a group of taleb-e nur (Student of Nur), who met to study the Risale-i Nur.

In Turkey today, a large set of tariqats, or religious orders, are the Nurju groups. This name is one given to them by outsiders (Eskişehir Court dubbed Nursi’s followers as “Nurjus”). These groups would more likely call themselves the followers, or readers, or disciples of the writings of Nursi. Consisting of several branches and divisions, the Nursis all look strictly to the works of the twentieth century mystical writer Nursi as the spiritual guide to contemporary life.

VI. Differences among the Nurju Groups

As mentioned above, there are said to be around a dozen different major Nursi groups. For example, Nursi’s refusal to give up the script of the Quran made it illegal to print and circulate his works after the alphabet reform of 1928. Said’s treatises had to be copied by hand and circulated secretly. By the mid-1930s, some villages around Isparta, near Said’s first place of exile in western Anatolia, had become centers for manuscript reproduction, so much that his treatises became a factor in propagating rural literacy in the old script, among women as well as men. Some even hand-copy these writings using the original Ottoman script, treating them as semi-sacred, unwilling them to transliterate them into the modern Turkish alphabet. Yet other Nursi groups give much effort to publishing and distributing these works, including translations of them into other languages. They differ widely on many such issues. For instance, some Nursi groups are actively involved in mainstream politics. But other Nursi groups, totally rejecting the Turkish state for being un-Islamic, opt out of the secular system entirely, even to the extent of dressing distinctively.

Further, the focus of the movement itself is not to be Nursi at all, but the Risale-i Nur. Indeed, it is the lack of tolerance for differences in interpretation which constitutes the most important problem for the Nur movement over the last four decades. Ironically, the attitude of “one text, one interpretation” has given rise to different groups, each claiming to hold the authoritative interpretation. The process of “going Turkish” and “statist” created another split, along Turkish-versus-Kurdish ethnic lines. This ethnic fragmentation also coincided with the rise of politicized Kurdish nationalism as a result of the PKK attacks on the Turkish state. In the early 1980s, the Kurdish Nurjus began to organize around Tenvir Publishing House (Tenvir Neshriyat). The group stressed education in Kurdish by defending Nursi’s Medreset uz-Zehra project for a university in eastern Anatolia, which proposed education in Turkish, Arabic, and Kurdish in modern sciences and religious studies. Moreover, the group criticized the “Turkification” of the RNK by eliminating any reference to “Kurdistan” or “Kurd.” This group later organized as the Med-Zehra community under the leadership of Siddik Dursun and began to publish ‘Dava’ magazine in 1989. The magazine’s articles regularly questioned the close connection between Turkish nationalism and the Nurju movement and tried to construct a Kurdish Nursi. The attempt to maintain balance between Kurdish nationalism and Islamism led to a split within the Med-Zehra community; more nationalist Kurds, under the leadership of Izzettin Yildirim, established the Foundation of Zahra Education and Culture in 1991 and began to publish the monthly magazine ‘Nubihar’ in Kirmanca Kurdish in 1992. Although most Nurju groups reject these attempts to transform Nursi into a Kurdish nationalist, the rise of Turkish and Kurdish nationalism has contributed to the creation of two separate ethnic groups among the Nurjus.

VII. Major Nurju Groups

There are presently four major splinter Nurju groups- the community of Fethullah Gulen though distinct in itself known as Gulen-Hizmet movement; the mainstream Nurju group known as Mesheverat; the Yeni Asayeci and the Yeni Nesilciler (also known as Istanbul Foundation for Science and Culture). The writings of these second-generation Nurju intellectuals focus on contemporary issues: spiritual emptiness, the quest for identity amid growing fragmentation, and the loss of a common shared code of meaning. The most prominent contemporary leader of the group, generally known as the neo-Nurju, is Fethullah Gulen, who navigated the movement among this new bourgeoisie and mobilized them to support his private high schools in Turkey and Central Asia. Inversely, Mesheveret do not affiliate itself with any political party, it

13 These groups would more likely call themselves the followers, or readers, or disciples of the writings of Nursi, nevertheless, their methodology is implicitly permeated by Tasawwuf and even many Sufis recommend the writings of Said Nursi for their disciples.


attracted members of all parties. In fact, Nursi and his students always avoided political involvement. Nursi coined a very famous statement in this regard which became a principle for his students: “I take refuge in God from Satan and politics”17 as Nursi believed that one should focus on faith, rather than politics since faith is essential for the afterlife.

The Nesil is one of the most intellectually activist independent Nurju circles in Istanbul with several radio stations throughout the country. The Nesil circle includes prominent Nurju intellectuals, such as Bahadır Yavuz, a popular novelist, Şefa Mursel, a leading lawyer and writer, Faris Kaya, professor of Yıldız University, and İhsan Atasoy, a radio talk-show host. This group split from the Yeni Asya of Mehmet Kutlular in 1991. The Nesil circle is closer to Fethullah Gülen than any other Nurju group in the country.18

Western scholars and academic institutions are contacted and invited to participate in the discussion of Nursi’s works in various theoretical contexts, with conference proceedings published both in book form and in electronic versions and, more recently, sponsored academic studies published by Western academic presses. Over the past decade or so, certain branches of the Nur community have undertaken outreach activity consisting of attracting foreign scholars to conferences, sponsoring academic publications and, in the case of the Gülen community, establishing schools, media networks, and interfaith dialogue activities in a host of overseas locations.

Symposiums played a significant role in introducing Nursi’s writings to the global academic audience. They are mainly organized by the Istanbul Foundation for Science and Culture (IFSC), dedicated to the dissemination of Nursi’s thought. Taking the abolition of article 163 as an opportunity, the IFSC organized a symposium on Nursi on March 16, 1991. Scholars such as Serif Mardin, Mım Kemal Oke, and Colin Turner presented papers on Nursi’s thought. Indeed, this was a breakthrough point. First, it was the first academic gathering to discuss Nursi’s thought publicly. Second, this was to some extent a shift from the study-center method to a public academic gathering.

VIII. Copying and Publishing of Risale

The movement gained new momentum, especially after the printing of the Risale-i Nur in book format in 1956. Said Nursi and some of his disciples explained the support they gave to the Democratic Party as the result of the latter’s tolerant attitude towards their publishing activities. 19 A new generation of young students was organizing the printing and publishing of Said Nursi’s writings in Ankara, Istanbul, and other centers. Some of them became his voluntary assistants in his daily life. As a result of their involvement with the movement, some of the students also served terms in Afyon Prison. This generation was to form the nucleus of the Nurju movement in the following decades. The Nur disciples made themselves known through letters or messages addressed to politicians or to the press. 20

Despite all official measures against the Nurju movement, Said Nursi’s writings became known to an ever broader public through the continuing activities of the Nurju network and the Islamic press that sprang up in the 1960s. Nurjus had several periodicals and in 1971 they began to publish a daily newspaper, Ittihad (Union), which was later to be succeeded by the widely read Yeni Asya (New Asia). The circle around this latter newspaper constituted the mainstream of the movement which had split into different groups at different stages. Yeni Asya Publication was founded by several Nursi followers in 1968. It publishes four thousand copies of the Risale-i Nur every year. In addition to Nursi’s primary writings, Yeni Asya published more than thousands of secondary books explaining basic themes of the Risale-i Nur. The publication owns a daily newspaper, Yeni Asya Gazetesi.

Sozler Publications is one of the official publication houses of the Nur Community. It was founded by several of Nursi’s students in 1975 and has been a pioneer in translating the writings of Nursi into different languages. The major part of the Risale-i Nur was translated into English and Arabic by Sozler Publications. In addition, this publication translated various treatises of Nursi into 41 different languages including Kurdish, Tatar, Malay, Russian, and Indonesian. Every year, this publishing house publishes forty thousand copies of the Risale-i Nur. Hayrat Publications was founded in 1974. They primarily focused on publishing the writings of Nursi in Ottoman Turkish, the original language of Nursi’s writings.Envâr Publications was founded in 1979 and publishes Nursi’s Risale-i Nur. Other publication houses include Nesil, Shah Damar, RNK, Tenvir, Soz Basim, and Zahr.

IX. Communal Harmony

In Dershanes, reading is evolving into a kind of large-scale community formation with a number of social activities that consolidate social ties. In the urbanizing society of Turkey, people are isolated and search for

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ways to connect with other people. Reading the same book and internalizing the same vocabulary play an important role in connecting people. The Dershanes clearly are more than religious institutions. They also function as business channels and networks where employment and even the raising of investment capital among fellow Nurjus takes place. These Dershanes also have a strong class dimension. Wealthier people tend to congregate in their own upper-class neighborhood Dershanes. And even interpretations of the Risale-i Nur tend to vary according to the class makeup of each Dershane.

The Nurju movement has responded most effectively to the search for identity which has been a salient characteristic of Turkish politics since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Through religiously rooted and socially shaped networks, the Nurjus, participants of the Nurju movement, have sought to establish a sense of community within a laicist state. At the communal level, this identity functions as a boundary in relation to other groups. For example, it is possible to recognize Nurju in public places by their distinct manners and appearance. According to Yasin Aktay, a professor of Seljuk University, Nurjus set themselves apart from other Islamic groups with their very orderly clothing of suit with necktie, daily shaved face, almond moustache “badem biyik” and short and neatly cut hair. It is very rarely possible, if not impossible, to see a Nurju smoking, or eating or drinking at fast-food places, sitting at the coffee-houses, and so on. Islamic sexual ethics and the separation of sexes have been items on which they have been uncompromising, and these ideas have gone against the values promoted by the secular civil code of Turkey. The Risale is one of the common points of Nurjus. It binds them together, unifies them; being in the same house, doing good things together, speaking of good things, saying prayers, and worshipping together. They do not just see them at discussion groups (sohbet). They also go out together, go shopping. They do all types of activities together. They go to a concert together or are involved in a civic group.

Followers of the Nur movement look like many other Turks who have overwhelmingly adopted Western dress. Men do not usually have beards, while females wear attractive and fashionable head-scarves and stylish overcoats (pardesu). This is typical of other Islamic movements in Turkey. In fact, in contemporary Turkey, small variations in Islamic dress styles may signal the movement affiliation of females more openly than that of males.

X. Conclusions

Today, Nursi still is considered one of the most influential figures in modern Turkey, despite being dead for nearly fifty five years. The readers of his writings come from various segments of society, from lay people to college students to members of parliament. A stable Turkey presupposes a modus Vivendi between Islamic values and the Kemalist political system, and the Nurju movement offers a way to achieve this balance. By utilizing new opportunity spaces, these Turkish Islamic movements are making new actors of intellectuals, businessmen, scholars, and artists and creating new sites of sociability. One of the major impacts of these opportunity spaces has been facilitating the emergence of private identities, commitments, and lifestyles in the public sphere. These new public spaces, along with new actors, have brought Islam to the forefront of public discussion. The second impact of these opportunity spaces is on the ultimately centrifugal trajectory of Islamic sociopolitical movements in democratic and pluralistic settings.

The Nurju movement is probably the most widespread of non-state sponsored Islamic movements in the country and has received a good deal of attention in Turkish media and domestic and foreign scholarship. They are also undoubtedly a favorite topic of research because of their professed emphasis on technological progress, while their uneasy relationship with the state accords them a prestigious “persecuted” status in the eyes of some foreign researchers.