

**An Advocates of Silenced  
Turkey Special Report  
March, 2018**

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**REPORT:  
ERDOGAN'S TOOL TO TAKE OVER  
HIZMET SCHOOLS *ILLEGALLY*: THE  
MAARIF FOUNDATION**

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## Introduction

This paper will first excerpt a passage from a report prepared by the Journalists and Writers Foundation (“JWF”) entitled “Assault on Education in Turkey and Abroad”. The report talks mainly about the recent activities of the Turkish government putting education at risk through illegal takeovers by Turkish government sponsored Maarif Foundation. The government for a long time has been trying to “Islamize” Turkey’s education system by placing imam hatip high schools in the center of the education policies.<sup>1</sup> Nearly for one and a half year, the Turkish government has also been attempting to export its policy abroad by taking over Turkish schools founded years ago around the world by participants of the Hizmet Movement. Following the excerpt from the JWF’s report which will provide background information on the case, new information acquired by the Advocates of Silenced Turkey will be provided aiming to illustrate the current situation.

### Passage from the JWF’s report:<sup>2</sup>

“The Maarif Foundation

In late May 2016, the government presented a draft-law to Parliament aiming to establish a foundation (the Maarif<sup>3</sup> Foundation), which would operate under the Ministry of National Education. The bill was adopted by the Turkish Parliament on June 17, 2016 and entered into force as Law No. 6721 on the “Turkish Maarif Foundation.”

Legally, the purpose and scope of the law was to establish the Maarif Foundation, with a total budget of 1 million Turkish liras,<sup>4</sup> with the objective of providing education services in foreign countries at the elementary, middle and higher levels, as well as offering private courses, culture centers, libraries, laboratories, arts and sport centers, and dormitories for students and instructors.<sup>5</sup>

In reality, the Maarif Foundation is the organization established and tasked by the Turkish government with encouraging foreign governments to seize Turkish educational foundations already operating in their respective countries, possibly targeting enterprises run by individuals close to the Gülen Movement. In the event seizures are successful, through different legal, administrative and practical actions, the Maarif Foundation would be offered as an alternative foundation with the authority to purchase, take over, and rent properties.

According to the founding act,<sup>6</sup> the Foundation will be overseen by a 12-member Board of Trustees, including four members from the presidency, three from the cabinet

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<sup>1</sup> Yeginsu, Ceylan. “Turkey Promotes Religious Schools, Often Defying Parents.” *The New York Times*, 16 Dec. 2014, [www.nytimes.com/2014/12/17/world/europe/turkeys-religious-schools-rise-as-erdogan-exerts-sway.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/17/world/europe/turkeys-religious-schools-rise-as-erdogan-exerts-sway.html).

<sup>2</sup> Journalists and Writers Foundation, *Assault on Education in Turkey and Abroad*, March 2017, available at: <http://jwf.org/download/reports/Education-Report-in-Turkey-2017.pdf> (accessed 3 March 2018).

<sup>3</sup> Ottoman Turkish word for education, which comes from the Arabic word for knowledge or wisdom.

<sup>4</sup> Currently around 285,294.52 US Dollars according to the December 2016 average exchange rate. [This was calculated at the time of this JWF report. As of March 2018, the amount is around 262,147.70 US Dollars.]

<sup>5</sup> Law No. 6721 on “Turkish Maarif Foundation”.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.resmigazete.gov.tr/eskiler/2016/06/20160628-17.htm>

ministers, two from the Education Ministry, and one member from each – the Foreign Ministry, the Finance Ministry and Turkey’s Higher Education Board of Education (YÖK). The executive organ of the Maarif Foundation is the Board of Directors consisting of one chairman and six members, which has the authority to represent the Foundation. The Supervisory Board consists of five principal and five alternate members overseeing the activities and accounts of the Turkish Education Foundation on behalf of the Board of Trustees.

The budget of the Foundation, with its headquarters in Istanbul, will be provided by the Ministry of National Education and may be used to purchase, take over, rent, or sign partnerships with other foreign education institutions.

### *Concerns related to Maarif schools*

With the establishment of the Maarif Foundation targeting illegal takeovers of Hizmet inspired schools around the world the Turkish government has already “sealed Maarif schools fate,” which are likely to have an unfortunate and inescapable end.

The persisting issues go indeed beyond merely establishing the Maarif Foundation, the immense pressure on foreign governments and the legal considerations in a given country as to whether it is possible to arbitrarily seize property from its rightful owners and transfer it to other entities with or without any compensation. Right to property is a human right enshrined among others in Article 17 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which provides that – “Everyone has the right to own property alone as well as in association with others. No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his property.”

One of the main questions experts have also raised in this context is whether the Maarif Foundation, an organization fully controlled and currently backed by the Turkish government – whose education policies have been highly unsuccessful in Turkey can be successful in other countries?

The sixth PISA,<sup>7</sup> a test of the science, mathematics, and reading skills of 15-year-olds from around the world published by the OECD on December 6, 2016 revealed that Turkey is second from the bottom among 35 OECD countries in mathematics, science, and reading scores. Turkey has slipped an average of seven places in mathematics, science, and reading compared to its rankings in the 2012 PISA survey. Turkey ranked 44<sup>th</sup> among all countries in math in 2012 and it slid to 49<sup>th</sup> place in 2015. In science, Turkey ranked 43<sup>rd</sup> in 2012, while in 2015 it ranked 52<sup>nd</sup>. In reading Turkey ranked 41<sup>st</sup> in 2012, while it got to 50<sup>th</sup> place in 2015.

The example of the first Maarif school<sup>8</sup> opened in Georgia in September 19, 2016 is a prime example reflecting the above concerns:

Batumi City Hall reported that the school had not acquired a construction license and had been fined three times (before September 19, 2016) for a total of 9,000 Georgian

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<sup>7</sup> Program for International Student Assessment.

<sup>8</sup> Batumi Turkish School could reportedly accommodate up to 170 students and 25 teachers. The schools would follow the Turkish curriculum and be supervised by Turkey’s National Education Ministry.

Lari.<sup>9</sup> City Hall's Supervisory Service had also stated that the school must acquire an official permit or it may have to be demolished. The Turkish Consul-General in Tbilisi reported that the building was built by an unnamed philanthropist,<sup>10</sup> the diplomatic mission was not involved into the construction process. He further promised to look into any violations that may have occurred during the construction of the building.

The opening ceremony was attended by representative of the Turkish Ministry of Education, as well as the Embassy of Turkey in Georgia; however, neither the Georgian Minister of Education nor local education authorities<sup>11</sup> were invited to participate in the opening event. According to local media they did not hide their dissatisfaction about the matter. The Turkish Consul-General also claimed that the school has "not officially opened," which *explains* why the Georgian side was not invited to the recent opening ceremony.

The former Director of the Adiyaman Gerger Imam Hatip High School (M.K.), who served in that post as a sexual abuse scandal unfolded (involving as many as 75 victims among students)<sup>12</sup> was appointed principal of the Batumi school. Other alarming concerns on the principal's background appeared in other Georgian media outlets.

In addition, the activities the Maarif Foundation is expected to perform, and its intended takeover of the Hizmet inspired schools, represent numerous other challenges, including the following:

Affiliation with an oppressive foreign government with a clear political Islamic agenda, and acting on that government's instructions in a sovereign country, would unmistakably contribute to further youth radicalization and extremism.

The current government in Turkey already has a disturbing track-record of gathering intelligence through the Religious Affairs Directorate (Diyanet), amid reports that the Diyanet has asked imams to spy and inform on people of Turkish origin suspected of being active in the Gülen movement.<sup>13</sup> In a briefing to the parliamentary Coup Commission in December 2016, the Diyanet openly admitted it had gathered intelligence and prepared reports on sympathizers of the Gülen movement in 38 countries and regions.<sup>14 15</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The equivalent of around 3,333 US Dollars, based on November 2016 average exchange rate. [This was calculated at the time of this JWF report. As of March 2018, the amount is around 3,653.49 US Dollars.]

<sup>10</sup> Several sources identified the philanthropist as Galip Ozturk, the board chairman of Metro Holding Company. <http://aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/turkey-opens-first-state-school-in-georgias-batumi-/648638>.

<sup>11</sup> Officials from the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports of Adjara stated they had not been informed about the opening of the school.

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.birgun.net/haber-detay/gerger-deki-skandalin-sorumlusuna-yeni-gorev-mudure-odul-gibi-atama-135586.html>

<sup>13</sup> A circular of September 20, 2016 from Turkey's Diyanet instructed Turkish missions and religious representatives abroad to profile Gülen movement expatriates living in their respective foreign countries.

<sup>14</sup> Abkhazia (Georgia), Germany, Albania, Australia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Georgia, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Sweden, Switzerland, Italy, Japan, Montenegro, Kazakhstan, Kenya, Kyrgyzstan, Kosovo, Lithuania, Macedonia, Mongolia, Mauritania, Nigeria, Norway, Poland, Romania, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, Tanzania, Turkmenistan and Ukraine.

<sup>15</sup> [After this JWF report was published, Germany started investigation against these accusations. Dearden, Lizzie. "Germany opens investigation into Turkish group accused of spying on Erdogan opponents in 35

Fully dependent on the Turkish government, the Maarif schools will not only advance the government's narrative and objectives, but undoubtedly also act as "foreign agents" gathering intelligence and sensitive information.

Apart from the Turkish government, groups funding the Maarif Foundation are the Saudi government and the Islamic Development Bank.

Legitimate concerns about the future functioning of Maarif schools are real, should the current or future governments withdraw their financial, diplomatic and (almost) unlimited support of the Foundation. Should the governments in the Maarif Foundation fade in the future, the institutions it administers will suffer – and so will the students attending those institutions.”

## Updated Information

As noted by the JWF, the Maarif Foundation was established with the task to takeover Hizmet schools around the world. The Foundation was not only funded by the Turkish government but also the Saudi government to introduce the Wahhabism ideology.<sup>16</sup> This indeed indicates that these schools will follow Islamic agenda which will highly likely be radical and extremist, not moderate. It is extremely important that the Foundation mostly target the countries that have large Muslim communities. There have already been news stories raising concerns about possible ISIS infiltration into the Foundation.<sup>17</sup>

International media has attracted attention to the case as well. According to the GlobePost, although the Maarif Foundation assured that students will not be affected anyhow by these transfers, it is not the case.

Turkey has failed even to maintain a good, quality education in a small number of schools it directly runs in countries such as Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, and Moldova, let alone those in Africa. Although the number of these government-run-schools is small and salaries are encouraging compared to working in Turkey, Turkish Education Ministry can hardly find teachers willing to work for these schools.<sup>18</sup>

The situation is not much different in Sudan, for instance, where schools and a hospital run by the Movement were confiscated. Since the so-called coup attempt in Turkey in July 2016, the schools are still not effectively working. Similarly, the Turkish government cannot find doctors to send to Sudan despite suggested high salaries.<sup>19</sup>

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countries.” *The Independent*, 1 Apr. 2017, [www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/turkey-spying-germany-europe-austria-35-countries-erdogan-coup-fethullah-gulen-diyaniyet-a7662096.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/turkey-spying-germany-europe-austria-35-countries-erdogan-coup-fethullah-gulen-diyaniyet-a7662096.html).]

<sup>16</sup> Wahhabism is a conservative and intolerant form of Islam that is practiced in Saudi Arabia; Osama bin Laden and his followers practice Wahhabism. “AKP, Suud parasıyla Türk okulu açacak!” *Tr724*, 14 Oct. 2016, [www.tr724.com/akp-suud-parasiyla-turk-okulu-acacak/](http://www.tr724.com/akp-suud-parasiyla-turk-okulu-acacak/).

<sup>17</sup> “Erdoğan taraftarı öğretmen, Arnavutluk'ta IŞİD propagandasından tutuklandı!” *Haberdar*, 21 Jan. 2017, [www.haberdar.com/gundem/erdogan-taraftar-ogretmen-arnavutluk-ta-isis-propagandasindan-tutuklandi-h40448.html](http://www.haberdar.com/gundem/erdogan-taraftar-ogretmen-arnavutluk-ta-isis-propagandasindan-tutuklandi-h40448.html). “ISIS Infiltrates Erdogans Maarif Foundation.” *Hizmet News*, 11 July 2017, [hizmetnews.com/21150/isis-infiltrates-erdogans-maarif-foundation/#.WpcjYZPwau1](http://hizmetnews.com/21150/isis-infiltrates-erdogans-maarif-foundation/#.WpcjYZPwau1).

<sup>18</sup> “Erdogan's False Promises to Africa.” *The Globe Post*, 14 June 2017, [www.theglobepost.com/2017/06/12/erdogans-false-promises-to-africa/](http://www.theglobepost.com/2017/06/12/erdogans-false-promises-to-africa/).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

As the Advocates of Silenced Turkey, we have conducted some interviews on the issue with people working at Hizmet schools in several countries including Malawi, Niger, Burkino Faso, Mali (all of whom do not want to disclose their identities as they are afraid of the Turkish government's possible actions).

i- Situation in Malawi

Ministry officers of the Republic of Malawi has investigated the Maarif Foundation who has already contacted the government of Malawi on this matter. The interviewee we have contacted was asked by the Ministry officials about the Foundation and its mandate and has told them the mandate of the Foundation which is mainly to target the Hizmet Movement not to serve Malawi's interests. Our source also said if they really wanted to serve to Malawi, they could have done it without asking for any illegal takeover. Rather, they could have found a new school and prove their sincerity. Our source then also added that even though the Foundation looks secular, it is more like an extremist institution whose employees are not adequately qualified to teach abroad' and lastly said that it would create chaos within the country if they start to follow their radical Islamic agenda by educating kids accordingly. Authorities that contacted our source then responded that they already asked similar questions to many people including some non-Turkish Muslims and that they got almost the same answers. The Ministry officials have assured him/her that they will not allow the Maarif Foundation to operate within their territory to protect their kids from any type of radicalism.

i- Situation in Burkina Faso

Our interviewee from Burkina Faso has mentioned that people from the Maarif Foundation have been working in cooperation with another Turkish foundation more active in the country. Together, they have visited the national authorities in Burkina Faso and asked for take over. Local authorities have suggested a different plan which was to provide them another place to open a new school. This suggestion was not so far welcome by the Foundation that it has not taken any official step so far. Lastly, our source has indicated that citizens of Burkina Faso does not want the Foundation to operate in their country as it is believed that they will follow a radical Islamist agenda and that they will not be able keep the level of education as it is now.

ii- Situation in Niger

Shortly after the Maarif Foundation was founded, the government of Niger has contracted with the Foundation on the taking over of Hizmet schools in Niger.<sup>20</sup> However, the Foundation has not been doing well according to our sources from Niger. Although the Foundation has promised to lower the tuition fees and to raise teachers' salaries, there has not been any progress on both. New school administration does not prioritize the quality of the education. Students can just leave classrooms and were seen outside many times during class hours. Unfortunately, cases in which students smoke have increased. Therefore, the schools' reputation has started to be damaged after the Foundation took over the schools.

iii- Situation in Mali

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<sup>20</sup> Aktas, Tufan. "Nijer'deki FETÖ okulları Maarif Vakfına devrediliyor." *Anadolu Ajansı*, 15 Dec. 2016, aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/nijerdeki-feto-okullari-maarif-vakfina-devrediliyor/706857.



The situation in Mali is far more complex than the previous countries. As our sources indicated, the Maarif Foundation announced via social media on August 2017 that they made an agreement with the government of Mali which was a week after the Mali's president was visited by officials from the Foundation together with the Turkish ambassador. At the end of August, the Horizon schools (previous organization) was notified that their education licenses were cancelled. Although Minister of Education was questioned on this situation in a parliamentary meeting, he left questions unanswered. In a different meeting, another Minister was also asked the same question and he was reminded that government officials of Mali have also been sending their children to those schools. He eventually said these people have been accused of being terrorists by the Turkish government as well as President Erdogan however that those accusations were not agreed with by Malian authorities. Short after these, together with military personnel, the officials of the Foundation came to the schools and occupied the buildings without providing any official document or decision. They have changed the locks of the buildings and also damaged the equipment such as computers in some schools. Previous employees and parents of students who tried to prevent them were forced to leave the schools. Once the head of military was reached out it was revealed that the Foundation acted as if they owned the buildings and thus asked for protection. Once the officers from the Horizon schools presented actual documents proving they indeed owned the properties, the soldiers were withdrawn from the schools. Our sources continue as the story has not yet ended. A day after this, the government has suggested to appoint a trustee to the privately-owned schools. With a quick amendment to the current legislation, status of the Maarif Foundation was changed and all other Turkish organizations were banned to operate a school in the country. Trustee committee was appointed to run the schools. It was decided that all the property of the Horizon schools was transferred to the Maarif Foundation and all Turkish employees were fired and had to leave the country. The situation attracted the attention of foreign media as well. It is still a matter of concern and yet to be seen whether the Maarif Foundation will be able to maintain the quality of education achieved by the previous administration.

## **Evaluation**

It is clearly illustrated above that the case of Maarif Foundation raises serious concerns around violation of right to private property and education. It is not clear if the Foundation will be able to sustain the quality of education in the schools it forcefully takes over, which should be the main priority. The Maarif Foundation is founded with a special mission by the Turkish government which is to take over Hizmet affiliated schools that are planned to be shut down. In order to achieve their goal, Maarif Foundation officials with the help of Erdogan government have used methods that are clear violations of domestic and international law.

In the light of this information we kindly request all the local authorities to ask the questions below when deciding whether to hand over Turkish schools to the Maarif Foundation.

- 1- How one can be sure that the Maarif Foundation that has been founded to take over Hizmet schools for the purpose of serving the Turkish government's and Erdogan's interests could be beneficial to the local community in the long-run? Is the Erdogan government's true goal to serve the educational needs of the local community? What will happen when the government changes after an election?

- 2- What is the financial situation of the Maarif Foundation? How transparent is it?
- 3- How one could be sure that Erdogan who has been using any opportunity (such as abusing a little girl's feelings)<sup>21</sup> to serve his own Islamic agenda will not use these Maarif schools for the sake of his own political interests?
- 4- Will President Erdogan keep his promises regarding these schools whereas he has a track record of reversing his promises whenever he wants?
- 5- What will happen to the international reputation of those countries who collaborate with Erdogan government which earned a reputation as a corrupt and authoritarian state by human rights watchdog groups and international news agencies?<sup>22</sup>
- 6- How a foundation that have no schools of its own in or out of Turkey could provide a good education?
- 7- Does the Maarif Foundation have any education experience regarding the country at stake?
- 8- What is the curriculum prepared by the Maarif Foundation to be taught in these schools in case of takeover and how much does it represent the national interests of the country at stake?
- 9- How could one be sure that the Maarif Foundation is able to maintain the level of education Hizmet schools, who have experience around the world, and have been providing education for decades?
- 10- How many of the teachers to be employed by the Maarif Foundation have teaching experience abroad?
- 11- How many of the teachers to be employed by the Maarif Foundation can speak and teach the native language of the country at stake? Moreover, how many of them can speak even English or French which are two of the most common languages used in education systems around the world?

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<sup>21</sup> Jovanovski, Kristina. "Turkey's Erdogan criticised for telling tearful young girl dressed as soldier she would 'die a martyr'." *The Telegraph*, 26 Feb. 2018, [www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/02/26/turkeys-erdogan-criticised-telling-tearful-young-girl-dressed/](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/02/26/turkeys-erdogan-criticised-telling-tearful-young-girl-dressed/).

<sup>22</sup> Gingeras, Ryan. "Is Turkey Turning into a Mafia State?" *Foreign Affairs*, 30 Nov. 2017, [www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/turkey/2017-11-30/turkey-turning-mafia-state](http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/turkey/2017-11-30/turkey-turning-mafia-state).