

An Advocates of
Silenced Turkey
Special Report
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TURKEY'S MAARIF FOUNDATION POORLY PERFORMS IN AFGHANISTAN MIRED IN SCANDALS

WHO WE ARE

When the Turkish President declared in an infamous speech that “old Turkey no longer exists. This Turkey is new Turkey”, the story of Turkish authoritarianism had once and for all taken on a new character. Since the July of 2016, the Turkish government has improperly imprisoned 130,214 homemakers, teachers, NGO workers, academics, judges, prosecutors and journalists. Once upon a time, the Republic of Turkey was lauded by insiders and outsiders for constituting a powerful model for democratization. In New Turkey, however, silence against the regime’s draconian laws, mass imprisonment, and frequent violations of universal human rights has become the sole norm.

In a regime which ranks as the worst upholder of the rule-of-law in Eastern Europe & Central Asia, 187 media outlets have been shut down and 308 journalists, including Idil Eser, Ahmet Altan, Hidayet Karaca, Aslı Erdoğan, Şahin Alpay, Selahattin Demirtaş, and Andrew Brunson are political prisoners of the state.

Dissent in New Turkey is absent.

Human rights in New Turkey are absent.

Respect for human dignity in New Turkey is absent.

We are a group of lawyers, judges, academics, journalists, and hundreds of activists who cherish democratic ideals and universal human rights.

We are prisoners of conscience wanted by the Erdogan’s regime, relatives of political prisoners, and victims who have lost their jobs, property, and family members to the current administration which has been described as a Mafia State.

We are the Advocates of Silenced Turkey.

We, the Advocates, have made it our mission to champion the rights of Silenced Turkey until universal human rights and democratic governance are established and sustained as the utmost priorities of the Republic of Turkey.

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1. Introduction

For more than two years, Turkey's aggressive policy to take over and shut down schools operated by opponents of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan across the world has produced mixed results. In some countries such as Pakistan, Somalia, Gabon and Malaysia, the Turkish government's relentless pursuit and sweetening financial offers swayed local governments' positions and led to the takeover of Turkish schools previously ran by non-governmental organizations affiliated with U.S.-based cleric Fethullah Gulen, the arch-nemesis of President Erdogan. But not every country conceded to Ankara's demands. And in some countries, Ankara-led Maarif Foundation has shown signs of poor management and has failed to deliver success in education. In Afghanistan, the Maarif plunged into disarray and is mired in institutional dysfunction. It also met with stiff resistance by families of students who were not content with the change. So far now, Maarif has been locked in a state of limbo, although authorities officially blessed their move to seize schools administered by Afghan-Turk CAG Educational NGOs (ATCE).

The Turkish government has been fixated with the idea of rooting out whatever influence or organizational presence sympathizers of Gulen Movement have around the world. A crackdown of epic proportions against the community is not limited to the domestic realm in Turkey. Ankara's purge campaign has taken a global form. A number of media outlets well documented how the illegal kidnappings become the central staple of the Turkish government's brutal campaign across the world.¹ Against this backdrop, Ankara's obsession takes a new meaning when it comes to its push to establish a monopoly over education institutions found by Turkish citizens who are not directly linked to the Turkish authorities abroad.

¹ *Black Sites, Turkey. Correctiv TV*
<https://correctiv.org/en/top-stories-en/2018/12/06/black-sites/>





In this regard, Maarif emerges as a key actor affiliated with the Education Ministry in Ankara.

Maarif's yearlong efforts in Afghanistan finally bore fruits after Kabul ceded ground to the Turkish officials to steer the confiscation of ATCE-run schools. But how the process transpired is a clear-cut indication of the breakdown of domestic legal mechanism and procedures as the Afghan officials, in submission to persistent demands from Ankara, contravened its own laws. More than that, Maarif-run schools now poorly perform and suffer a sharp decline in the quality of education. Observable changes breed discontent among Parents Committees and students themselves as the discipline in many schools has disappeared altogether due to non-professional management and idle classes.

2. THE ORIGINS OF MAARIF FOUNDATION

Maarif Foundation was found as a department under Turkey's Education Ministry. Although it was designated as a foundation, it was officially linked to the government, reflecting a set of political and ideological contours along the line of the ruling Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Ankara.

According to the founding act,² the Foundation is overseen by a 12-member Board of Trustees, including four members from the presidency, three from the cabinet 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 (YOK).³ 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, is provided by the Ministry of National Education and may be used to purchase, take over, rent, or sign partnerships with other foreign education institutions.

Its officially expressed mission is to regulate affairs of Turkish schools operating around the world. But beneath the facade of this official framework, the only reason for its existence and structure has been to take over and run schools previously found by Gulen-affiliated NGOs around the world.

Maarif has devoted its entire resources, time and energy to this goal. It has been admitted by an official who described the mission of the foundation as follows:⁴

“One of our goals is to ensure the schools which we couldn’t seize to be closed down. We know that FETÖ has around six hundred schools in the world. We reached about two hundred of them together with the takeovers and closures. And for the schools which we couldn’t take over or have them closed down, we establish alternative schools in the region as a competitive institution.”

² <http://www.resmigazete.gov.tr/eskiler/2016/06/20160628-17.htm>

³ See the report by Advocates of Silenced Turkey. <http://silencedturkey.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/AST-3-5-18-REPORT5-REPORT-ON-MAARIF-FOUNDATION-1.pdf>

⁴ Türkiye Maarif Vakfı Neler Yapıyor? <https://www.dunyabizim.com/etkinlik/turkiye-maarif-vakfi-neler-yapiyor-h28040.html>

As part of this zealous mission, Maarif steered the takeover of Gulen-affiliated schools in a number of countries in Africa and Southeast Asia. But the U.S. and European countries, as Turkey's senior leaders grudgingly admit, refuse to cave in to Ankara's pressure. Maarif's acts in Africa and elsewhere often are accompanied by Turkey's diplomatic overtures and aided by almost a personal crusade from President Erdogan.

The Turkish president used diplomatic visits as an opportunity to cajole and nudge host leaders to budge their position regarding the takeover or shutdown of Gulen-affiliated schools. It has become a defining element of his legacy and a cornerstone of new Turkish diplomacy.

In a separate AST report, it can easily be seen how Maarif orchestrated the entire process of takeovers. After Turkey's efforts, governments blatantly violated their own domestic laws when they confiscated property and buildings of Gulen-related NGOs. In Mauritania, Mali, Senegal, Gabon, Niger, Chad, Somalia, Mozambique and Burkina Faso similar processes took place. In Southeast Asia, Pakistan caved in after the coup attempt in 2016. Afghanistan followed the suit this year.



3. MAARIF'S TAKEOVER OF SCHOOLS IN AFGHANISTAN

Earlier this year Kabul accepted Ankara's demand to transfer Gulen-run ATCE schools to Maarif Foundation. As expectedly, the whole process created a protracted fuss. To their surprise, the authorities met with great resistance from Parents Committees.

Although Maarif achieved its long-sought goal of school seizures, the pitfalls of smoothly running schools have only grown by the day. The management of schools is not free of challenges or drawbacks however Maarif officials thought otherwise.

Soon after, Maarif officials have been involved in a number of scandals,⁵ ranging from forgery of documents to orchestrating defamation campaigns on social media to target and discredit opponents of President Erdogan.

The seizure of schools in Herat this November only became possible after an intervention by Afghan security forces. In an assault-like raid, Turkish officials, accompanied by armored vehicles, took the management of school, sparking large scale protests from families and students. Taken aback by the level of protest, Maarif officials sought refuge in armored vehicles as students invaded a school to expel Maarif directors. This touched off a larger deployment of forces in the school to crush the protest. Some students were briefly detained. Subsequent demonstrations and protests eventually dissipated. But it did not mean the end of Maarif's troubles. They have only worsened and become almost ungovernable.



⁵ In Afghanistan, Turkey's Education Foundation Mired in Scandals, *Globe Post Turkey*, July 16, 2018.

<https://turkey.theglobepost.com/maarif-foundation-turkey-afghanistan/>

MAARIF FAILS TO DELIVER SUCCESS IN EDUCATION

Maarif's efforts in Afghanistan have so far stumbled on many fronts. The mission led by Embassy and Maarif officials had previously been thwarted before it was finally accomplished. Signs are not promising as parents of students, in a robust indication of civil society solidarity and activity in a country where all of it barely and scarcely exist, ferociously fight back against further encroachment by Maarif.

But the list of complaints lodged by families points to a deeper problem. The preliminary observations and experiences of students under the new administration suggest a dramatic setback in quality of education, a sharp decline in professional management and a steady deterioration in services provided to students.

Families express displeasure over how the quality of courses worsened and how the new administration indulged in political propaganda in Sheberghan Afghan-Turk schools, the major subject matter of this report. This is only a small glimpse of a larger picture, a new reality that firmly takes hold, to the displeasure and disapproval of student families.

New teachers sent from Turkey were not as professional as the previous ones, students noted. Their presentation and lecturing do not meet the standards of the school's previous education level. Parents press for enrolling their children to different schools after this experience. Fearful of a potential large exodus, authorities and local education officials do not approve such demands from families.



MAARIF HAS NO PLAN OR EDUCATION POLICY

These elements are not fleeting readings of a moving reality. They reveal an underlying problem at the heart of Maarif issue and they are very much directly linked with what Maarif means and how it operates in Afghanistan. Appreciation of this broader pattern would do justice to recognize the root of the problem. It is that Maarif has no an all-encompassing program, no roadmap or a plan over how to run and effectively manage newly confiscated schools. It lacks experience, vision, vigor and an ideal staff who, despite their cultural and religious affinity with the new country they adopted, display signs of troubles for getting acclimated with realities of Afghanistan.

What is more important that Maarif lacks a central objective, a coherent policy and long-term planning. The new breed of teachers only fuel disillusion among students; they do not instill confidence in families and they do not exhibit the needed qualities or flexibility to adapt to a new set of realities and environment. They display symptoms of political affiliation (with the government of Turkey) and espouse a similar political ideology and ideas sometimes bordered on mere propaganda. This point is particularly disturbing for Afghan people who had already grown



disgruntled and disillusioned with ideological indoctrination or politicized education either under Taliban rule or the subsequent dysfunctional governments. That said, what AKP-oriented teachers teach do not sit well with students for whom the mere idea of education embodies the only pathway to achieve their lifetime dream or pursue their goals for a better future. The education is measured for its success in the delivery of practical goals. The new teachers, on the other hand, attribute a divine mission to education. And it is focused on intense rhetoric and mere ideological flavours. This perspective only taints the integrity and quality of education rather than improving it in the newly seized schools.

Needless to say, Maarif's credentials are on public trial after the seizures. First months under the new administration in Sheberghan Afghan-Turk schools in northern Afghanistan would provide, though inchoately, an opportunity to deliver a judgment on the performance of Maarif officials.

The first noticeable setback in the school is the disappearance of discipline. According to the account of parents, new teachers are unable to impose discipline on young students and fail to increase their engagement with courses. Majority of courses suffer idleness amid lack of teachers or lectures. The root of this problem derives from the fact that new teachers have yet to adapt to the new curriculum and show little willingness to socially engage with their new environment.

Such factors unmistakably breed discontent among student parents who plainly observe the steady decline in the school in Sheberghan. H.B., the family member of a student, who spoke for this report on the condition of anonymity, told his account of a meeting with the school administration. Although the administration pledged to increase the quality of education, so far no progress has been made, he said in disbelief.

FORMER PIZZA SELLER IS NOW A TEACHER IN AFGHANISTAN

If something measures the sudden decline in lecturing, the new staff of teachers must be the ones for an adequate explanation at first place. According to information obtained for this report from student parents, a female teacher's social background in Turkey offers an insight into the nature of the problem. The teacher was used to work at a pizza store in Turkey and applied for a position in the school through Maarif due to a higher salary, which is designed to lure people from Turkey to work in Afghanistan. The former pizza seller somehow got the job and began to teach in Sheberghan school, only to the dismay of Afghan students.

The teacher suffers from poor English and performs dismally in courses as curriculum and content are all in English. The teacher offered to tell the course in Turkish and met with a remarkable reaction from students.

“My English is not good, I’ll tell the course in Turkish,” the teacher reportedly told the class. When she faced resistance from students, she acknowledged that she had previously worked at a pizza store back in Turkey. She applied to Maarif when she heard the high salary, she told them.

SCHOOLS BECOME PROPAGANDA TOOLS FOR TURKISH GOVERNMENT

If this is telling and revealing over the level of decline, it is only one part of a larger problem. The Maarif-led school has become a propaganda machine. Turkish teachers are visibly fond of President Erdogan. They fondly speak of him. Though nothing wrong with this, it becomes bizarre when rabble-raising teachers turn classrooms to campaign rally grounds for the Turkish strongman with their constant praise and near-worshipping.

A student who spoke for this report but declined to disclose his name for safety reasons says: “Courses of Turkish teachers pass in mere idleness. Teachers are unable to perform properly, they cannot deliver lectures. Instead of lectures and telling course subjects, teachers talk about how Erdogan is a patriot and how he acts as the leader of Muslims around the world. In comparison, they present and portray Fethullah Gulen as a terrorist and traitor to his country.”

This shows that Turkish teachers have no scruples in exporting a domestic issue of Turkey to Afghanistan. Such a characterization of the U.S.-based scholar has a wider currency among Erdogan supporters. But Turkish teachers’ similar treatment at an Afghan school points to the level of politicization of teachers affiliated with President Erdogan and do not augur well for Maarif’s presence in Afghanistan’s education landscape.

After police intervention and the seizure in Sheberghan School, several unpleasant disturbances have been reported. Precious stuff and equipment have found to be stolen and missing. According to reports, CineVision player equipment, security cameras, furniture, refrigerator, computers and personal belongings of former teachers were found to be either stolen or missing.

Maarif's practices go beyond this set of measures or scandalous failures and abuses. President Erdogan's contempt for anything even slightly associated with Gulen Movement once again has become vividly in place in Sheberghan. The ATCE schools proved themselves with acquiring many medals and rewards for success. The pro-Erdogan Maarif Foundation reportedly burnt certificates, award documents and medals won by students during previous ATCE administration. The practice echoed the government's unrelenting efforts in Turkey to expunge successes and contributions of Gulen Movement from public memory. A section, which was devoted as a tribute to exhibit successes of the school and its students so far, in the entrance of the building was razed to the ground, while certificates and documents were burnt to ashes.

They were proofs of Afghan students' proud successes in international science contests and competitions. Afghan students, who became a source of pride for Afghanistan, demanded a legal probe for ransacking of their medals and awards. The issue created a sensation and controversy, but only on social media. The reaction on social media did not translate into a political action to investigate the matter. At least, not yet.

SCANDAL IN HERAT

The cascade of scandals involving Maarif is not restricted to Sheberghan, the capital city of Jowzjan province in northern Afghanistan. Students and parents from all-boys school in Herat, previously ran by ATCE, offered a sober and disquieting account of their experiences under the Maarif administration.

As in Sheberghan, the school in Herat saw a sharp decline in all fronts such as discipline, management and quality in education. Unimaginable and unthinkable though it may sound, some accounts from students even suggest physical violence against certain students.

One student, in remarks to AST, revealed a harrowing and disturbing account of violence against students from Ankara-assigned teachers. He noted that the system teeters on the brink of

total collapse. Only a Turkish teacher, sent by Ankara, currently works in the school. This factor causes an interminable idleness in classes where no longer lectures are delivered due to shortage of teachers. The discipline is lost and even incidents of some sort of torture have been reported.

When some students complained about the chaotic situation in the school, the student added, they faced physical violence and threats from Ismail Turk, an official at the school.

“Our classes pass dull and idle without lectures at all. Everybody is free. Some simply sit at the classroom and some play football outside in the yard. An official called Ismail Turk take students, who lodge complaints with the office of principal about the situation, to a locker room for physically beating them. To deter them from reporting this violence to their families, the official threatened to cut scholarship, to lower their grades, terminate their register and relationship with the school and with other things,” he said.

CONCLUSION

Things only get worse and parents understandably express dismay. They are quite rattled by the transformation of Sheberghan school from one of the model schools in Sheberghan to one of a dismal failure. The tragic story is of Afghan authorities’ own making and owes much to political considerations in relations with Ankara. The imprudent policy of appeasing Ankara at the expense of education appears to spark prolonged despair on behalf of parents and students. It also reveals the impotence of Maarif as an actor to regulate education affairs as smoothly as it normally would be.

Parents’ push for change or demands for going back to the previous system led by Gulen-affiliated NGOs have so far fallen on deaf ears. Such demand is bound to bog down in intricate and tangled web of diplomatic relations between Ankara and Kabul. The lack of prospect for improvement any time soon leads people and parents into a prolonged battle for reclaiming the ownership of CAG schools, something rare in a country where civil society barely exists.

But that seems a remote option and an unattainable goal given the current political climate and the contemporary state of diplomatic relations.

Frustrated by the education officials' nonchalant and indifferent stance, parents at least demand approval from the school administration to unregister students to be enrolled in a different school in the same city. Fearful of a mass exodus, the city officials have not processed parents' applications.

The end result is a stalemate and deadlock that only serves to prolong frustration of students and parents. Progress or positive change seems nowhere to be afoot. Maarif, with all its policies and failures, lies at the root of the problem that afflicts Afghan students. And the solution rests with the Afghan authorities in Kabul. They need to see what went wrong and should offer a remedy to families for their rightful pleas and demands.

Maarif will not be able to deliver the quality of education students previously enjoyed and received. To begin with, better education was not Maarif's paramount objective from the beginning when it relentlessly pursued the seizure of CAG Educational Schools in Afghanistan. The seizure or shutdown of Gulen-linked schools had been its ultimate goal, with no afterthought or a plan regarding what to do with them once Maarif achieved its aim. The lack of a coherent plan and lack of any experience to run schools as effectively as the previous foundation did were on vivid display in the aftermath of the takeover of Afghan-Turk schools. The result has been an abysmal failure. And Maarif does not seem to be concerned about that. But Afghan authorities must care and pay attention to students' legitimate concerns and families' demands. It is Afghan education is at stake here. This report aimed to shed light on the origins of Maarif foundation, its genesis, its institutional evolution, its aims and policies, and finally its dramatic institutional failures in the education sector in Afghanistan. The AST report calls on Afghan authorities to pay attention to the shortcomings of Maarif foundation, correct and improve its failures, and heed calls from students and parents who are indispensable for Afghanistan's future.

