

From a Parallel State Structure to A Terrorist Organization Against the State: A Comparative Analysis of FETO/PSS's Terrorist Organisation's Strategies of Infiltrating Political Institutions and Building a State-Like Structure

Paralel Devletten Devlete Karşı Terör Örgütüne: FETÖ/PDY Terör
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ABSTRACT

Religiously motivated organisations have become an important focus in contemporary security studies and political science. Although often perceived as purely ideological or theological, some have developed institutional strategies that can infiltrate state structures. This study examines the Fethullahist Terrorist Organisation/Parallel State Structure (FETO/PSS) from a comparative perspective to analyse the organisational logic of religiously referenced movements and their interactions with political systems.

The research traces the historical development of FETO/PSS from the 1960s to the July 15, 2016 coup attempt, focusing on its leadership structure, intra-organisational oath mechanism, collective identity formation, and seven-level hierarchical system. Fetullah Gülen's charismatic authority is analysed through primary sources, including his own discourses and reports of the Presidency of Religious Affairs. Key data sources also include the 2018 indictment of the Chief Public Prosecutor's Office of the Court of Cassation and the 2019 reports of the Ministry of Interior, which document the organisation's systematic infiltration into state institutions. In addition, the FETO/PSS terrorist organization has

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been evaluated through a comparative analysis with the Aum Shinrikyo movement, which emerged in Japan, and the Minhaj-ul Quran movement, which operates in Pakistan.

Findings indicate that, unlike many religious movements, FETO/PSS developed a long-term strategy of cadre formation and institutional infiltration, corresponding to “state capture” in political science literature. The July 15 coup attempt represents the culmination of this strategy, while post-coup judicial and administrative measures reveal the depth of the organisation’s penetration into state institutions. The study concludes that organisations instrumentalising religious discourse should be analysed not only as ideological entities but also as hybrid organisational models capable of shaping political institutions.

Keywords: Türk Political Life, Religiously Motivated Terrorism, FETO/PSS, Infiltration of State Institutions, State Capture

ÖZ

Dinî referanslı terör örgütleri modern güvenlik çalışmaları ve siyaset bilimi literatüründe giderek daha fazla dikkat çeken bir araştırma alanı hâline gelmiştir. Bu tür örgütler çoğu zaman yalnızca ideolojik veya teolojik hareketler olarak değerlendirilse de bazı örneklerde devlet kurumları üzerinde etkili olabilecek kurumsal stratejiler geliştirdikleri görülmektedir. Bu çalışma, dinî referanslı örgütlerin örgütlenme mantığını ve siyasal sistemlerle kurduğu ilişkileri analiz etmek amacıyla Fethullahçı Terör Örgütü/Paralel Devlet Yapılanması (FETÖ/PDY) yapılanmasını karşılaştırmalı bir perspektifle incelemektedir.

Çalışmada, FETÖ/PDY’nin 1960’lardan 15 Temmuz 2016’ya uzanan tarihsel gelişim süreci; örgütün liderlik yapısı, örgüt içi yemin mekanizması, kolektif kimlik üretimi ve yedi basamaklı hiyerarşik sistemi ele alınmıştır. Bu çerçevede, Fetullah Gülen’in liderlik otoritesi örgüt liderinin kendi söylemleri ve Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı raporları üzerinden birincil kaynaklarla analiz edilmiş; örgütün devlet kurumlarına sistematik sızmasını belgeleyen Yargıtay Cumhuriyet Başsavcılığı (2018) iddianamesi ve T.C. İçişleri Bakanlığı (2019) raporları temel veri kaynakları olarak kullanılmıştır. Ayrıca FETÖ/PDY yapılanması Japonya’da ortaya çıkan Aum Shinrikyo hareketi ve Pakistan’da faaliyet gösteren Minhacü’l Kur’an hareketi ile karşılaştırmalı bir analiz çerçevesinde değerlendirilmiştir.

Çalışmanın bulguları, FETÖ/PDY’nin diğer dinî hareketlerden farklı olarak devlet kurumlarına uzun vadeli “state capture” stratejisiyle sızdığını, 15 Temmuz darbe girişiminin bu sürecin eyleme dönüşmüş hâli olduğunu ve sonrasındaki tasfiyelerin yapılanmanın boyutunu ortaya koyduğunu göstermektedir. Bu çalışma, dinî referanslı örgütlerin yalnızca ideolojik hareketler olarak değil, aynı zamanda devlet kurumları

üzerinde etkili olabilecek hibrit örgütlenme modelleri olarak da incelenmesi gerektiği bulgusuna ulaşmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Türk Siyasal Hayatı, Dinî Motifli Terörizm, FETÖ/PDY, Devlet Kurumlarına Sızma, State Capture

Introduction

In the modern era, terrorism is discussed not only through armed actions and direct violence, but also through the erosion of state institutions from within, the manipulation of social legitimacy and the transformation of ideological commitment into organisational discipline. In this framework, some structures, unlike classical terrorist organisations, build social ground through education, media, civil society, and economic networks without resorting to open violence in the first stage, and then transform this ground into bureaucratic entrenchment, institutional influence, and political intervention capacity. In Türkiye's recent political history, one of the most prominent examples of this model is the Fethullahist Terrorist Organisation/Parallel State Structure (FETO/PSS). Within the sources examined in this study, FETO/PSS appears not only as an organisation instrumentalising religious structure but also as a multi-layered organisational model that systematically infiltrates the judiciary, security, and bureaucratic areas of the state.

In this context, the Fethullahist Terrorist Organisation/Parallel State Structure (FETO/PSS) is considered one of the organisations that emerged in the modern era and was able to establish a wide social network by instrumentalising religious discourse. One of the most striking aspects of FETO/PSS is that its terrorist organization strategy is not limited to being an ideological or religious movement; it also aims to establish itself within state institutions and systematically build bureaucratic power. This shows that the organisation is not only a structure presenting itself as a civil-religious network but has also developed an organisational model with political and institutional goals.

When FETO/PSS's terrorist organization is examined, it is seen that in the first phase, the movement built a large human resource through education-based recruitment activities, student dormitories, and aid-oriented networks used for recruitment and social penetration. In this process, the organisation sought to create long-term organisational loyalty by recruiting young individuals into its organisational-ideological network at an early age. These activities, carried out through educational institutions, private preparatory schools (dershanes) and organization-controlled student houses, both produced social legitimacy and enabled the training of individuals who could take office in state institutions. Thus, over the years, the movement not only presented itself as a religious community but also produced a cadre of human resources capable of influencing bureaucratic cadres.

When the organisation's ideological and organisational structures are examined, the relationship between charismatic leadership and absolute obedience emerges as an important element. Fetullah Gülen's discourses and his position within the organisation played a central role in shaping the movement's ideological framework; the organisation's members were socialised to accept the leader figure as a source of both religious and organisational authority. This situation shows that the charismatic leadership model, which is frequently seen in religiously referenced organisations, is also a determining factor in the FETO/PSS structure. This authority relationship, centred on the leader, played an important role in strengthening the organisation's hierarchical structure and obedience mechanisms.

FETO/PSS's terrorist organization structure shows both similarities and differences compared to other religiously referenced organisations examined in the literature. For instance, the Aum Shinrikyo movement that emerged in Japan stands out as a closed cult, organised around charismatic leadership and mystical ideology. Similarly, the Minhaj-ul-Quran movement in Pakistan, led by Tahir-ul-Qadri, stands out with its strong leadership structure and extensive international networks. Although all three movements have distinct ideological and organisational characteristics, they share common features, such as charismatic leadership, the use of religious discourse for mobilisation, and a claim to social transformation.

The main purpose of this study is to examine FETO/PSS's terrorist organization structure and political goals within the framework of the literature on religious movements and to analyse the organisation's relations with state institutions. To this end, three main issues are addressed in this study. First, the political mobilisation and leadership structures of organisations instrumentalising religious discourse will be examined. Second, FETO/PSS's ideological discourse, oath mechanism, and the organisation's culture of obedience are analysed. Thirdly, the organisation's multi-layered hierarchical structure and seven-tier caste system will be analysed in comparison with the Aum Shinrikyo and Tahir-ul-Qadri movements.

The distinctive aspect of FETO/PSS is that it introduced violence not at the moment of its establishment, but at the end of a long period of organisational accumulation. Over the years, the movement has legitimised itself through the language of "education", "dialogue", "service" and "spirituality", thereby expanding its social base and generating human resources to place loyal cadres within public institutions. For this reason, it is insufficient to define FETO/PSS as a network presenting itself through religious discourse or a terrorist organisation. It is more accurate to consider it as a hybrid terrorist organisation model that instrumentalises religious discourse, transforms charismatic leadership into absolute obedience and makes bureaucratic establishment a strategic goal.

In this study, FETO/PSS's bureaucratic entrenchment strategy is analysed within the framework of the concept of 'state capture' in the political science literature. The concept was first conceptualised by Hellman, Jones, and Kaufmann (2000) in the context of oligarchic firms in former Soviet transition economies, shaping public policies in line with their interests through illicit payments. The original definition is based on economic actors and mechanisms of monetary corruption. However, recent literature has broadened the scope of the concept beyond transition economies and has included political and ideological actors that aim to establish control over state institutions (Dávid-Barrett, 2023). When the case of FETO/PSS is evaluated within this expanded framework, the limits of the concept become apparent: the organisation attempted to take over the state not through monetary corruption but through a decades-long cadre-building strategy and human resource recruitment mechanisms. In this respect, the FETO/PSS case contributes to the 'state capture' literature as a unique subtype: the ideological-organisational state capture model.

For many years, FETO/PSS gained social legitimacy by presenting itself as a religious and civilian organisation; behind this discursive mask, which concealed its organisational structure, it systematically infiltrated the state's judicial and security institutions. The organisation, which has established a wide sphere of influence through its activities in education, media, finance, and civil society, has instrumentalised these channels to both recruit human resources and reinforce ideological loyalty. The organisational structure built on the principles of secrecy, strict hierarchical loyalty and absolute obedience is among the main features that distinguish FETO/PSS from other terrorist organisations with religious motives. The most visible violent act of this organisational structure was the coup attempt of July 15, 2016, which was not only an attempt to change the government but also an act of terrorism that aimed to overthrow the constitutional order of the state and the national will. This study aims to examine the structural characteristics and social repercussions of FETO/PSS from a holistic perspective and discuss it as an example of a new generation terrorist organisation with religious motives.

This study adopts descriptive case study and comparative analysis methods from qualitative research designs. The comparative analysis is based on the most similar systems design framework proposed by Lijphart (1971). In this design, the units of analysis are selected from cases that are similar in their basic structural characteristics, and the observed differences are placed at the centre of the analysis as explanatory variables. In this framework, Aum Shinrikyo and Minhaj-ul Quran movements were selected as the units of comparison with FETO/PSS. These three structures exhibit significant similarities in their religiously referenced organisation, charismatic leadership, closed hierarchical structure, and claims of social transformation. On the other hand, they differ significantly in how they relate to state institutions, in

their strategies for resorting to violence, and in their ultimate political goals. These points of divergence reveal the unique position of FETO/PSS's 'state capture' strategy within the typology of religious organisations. The selection of Aum Shinrikyo and Minhaj-ul-Quran as comparative cases was guided by three explicit criteria: (1) all three organisations derive their legitimacy from a religiously referenced ideological framework; (2) each exhibits a charismatic leadership structure that underpins internal organisational discipline; and (3) each has, to varying degrees, sought to exert influence on political institutions or the state institutions. These shared structural features make the cases comparable under the most similar systems logic, while their divergent strategies — direct violence, political mobilisation, and institutional infiltration, respectively — constitute the primary explanatory variable of the analysis. The study's data set comprises two levels: primary and secondary sources.

Primary sources consist of the following documents: The indictment of the Chief Public Prosecutor's Office of the Court of Cassation (2018), which documents the organizational structure of FETO/PSS; the report of the Internal Security Strategies Department of the Ministry of Interior (2019), which reveals the extent of the organization's infiltration into state institutions; the analysis document of the Presidency of Religious Affairs (2017), which directly reflects the religious language and ideological framework of the organization; Gülen's own writings (1997, 2011), in which the leader of the organization personally explains the hierarchical structure and organizational strategy; and the text of the oath, which embodies the mechanism of loyalty within the organization. Secondary sources consist of academic studies published in the fields of terrorism literature, political science and security studies.

The comparative analysis examines FETO/PSS alongside the Aum Shinrikyo and Minhaj-ul Quran movements in terms of their leadership structures, organisational socialisation, use of violence, relationships with the state, and ultimate strategic goals. This methodological choice aims to differentiate FETO/PSS's unique position among religious organisations and its 'state capture' strategy from other models.

The main limitation of the study is that the entire organisational structure of FETO/PSS cannot be fully made visible due to the confidentiality of some documents related to FETO/PSS within the scope of ongoing judicial processes. On the other hand, the primary sources used in this study enable an adequate analysis of the organisation's structural characteristics and strategic behaviour.

This study aims to examine FETO/PSS's terrorist organization structure and strategic behaviour from the perspective of political institutions. The main research question is: In what ways does FETO/PSS differ from conventional terrorist organisations, and how can it be considered an institutional state-capture attempt in terms

of its strategy of infiltrating state institutions? The main argument of the study is that FETO/PSS is not only a terrorist organisation with religious motives, but also a hybrid terrorist organisation model that seeks to establish itself in the bureaucratic and security institutions of the state through an organisational strategy spanning many years.

The theoretical contribution of this study is twofold. First, it extends the concept of “state capture” beyond its original economic framing to encompass ideologically motivated, non-economic actors. This dimension has received limited attention in the existing literature. Second, by situating FETO/PSS within a comparative framework alongside Aum Shinrikyo and Minhaj-ul-Quran, the study proposes an “ideological-organisational state capture” subtype as a new analytical category for the political science and security studies literature.

Terrorism Literature and Organizations with Religious References

The concept of terrorism is among the most debated in the modern political science and security studies literature. The main reason for this is that terrorism is not only a form of violent action, but also a strategic tool used in the pursuit of political goals. According to Bruce Hoffman, terrorism is a set of violent acts carried out for a political purpose, aiming to create psychological impact and often targeting civilians (Hoffman, 2006, p. 40). Similarly, Martha Crenshaw defines terrorism as a strategic form of violence used to exert pressure on a state or society (Crenshaw, 1981, p. 381).

Terrorism is defined as the planned, organised, and systematic use of violence to achieve specific political, ideological or social objectives. Acts of this nature not only cause direct physical destruction but also produce large-scale social consequences by deeply shaking the established order of society, perceptions of security, and public stability. Indeed, the concept of terrorism in Türkiye is clearly defined in Article 1 of the Anti-Terror Law No. 3713 Republic of Türkiye, 1991:

“Terrorism is any kind of act done by one or more persons belonging to an organization with the aim of changing the characteristics of the Republic as specified in the Constitution, its political, legal, social, secular and economic system, damaging the indivisible unity of the State with its territory and nation, endangering the existence of the Turkish State and Republic, weakening or destroying or seizing the authority of the State, eliminating fundamental rights and freedoms, or damaging the internal and external security of the State, public order or general health by means of pressure, force and violence, terror, intimidation, oppression or threat.”

Studies on terrorism also point to the emergence of different types of terrorism

over time. In particular, terrorist organisations emerging based on ideological motivations are categorised in the literature as ethnic, left-wing ideological, right-wing ideological and religiously inspired terrorist organisations. Within this classification, terrorist organisations with religious references have become an important research topic in the international security literature in recent years. Terrorist organisations with religious references derive their ideological legitimacy from sacred texts, religious discourses, or messianic leadership claims, and through this discourse, they establish strong loyalty among their members.

At this point, the distinction made in the terrorism literature between 'religious terrorism' and 'religiously motivated terrorism' becomes important, as it is not merely a terminological choice but reflects a fundamental analytical issue regarding how organisations legitimise violence. The main aim of terrorism is not limited to inflicting physical harm; it also aims to create an atmosphere of fear and insecurity by targeting the psychological structure of society. To legitimise these strategies, terrorist organisations often resort to belief systems and sacred references. In this context, religion stands out as a powerful tool of legitimacy and mobilisation; however, this use is mostly based on its symbolic and discursive dimensions rather than its essence. Religiously motivated terrorism can be considered as a form of ideological structuring that gains legitimacy through the process of sanctification of violence; therefore, using the term 'religiously motivated terrorism' instead of 'religious terrorism' offers a more conceptually accurate approach (Aydın & Türkoğlu, 2011, p. 164; Bay, 2024, pp. 197-198).

One of the most striking features of religiously referenced organisations is their closed organisational structures shaped around charismatic leadership. Max Weber's concept of charismatic authority provides an important analytical framework for understanding such organisations. According to Weber, charismatic leadership is a form of authority grounded in the belief that the leader possesses extraordinary qualities. In such structures, the leader is accepted as an unquestionable authority (Weber, 1978, p. 241). In terrorist organisations with religious references, the leader is often portrayed as the bearer of a sacred mission, and members show absolute obedience to the leader's authority.

The combination of charismatic leadership and the use of discourse that legitimises violence in religiously referenced organisations exhibits a pattern that dates back to ancient times. In this context, the Sicarii, considered one of the oldest known terrorist movements, is a religious movement with a hierarchical structure and strong organisation that operated in Palestine between 66 and 73 AD. It is considered to be one of the first examples of religiously motivated terrorism in historical terms due to the atmosphere of fear and an atmosphere of fear within society (Kurt, 2019, p. 82). Throughout history, terrorist acts have been committed in the name of almost

every religion, especially Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The most striking example of misinterpretation of religion in Islamic history is the Kharijites; they interpreted the verses of the Qur'an narrowly and erroneously and legitimised their violent acts with these interpretations (Aydın & Türkoğlu, 2011, p. 168).

When the relations between religiously referenced organisations and political systems are examined, it becomes clear that some movements not only engage in ideological propaganda but also aim for social and political transformation. Over time, such movements can build a broad social base through education, media, and civil-society-like channels used for recruitment, legitimacy production, and institutional influence, and turn this base into a means of generating political power. For this reason, in modern security studies, organisations with religious references are examined not only for their involvement in terrorist acts but also for their capacity to mobilise public opinion and exert political influence.

Recent scholarship has further elaborated the mechanisms through which religious organisations transition from civic to coercive modes of engagement with the state. Hegghammer, 2017 identifies ideological consolidation and elite cadre formation as preconditions for such transitions, while studies on hybrid threats have similarly noted that non-state actors with dual civil-political profiles present qualitatively different challenges to democratic institutions than conventional terrorist organisations. Moreover, research on organisational radicalisation has demonstrated that incremental institutional access — rather than sudden ideological rupture — is the primary pathway through which religiously motivated movements acquire state-capturing capacity (Wiktorowicz, 2004). These insights provide a broader theoretical foundation for the analysis of FETO/PSS as an ideological-organisational attempt at state capture.

In this context, FETO/PSS is considered one of the structures that mobilise members and build social networks through religious discourse and build a wide social network. To fully comprehend these qualities of FETO/PSS, it is necessary to chronologically trace the historical process and stages through which the organisation reached its current structure, as its current organisational capacity is the direct product of a decades-long, planned construction process.

The history of the Fethullahist Terrorist Organisation should be examined together with the life of its founder and ringleader, Fethullah Gülen. Gülen left Erzurum in 1959 and settled in Edirne, where he grew older and began working as an imam. In 1961, Gülen enlisted in the army and, upon returning from military service, became one of the founders of the Association for Combating Communism in Erzurum. This platform was an important turning point for Gülen, enabling him to increase his capacity to influence and organise young people through anti-communist rhetoric.

In the 1960s and 1970s, FETO/PSS's first organisational activities began. During his tenure in İzmir, Gülen took action to establish the organisation's first structures and to form its core cadre. In this process, he focused especially on young people and students and began to build a following through his sermons and chats. These followers were usually students from modest socio-economic backgrounds. These houses, opened to provide a place to sleep, are so-called 'Işık Houses' and are considered the organisation's most intimate spaces (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Interior, 2019, pp. 14-15). Through this system, FETO has organised in many areas, including public institutions, the judiciary, the military and universities. Given that FETO organised religious activities and provided scholarships to students in these FETO-controlled houses, it was claimed that these structures were reliable. Gülen's ideas were imposed on students in homes and schools through ideological conditioning. Young people and children were taught how to behave in the houses by male/female organisational mentors called "abi" and "abla". These people were the organisation's main cadre and worked to recruit loyal members (Women and Democracy Association, 2017, pp. 6-7).

In the 1980s, the organisation's mediatization and schooling process gained momentum. In this period, Gülen increased his dialogue with bureaucrats and political figures and sought to control the political sphere through his schools, universities, financial institutions, associations, and foundations. In 1989, the organisation began to institutionalise through companies and affiliated structures (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Interior, 2019, p. 20).

In the 1990s and 2000s, the organisation established schools abroad and organised across all segments of society. Taking advantage of the vacuum created by the collapse of the Soviet Union, FETO/PSS expanded its overseas school network as part of its organisational outreach in these regions and spread to many countries, particularly Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan. In the 2000s, the organisation's recruitment of state cadres reached its peak, and its human resources, intelligence capabilities, and overseas network became widespread during this period. In 2003, the organisation presented itself publicly under the label of the so-called "Hizmet Movement" through events such as the Turkish Olympics ; in 2008, Gülen was listed by Foreign Policy and Prospect magazines among the "100 Most Intellectual People in the World", further strengthening the organisation's international visibility. (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Interior, 2019, pp. 24-26).

However, an analysis of FETO/PSS's terrorist organization structure reveals that the movement does not merely present itself as a religious community but has also developed a long-term strategy to establish itself within state institutions. In this respect, unlike classical religious movements, the organisation emerges as a structure

that seeks to generate political power through bureaucratic staffing and institutional infiltration.

A comparative analysis of different examples is an important method for understanding the relationships between religiously referenced organisations and political systems. In this framework, the Aum Shinrikyo movement in Japan and the Minhaj-ul-Quran movement led by Tahir-ul-Qadri, operating in Pakistan, offer distinct examples of religiously referenced organisations. As a matter of fact, Qadri's 'Long March' from Lahore to Islamabad, which he organised claiming that Pakistan's parliament had lost its legitimacy, is a remarkable example of the movement's influence on the political system (Çevik, 2013, p. 93).

Although FETO/PSS, Aum Shinrikyo, and Tahir-ul-Qadri movements have different ideological and organisational structures, they share some common characteristics, such as charismatic leadership, the use of religious discourse as a mobilisation tool, and claims of social transformation. The fact that FETO/PSS has developed a long-standing cadre-building strategy within state institutions is one of the most important features that distinguishes the organisation from other religiously referenced movements.

An examination of the organisational logic of organisations instrumentalising religious discourse reveals that elements such as leadership authority, organisational

Table 1. Organisational Mechanisms in Religious Referenced Organisations and the Case of FETO/PSS			
Organizational Mechanism	General Definition	Manifestation in FETO/PSS	References
Leadership Authority	Acceptance of the charismatic leader as an unquestionable source of authority	Gülen's sermons and writings served as both a religious and organizational binding reference for members of the organization	Weber, 1978; Presidency of Religious Affairs, 2017
Organizational Socialization	The individual's internalization of organizational ideology from an early age; construction of a 'we' identity in place of 'I'	The systematic recruitment of youth through Işık Evleri, preparatory courses, and student dormitories	Police Academy Presidency, 2017; Ministry of Interior of the Republic of Türkiye, 2019
Collective Identity Production	Members perceiving themselves as part of an elite and privileged community	The differentiation of members from ordinary society through the 'Hizmet' discourse and the organizational mission framework	Demir, 2021

Organizational Mechanism	General Definition	Manifestation in FETO/ PSS	References
Oath Mechanism	A symbolic and legal enforcement instrument that reinforces organizational commitment at a ritual level	Members are sworn to obedience to leadership authority, to organisational decisions, and to the protection of secrets through the 'Wallah-billah' oath	Yeni Şafak, 2016; Supreme Court of Appeals Chief Public Prosecutor's Office, 2018
Hierarchical Organization	Determination of access to information and decision-making authority according to rank	A seven-tier caste system; lower-ranking cadres do not know the identities of upper-ranking cadres, and information is controlled vertically	Supreme Court of Appeals Chief Public Prosecutor's Office, 2018
Institutional Infiltration Strategy	Long-term and planned placement of personnel within state institutions	Systematic entrenchment across the judiciary, security forces, military, and education over decades; July 15 represents the culmination of this process in its final act	Ministry of Interior of the Republic of Türkiye, 2019; Akdoğan, 2023

Reference: Compiled by the authors based on the relevant literature.

socialisation, elite cadre and institutional infiltration form a complementary structure. Table 1 summarises how these elements emerged within the FETO/PSS organisation.

The Organizational Function of Religious Discourse: Leadership, Oath Mechanism and Culture of Obedience

When the organisational structures of religiously referenced organisations are examined, it becomes apparent that ideological discourse, leadership authority, and mechanisms of organisational commitment emerge as complementary elements. In such structures, religious discourse is not limited to the sphere of belief; it also functions to ensure discipline within the organisation, create group identity and legitimise organisational goals.

Charismatic leadership is one of the basic elements of the organisational structure in most religiously referenced movements. According to Weber, charismatic authority is a form of authority characterised by a strong belief in the leader's extraordinary qualities. In such structures, the leader figure is accepted by the followers without question (Weber, 1978, p. 241).

An analysis of the FETO/PSS reveals that the discourses of Fetullah Gülen largely shape the movement's ideology and organisational structure. Gülen's sermons, informal religious talks, and written texts are accepted by the organisation's members not only as religious interpretations but also as the primary sources that determine organisational behaviour. This strengthened the leader's position within the organisation and made the leader's authority unquestionable among members.

One of the most important functions of religious discourse in FETO/PSS is to foster a strong collective identity among its members. Pushing individual identity to the background and emphasising the collective 'we' discourse within the organisation enables members to see themselves as part of a privileged community. In this process, the emphasis on the collective 'we' discourse rather than the individual 'I' is used as a socialisation strategy that enables members to substitute the organisational ideal for their personal values (Police Academy Presidency, 2017, p. 25).

Rituals and symbolic practices are also important tools used in religiously referenced organisations to strengthen organisational loyalty. In the FETO/PSS organisation, one of the most important tools for ensuring discipline and loyalty is the oath mechanism. Members of the organisation were expected to take an oath of loyalty at certain stages. In the oath text, elements such as loyalty to the organisation's leader, unquestioning fulfilment of assigned tasks, and protection of organisational secrets are emphasised (Yeni Şafak, 2016).

To fully understand the psychological pressure exerted by the oath text on the organisation's members and the relationship of loyalty, it is first necessary to examine the primary documents that convey the organisation's leaders' understanding of religion. In his speech at the Hisar Mosque on 26.11.1989, Gülen made the following statements:

"From the moment a believer steps into the temple, he falls under the mehabet and mehafah of the one who will be truly honoured there. It is such an assembly that on the dais of that assembly is Allah, who is the one who looks, who sees, who hears, who is aware of everything we do. And if someone is wandering among your ranks, if he has been permitted above, it is the sultan of our hearts, the sultan of your hearts, the master of humanity, the Prophet Muhammad Mustafa, who is present in every meeting related to him to honour the meeting. In this regard, I invite you to appreciate your presence in the mosque rather than resort to reminders, calls, or invitations. I think your hearts appreciate this far above my understanding and comprehension. Therefore, whether it is a teacher, a head of state or a prime minister, there is Allah, who looks into our hearts seventy times in a second, and there is the Prophet Muhammad Mustafa, who looks into His eyes and observes His Jemâl-i bâkemâlini. Because the congregation is his congregation, because he is the sultan, because he is

the one who mints the coin; he is the one who cuts the tughra.” (Video Sermons 1-Hisar 1, Taqwa of the Blessed, min. 10:40-12:00).

Gülen's claim that Allah is present on the pulpit is contrary to Islamic belief (Presidency of Religious Affairs, 2017, p. 14). This perverted understanding of religion constitutes the theological basis for members of the organisation to accept the leader's authority without question. The text of the oath, which embodies the mechanism of organisational loyalty, can be discussed under three main headings in terms of its organisational function (Yeni Şafak, 2016):

Loyalty to the Qur'an and Brotherhood

“I will make the Qur'an the goal of my life to the best of my ability, I will follow the path of loyalty towards my brothers, I will try to raise the honour and dignity of the people and fellow students as much as my honour and dignity, I will be pleased to be reminded of my flaws”

Absolute Obedience to Organisational Decisions

“I will reject all attacks and criticisms from within and without as if they were ‘made against my own self’, I will abide by the principles in the list of all decisions, I will try to fulfil the duties I have taken on in the name of the service or the obligations imposed on me by the decision without objection”

Eternal Subordination and Sanction

“I swear with the oaths of wallah-billah that I will never deviate from loyalty to the Qur'an, that the moment I act individually and act against these decisions, I will voluntarily dismiss myself from this cadre and continue my duty in the lecture hall like any other student, and that this oath will be La Yen Kati, and that this oath will be La Yen Kati, I ask the Almighty.”

This oath text clearly demonstrates the psychological pressure the organisation exerts on its members and the importance it places on unquestioning obedience to the leader's decisions. This loyalty forms the basis of the organisation's manipulative structure (Court of Cassation Chief Public Prosecutor's Office, 2018).

For organisational members, such oath texts function not only as symbolic rituals but also as tools that strengthen organisational discipline and mechanisms of obedience. Through the oath, organisational members not only accept the authority of the leader but also enter into a strong commitment to protect organisational secrets and fulfil assigned tasks.

Another important function of religious discourse in FETO/PSS is to legitimise the organisation's goals. The centrality of the concept of 'service' in the organisation's leader's discourse allows organisational activities to be presented within the framework of

a religious mission. In fact, some studies state that one of the main goals of the FETO/PSS organisation is to seize state power and transform the political system (Demir, 2021, p. 175).

In this framework, the FETO/PSS organisation can be considered not only a community movement grounded in religious discourse, but also a closed organisational model based on charismatic leadership, ideological commitment, and mechanisms of organisational discipline.

Closed Hierarchy and the Strategy of Statehood: The Seven-Tier Caste System and Comparative Organizational Analysis

In many religiously affiliated organisations, the organisational structure is based on a strict hierarchical system. In such structures, the distribution of tasks and authority relations within the organisation is hierarchical, and members at lower levels are expected to show absolute loyalty to senior cadres. While the hierarchical structure ensures discipline within the organisation, it also allows the leader's authority to reach down to lower cadres effectively.

An analysis of the FETO/PSS structure reveals that the organisation not only has an ideological closed organisational structure but has also developed a highly disciplined, layered organisational model. The distribution of tasks and decision-making processes within the organisation was organised within a certain hierarchical structure, which enabled the organisation to control its activities. In this context, the 'seven-step structure' frequently emphasised in the literature provides an important analytical framework for understanding FETO's organisational structure.

For this seven-tier structure to be more than an abstract description, it is necessary to mention the official name and functional definition of each level. In the document prepared by the Chief Public Prosecutor's Office of the Court of Cassation (2018), the structure in question is concretised as follows:

First Level "People Stratum": *Consists of those who are connected to the sect by faith and heart, and those who provide material and actual support.*

Second Level "Loyal Stratum": *Consists of loyal groups of school, classroom, dormitory, bank, newspaper, foundation and institution officials.*

Third Level "Ideological Organisation Stratum": *Consists of people who take part in unofficial activities and spread the organisation's ideology around them.*

Fourth Level "Teftis Kontrol Stratum": *Consists of people who supervise all services (legal and illegal). This layer can be accessed by those who rank high in obedience and loyalty.*

Fifth Level “Organising and Executing Stratum”: This is the stratum that requires a high level of secrecy, knows very little about each other, is directly appointed by the organisation’s leader, and organises and executes the structure at the state level.

Sixth Level “Has Stratum”: This is the stratum that serves as a liaison between Fethullah Gülen and the lower strata, handles changes and dismissals within the organisation, and includes those personally appointed by the organisation’s leader.

Seventh Level “Staff Stratum”: The most elite section of the organisation, consisting of 17 people directly selected by the organisation’s leader (Court of Cassation Chief Public Prosecutor’s Office, 2018, pp. 7-8).

The fact that this hierarchical structure was designed by the organisation’s leader himself is clearly seen in the following lines written by Gülen:

“On different platforms, Muslims sit and talk about the issues with the service and come to different decisions. In other words, they discuss every issue. Some of them are also engaged in different activities at school, in the dormitory, at home, and in the bazaar. You may wonder, are the latter one step ahead of the former? No, meşveret means thinking things through and conducting feasibility studies. These are very important things, and they are not for naïve minds, for people without experience and knowledge. Therefore, planning these things before the move is not only not inferior to implementation, but it can even be said to be ahead of it. In fact, the actions of those who carry out a task in the plan of action may pale in comparison to the strategies, feasibilities, plans and projects put forward by the supreme leaders. For example, during a war, although generals and lieutenant generals are very good fighters, they do not pick up a gun and fight. They stay behind the front lines and formulate military strategies; their decisions determine the fate of a war, thousands of soldiers, and even a nation and a state. Therefore, the work of this cadre of commanders cannot be taken lightly. In fact, these commanders are the enemy’s primary targets. Their destruction means the army’s destruction, and that means victory for the enemy. For this reason, if commanders get stuck during the war, they demote themselves and go out into the field dressed as privates or non-commissioned officers. Because the bigger they look, the bigger target they are” (Gülen, 1997, p. 47).

As Gülen’s words make clear, the organisation’s leader confirms the existence of a hierarchical structure from the top to the lower levels, which he refers to as the ‘chief dignitaries.

When the organisational model of FETO/PSS is examined, it is seen that this structure is not only a mechanism for generating ideological loyalty but also a tool

for developing a long-term cadre strategy within state institutions. The organisation has recruited young individuals into the movement, especially through educational institutions, and has sought to train them as cadres who can take office in state institutions in the long term.

The Aum Shinrikyo movement, which emerged in Japan, stands out as a closed cult organised around the charismatic leader Shoko Asahara. The 1995 sarin gas attack in the Tokyo subway is considered one of the most striking examples of the movement's radical and violence-based strategy. On the other hand, the Minhaj-ul-Quran movement, led by Tahir-ul-Qadri, which operates in Pakistan, is primarily a religious movement that stands out for its political mobilisation and social protest activities (Çevik, 2013, p. 93).

When these three movements are compared, it becomes clear that the relationships between religiously referenced organisations and political systems can take different forms. While Aum Shinrikyo aims for radical transformation through direct acts of violence, the Tahir-ul-Qadri movement demands systemic change through political mobilisation and mass protest. In contrast to these two models, the FETO/PSS organisation has developed a long-term strategy of institutionalisation and has focused on building bureaucratic power within state institutions.

In this respect, the FETO/PSS organisation presents a unique organisational model that combines religious discourse, charismatic leadership, and institutional infiltration strategies. The multi-layered hierarchical structure of the organisation enabled the preservation of organisational discipline and the realisation of long-term strategic goals, leading to the movement being considered not only a religious community but also an organisational model targeting the political system.

Analytically, this divergence is not merely a matter of tactical preference but reflects fundamentally different logics of political change. Aum Shinrikyo's resort to mass-casualty violence reflects an apocalyptic urgency incompatible with long-term institutional planning. The Minhaj-ul-Quran movement's use of mass protest signals acceptance of the legitimacy of democratic contestation, even as it challenges the current configuration of power. FETO/PSS, by contrast, operated on a logic of institutional patience: it did not seek to destroy or contest the state institutions from the outside, but to inhabit and redirect it from within. This distinction — between external disruption and internal capture — is the central analytical variable that positions FETO/PSS as a novel subtype within the typology of religiously motivated political organisations.

Table 2. Comparison of Religious Reference Organisations in terms of Organisational Structure and Strategy

Comparison Dimension	FETO/PSS	Aum Shinrikyo	Minhaj-ul Quran
Country of Origin	Türkiye	Japan	Pakistan
Leadership Structure	Charismatic and covert; Gülen resided in the United States and maintained symbolic authority over the organisation	Charismatic and overt; Asahara is central to the cult	Charismatic and visible; Qadri is actively present at rallies
Resort to Violence	Covert for a long period; July 15 is the final stage	Early and open; 1995 sarin attack	Avoids direct violence; mass protest
Relationship with the State	Infiltration of the state — state capture	Open confrontation with the state	Pressuring the state from outside
Organizational Structure	Seven-tier covert caste system	Closed cult structure	Open and international network, 100+ countries
Socialization	Işık Evleri; long-term recruitment	Retreat camps; rapid cult socialization	Madrasa and educational networks
Ultimate Goal	To seize the state from within	To destroy existing society and establish a new order	To transform the political system through reform
Distinguishing Feature	Hybrid model that conceals violence as a last resort	Radical cult that uses violence as a primary instrument	Mobilization model that rejects violence

References: Hoffman, 2006; Çevik, 2013; Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Interior, 2019; Court of Cassation Chief Public Prosecutor's Office, 2018; Gür, 2023; Compiled comparatively by the authors.

A comparative analysis of the organisational structures and political strategies of religiously referenced organisations reveals significant differences. These differences are summarised in Table 2.

FETO/PSS'S Transition to Final Action: The July 15 Coup Attempt and Its Structural Accounting

The most concrete and destructive manifestation of FETO/PSS's decades-long organisational strategy was the July 15, 2016 coup attempt. This attempt represents the breaking point where all the structural elements of the organisation, analysed at the theoretical level - charismatic leadership, closed hierarchy, infiltration of state institutions - turned into actual acts of terrorism.

Once the Fethullahist Terrorist Organisation ceased to be a structure presenting itself as a religious community, it began to act more openly against state institutions and public order. The February 7, 2012, summoning of the Undersecretary of the National Intelligence Service (MIT) to testify, the December 17-25, 2013, corruption and

bribery investigation, and the November 27, 2015, MIT trucks investigation are important breaking points in this process. When this organisation, described as the Parallel State Structure, failed to achieve results from the judicial coup on December 17, it attempted a direct military coup on July 15, 2016 (Akdoğan, 2023, pp. 115-116).

On July 15, 2016, a coup attempt was launched by a group of FETO members who identified themselves as the 'Peace at Home Council'. The coup attempt started simultaneously in many parts of the country: The Presidential Complex was bombed three times, the Turkish Grand National Assembly was bombed 11 times while parliamentarians were inside, the Chief of General Staff was taken hostage and the Police Special Operations Department in Gölbaşı, Ankara was attacked, killing 56 people (Republic of Türkiye, 2016, pp. 14-16). President Erdoğan's decisive resistance and public call for resistance and mass mobilisation contributed to the failure of the coup attempt.

705,172 people faced judicial proceedings as part of the investigations launched after the July 15 coup attempt. Of those on trial, 125,456 were convicted, and 13,251 are currently in prison for FETO membership. On the other hand, 357,205 investigation files were closed without any charges being filed. Comprehensive purges were also carried out to remove FETO-linked structures from state institutions. In this context, 23,859 personnel were dismissed from the Turkish Armed Forces, the ranks of 2,292 personnel were revoked, and 245 people were suspended or temporarily dismissed. Approximately 40,000 police officers were dismissed following internal investigations. In contrast, 4,006 judges and prosecutors were dismissed following investigations in the judiciary. In addition, 125,678 public employees were dismissed from their jobs as a result of decisions taken during the state of emergency. These data show that a large-scale, judicial and administrative process was implemented against FETO's organisation across the military, security, and civilian bureaucracies (Atay, 2024).

Today, FETO has largely lost its institutional and open organisational capacity within Türkiye. However, instead of ceasing to exist completely, the organisation has increasingly shifted its operational focus to its overseas networks. It continues its efforts to generate legitimacy in the international arena through educational institutions, non-governmental organisations, and media channels. However, these activities are far from being as effective and widespread as they were in the past; the organisation today is considered a structure that struggles to maintain its ideological and organisational continuity, but is far from its former strength.

Figure 1. Infographic Visualisation of the Organisational Process from Leadership to Institutional Infiltration in Religiously Referenced Organisations (Prepared by the authors)



As shown in Figure 1, the process in religiously referenced organisations begins with the establishment of charismatic leadership authority, passes through the stages of organisational socialisation and collective identity production, is reinforced by the oath mechanism and hierarchical discipline, and finally culminates in a strategy of institutional infiltration. FETÖ/PSS represents the most systematic example of this process. An analysis of the organisational logic of organisations with religious references reveals that leadership, collective identity formation and organisational loyalty mech-

anisms form a complementary process. In the long run, this process can translate into the production of political power through institutional infiltration strategies.

Conclusion

When the literature on terrorism is examined, it becomes clear that organisations with religious references have emerged not only as ideological movements but also as structures organised around certain political goals. In such organisations, religious discourse is often used to strengthen organisational loyalty and legitimise political goals. In this context, organisations with religious references should be examined not only from a theological or sociological perspective, but also with their political and institutional dimensions.

In this study, the historical development of FETO/PSS is examined, and the line from the organisation's structuring process, which began in the 1960s, through its systematic infiltration into state institutions, to the July 15, 2016 coup attempt is revealed using empirical data. Data on the post-coup judicial and administrative measures following the coup attempt - 705,172 faced judicial proceedings, 23,859 dismissed military personnel, 4,006 suspended judges and prosecutors, 784 seized companies - concretely reveal the extent of the organisation's organisation in state institutions (Atay, 2024). These data prove that FETO/PSS should be evaluated as a 'state capture' attempt not only on a theoretical level but also in terms of actual institutional practice (Hellman, Jones & Kaufmann, 2000).

In this study, the organisational structure of FETO/PSS was analysed in comparison with those of other movements with religious references. The findings of the study show that the FETO/PSS organisation has developed a multi-layered hierarchical structure unlike that of classical religious movements and has used it in line with long-term organisational goals. In particular, the oath mechanism, collective identity production and leader-centred authority structure within the organisation played an important role in ensuring organisational discipline.

The primary source analysis also clearly reveals how FETO/PSS produced its organisational legitimacy. An analysis of the organisation's leader's own discourses reveals that Gülen positioned himself as a sacralised form of leadership authority and personally constructed the organisational hierarchy (Gülen, 1997). On the other hand, an examination of the publicly disclosed oath text under three headings - Loyalty to the Quran and Brotherhood, Absolute Obedience to the Organization's Decisions, Infinite Loyalty and Sanction - is a primary source that concretely documents the psychological pressure and suppression of individual agency that the organization has established on its members (Court of Cassation Chief Public Prosecutor's Office, 2018).

One of the most important features that distinguishes FETO/PSS from other organisations with religious affiliations is its long-term cadre-building strategy within state institutions. While radical organisations such as Aum Shinrikyo aim for system change through direct acts of violence, the Tahir-ul-Qadri movement prefers mass protest and political mobilisation. On the other hand, the FETO/PSS organisation has adopted a long-term strategy of institutionalisation instead of direct violence and has focused on building bureaucratic power within state institutions.

From a historical perspective, the relationship between religiously referenced organisations and state structures has taken different forms depending on the conditions of the period and the strategic preferences of the organisation. Some structures have oriented themselves toward the civil sphere in search of social legitimacy, while others have directly sought political power. What distinguishes FETO/PSS from these patterns is that institutional infiltration was organised as a deliberate process spanning decades, with each phase functionally connected to the next. This demonstrates that the organisation operated on the principle of institutional patience rather than institutional impatience, preferring a strategy of transforming the state institutions from within rather than changing it from the outside.

In this framework, the FETO/PSS organisation should be evaluated not only as an organisation using religious discourse but also as a closed and hierarchical organisational model targeting the political system. From a theoretical standpoint, the FETO/PSS case reveals that the relationship between religious discourse and institutional strategy has acquired a dimension beyond what is conventionally addressed in the political science literature. State capture processes are generally examined through the pressure and guidance mechanisms of economic interest groups. However, the FETO/PSS case concretely demonstrates that this process can also operate along ideological and religious identity lines, and moreover, that the institutional infiltration capacity of such structures can be realised in a distinct and potentially deeper manner than conventional economic capture models. This finding indicates that existing theoretical frameworks need to be reconsidered in a way that encompasses religiously-motivated political organisations, and positions the FETO/PSS case not merely as a security problem but as a distinctive object of analysis that must also be addressed from the perspective of political institutions theory. Religious discourse, a leader-centred authority structure, and internal disciplinary mechanisms emerge as the main elements that ensure the organisation's institutional continuity.

The theoretical contribution of the present study can be articulated along two axes. At the conceptual level, it advances the literature on state capture by demonstrating that ideological-organisational actors can achieve institutional penetration with greater depth and over a longer time horizon than the economic actors traditionally studied within this framework. At the typological level, it contributes to the

comparative study of religiously motivated organisations by identifying institutional infiltration — rather than violence or mobilisation — as a distinct and analytically separable strategy. Future research might operationalise these criteria into measurable indicators to enable broader cross-case comparisons.

In conclusion, this study reveals that the relations between religiously referenced organisations and political systems can take different forms. The example of FETO/PSS shows that movements organised around religious discourse and charismatic leadership can build complex institutional structures over time and develop strategies that can affect political institutions. This situation reveals that organisations with religious references should be analysed not only from a security perspective but also in the context of political institutions and state-society relations. As a matter of fact, the FETO/PSS case is expected to be a starting point for the early identification of comparable infiltration patterns by showing that indicators of institutional infiltration - educational networks, judicial cadre-building, secret hierarchical structures - should be placed at the centre of security analysis.



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