



## Planting Hate Speech to Harvest Hatred: How Does Political Hate Speech Fuel Hate Crimes in Turkey?

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### Abstract

Hate crimes against dissident groups are on the rise in Turkey, and political hate speech might have a triggering effect on this trend. In this study, the relationship between political hate speech against the Gulen Movement and the hate crimes perpetrated by ordinary people was examined through semi-structured interviews and surveys with victims. The findings suggest that a rise in political hate rhetoric targeting a given group might result in a corresponding rise in hate crimes committed against them, the effects of which have been largely overlooked in the current literature in the evolving Turkish context.

### Keywords

Political hate speech; hate crimes; doing difference; group libel.

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## Introduction

Hate speech used by some politicians against certain ethnic, religious, or political groups has in recent years become part of an increasing number of political campaigns and rhetoric (Amnesty International 2017). Although there are few universally acknowledged definitions of hate speech, any offensive communication targeting the dignity or reputation of a given group or individual is considered as such (Bakircioglu 2008). When inflammatory statements from political leaders targeting a group become their political rhetoric, this does not fall on deaf ears. Widely publicized statements made by politically powerful individuals fan the flames of hate crimes, inciting members of the general public to victimize so-called “enemies” in a target group (Perry 2001).

A recent report revealed that hate crimes reported to police in the United States (US) reach their peak during election campaigns (Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism 2018; Williams 2018). Similarly, racially and religiously motivated hate crimes and online hate speech against minorities, specifically Muslims and refugees, spiked during the recent Brexit vote, which saw the general public of the United Kingdom (UK) vote to withdraw from the European Union (HateLab 2020a, 2020b). A possible reason for this might be the increasingly discriminating and targeting rhetoric used by candidates during elections and the subsequent rise in hate crimes that occur throughout campaigns—hence, suggesting the parallels between the two. However, pure statistics tell us very little about the nature of the hate crime process as fueled by the political atmosphere (Perry 2001). According to Walters, Brown, and Wiedlitzka (2016), theories in social psychology suggest that prejudiced attitudes toward the victim group and perceptions of threat correlate with the tendency to commit hate crimes. However, they concluded that lacking evidence shows how those attitudes and perceptions are shaped and how the mechanisms that lead to hate crimes operate.

By analyzing victims’ perspectives, the current study examines whether and how the inflammatory rhetoric of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and members of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) has fueled hate crimes against members of the Gulen (or Hizmet) Movement, a transnational religious civil society group. Using Perry’s (2001) “doing difference” theoretical framework, the study focuses on the ongoing political hate rhetoric in Turkey and how this language affects interactions between proponents of the current government and the targeted group.

## Theoretical Framework

Perry’s (2001: 185) “doing difference” theory posits “political discourse reaffirms and legitimates the negative evaluations of difference that give rise to hate crime.” Essentially, she depicts hate crimes as instruments for “intimidation and control” (2001: 2), which dominant groups use to reconstruct their authority and remind victims of their boundaries and limits. When the subordinate groups “step outside” (2001: 2) their boundaries constructed for them by the dominant group, they are perceived as a threat to authority. Thus, the power of the hegemonic group needs to be “reaffirmed” (2001: 54), and hate crimes provide both the tools for that process and a response to the perceived threat posed by so-called subordinates. In addition, Perry (2001) argues that the practices, policy, and rhetoric of a state that stigmatizes, demonizes, or marginalizes a subordinate group provide a formal context in which hate crimes can and do emerge. In that sense, hate crimes incited by state-level rhetoric serve as “an informal mechanism of control” (2001: 179). One such mechanism is discourse that depicts “others” as “different,” deviant, dangerous, and/or inferior, unlocking the “permission to hate” and further legitimating hate crimes and mistreatment against certain oppressed groups.

To further explain how political rhetoric creates a climate that legitimates hate crimes, van Dijk’s (2006) manipulative discourse thesis can be used. While all political speech attempts to condition public action through various techniques of persuasion and manipulation (David 2014; Rozina and Karapetjana 2009), politicians tend to use the latter, in particular, to mobilize their proponents and act in “the best interest of the dominated group and against the best interests of dominated groups” (van Dijk 2006: 359). Thus, manipulative discourse aims to control people’s beliefs, opinions, ideologies, and actions through abuses

of social power and domination (van Dijk 2006). Political hate speech can, then, be examined in this framework—first, to indicate whether politicians may use their power to disseminate their fears and hatred of targeted dissidents to the general public; and subsequently whether political hate rhetoric may mobilize members of the public to commit hate crimes against the targeted group in support of their dominant counterpart.

The daily conduct of hate speech, when combined with the social reach and influence of politicians, may create devastating effects on its victims (Benesch et al. 2020). When hate speech becomes the element of daily political discourse, its effect and harm may well go beyond the targeted group or individual(s) (Roberts 1995). By enabling hate crimes to occur against supposedly threatening groups using increasingly insulting language, they are alleged as inferior and deserving of this hostility (Poynting and Perry 2007).

For example, the genocide against Tutsis in Rwanda in 1994 provides a striking case of how political rhetoric against a group led to devastating outcomes. Decades of propaganda and demonization against Tutsis via a public radio station incited Hutus against the Tutsi minority (Ndahiro 2019). Politicians had been using anti-Tutsi rhetoric to rally voters when the party lost support and reached a dangerous level in the years preceding genocide, such that politicians publicly provoked their supporters into the mass murder of Tutsis and into dumping their bodies in a river (CBC 2001). As a result of this rhetoric, people turned against their fellow citizens, neighbors, and even peers at school, and 800,000 people were killed in only 100 days (BBC 2019).

The case of the Gulen Movement in Turkey has not yet turned into the genocide observed in Rwanda. However, the ongoing hate rhetoric used by President Erdogan and other top government officials, as well as a rise in the prevalence of hate crimes against the group, have reached a critical point in recent years. To better understand the hate-related victimization in Turkey today, we must acknowledge the recent history of hate crimes and political hate rhetoric plaguing the country.

### **Hate Crimes in Turkey**

The term “hate crime” is relatively new in Turkey, despite its presence in the country’s history (Kazaz 2016). As a legal concept, the term did not appear on the public agenda until the murder of Armenian journalist and activist Hrant Dink in 2006 (Gökten 2017). Since then, hate crimes have been used and discussed more frequently in the Turkish media as well as in academic literature and by the general public. Importantly, hate crimes were not defined as a separate type of crime in the Turkish Criminal Code (TCC) until 2014. Changes made to Article 122 of the TCC saw hatred and discrimination now described as occurring if one’s actions prevented people from economic activities, being hired for a job, or enjoying public services due to their ethnic, religious, or political differences, made punishable with one to three years’ imprisonment. Despite this change, Article 122 has been criticized for being far from enforceable in practice due to its language usage and narrow definition of hate crimes. Notably, the most common types of hate crime—that being both physical and verbal attacks—were not included in the TCC. Besides, there has been no conviction based on Article 122 since the crime was legally defined (Kazaz 2016; Nupel Haber 2019).

Over the course of the modern Turkish Republic (1920–2020), almost every elected government has created hegemony and a host of victims, and in almost all periods politicians have used hate speech against their opponents (Akpınar 2015). The victimization of minorities and political rivals in Turkey was not solely limited to being the target of political hate speech, but the hatred toward these groups also frequently sparked massive purges and persecution. Depending on the ideology of the leading party or power, various groups have been targeted in different periods. Among the victimized groups have been ethnic minorities (i.e., Kurds, Armenians, Caucasians, Laz, Romans, and Arabs); religious minorities (i.e., Jews, Orthodox Christians, Assyrians, Ezidis, Alawites, and Jafaris); Muslim groups, sects, and movements;

LGBTQ communities; and recently Syrian refugees whose population has exceeded three million in Turkey since the Syrian Civil War began in 2011 (Connor 2018; Göktan 2017).

Göktan (2017) argued that in addition to the official attitude toward certain minority groups, personal bias and prejudice as well as unfair media scrutiny have encouraged further victimization of select groups. A recent report by the Hrant Dink Foundation (HDF 2018) revealed that 5,296 articles that include hate and discriminatory speech were published in the Turkish press in 2017. Among these, 6,782 hate speech examples were found against 79 different racial, national, or religious groups. The country has also witnessed some outrageous hate crimes against members of different minorities. The victims of some of the most notorious hate crime incidents in recent times include Andrea Santoro, a Roman Catholic priest who was shot and killed in 2006; a gay journalist who was stabbed to death in 2006; Hrant Dink, an Armenian journalist and human rights activist who was murdered in front of his newspaper building in 2007; four bible publishing company workers at Zirve Publishing who were murdered in 2007 by an ultranationalist group known as Ergenekon; and Tahir Elci, a Kurdish human rights lawyer and activist who was shot dead in broad daylight in 2015 (Arslan 2011; Göktan 2017).

A common motivation in these recent cases was the rising hate rhetoric used against victims and/or victimized groups. For example, Tahir Elci and Hrant Dink had been increasingly and publicly targeted on the grounds of their ethnic and political identity up until their murders (Arslan 2011; Nupel Haber 2019). Two years before Dink was killed by the Ergenekon ultranationalist group (Arslan 2011), he wrote a column in which he alleged that the first Turkish female pilot, Sabiha Gokcen—a symbolic name in the history of the modern Turkish Republic and foster child of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk—was actually Armenian (Er 2015). Soon after, the Turkish General Staff declared Dink's allegation to be unhealthy, irresponsible, and dangerous. Until his murder in 2006, the explicit insults and threats continued to target him in the right-wing, conservative, and even mainstream media outlets, and he was accused of being a tool of imperialism, a traitor, and a collaborator with those powers who want to divide the country (Goktas 2009). The hatred against Dink did not stop after his death. Even recently, his wife, Rakel Dink, and the human rights organization founded under his name, the Hrant Dink Foundation, continue to receive hateful e-mails including death threats and hate speech (HDF 2020).

Similarly, the murder of Kurdish lawyer and activist Tahir Elci happened two months after he appeared on a television program on CNN Turk, where he was asked if he thought that the PKK was a terrorist organization. Responding negatively to the question, and believing the PKK to be an armed political organization that has large public support and that had at times committed terrorist acts, Elci was increasingly targeted and exposed to public hate speech; thereafter, he was taken into custody and forbidden to go abroad after his release (Human Rights Watch 2015). Elsewhere, rising anti-Christianity in Turkey was a key reason behind Roman Catholic priest Andrea Santoro's murder. Immediately following, Bishop Luigi Padovese, who was also serving in Turkey, warned the public about rising anti-Christian propaganda in the country during a media interview (Allen 2006). Later in 2010, Bishop Padovese was stabbed to death by his driver, who had announced that he had killed the 'great Satan' (Squires 2010: para. 1).

### ***Hate Crimes Against the Gulen Movement***

Since the outbreak of a corruption scandal in late 2013 that implicated some cabinet ministers and family members of President Erdogan (Arango et al. 2013), a new chapter has been opened in Turkey's history of hatred. Erdogan declared the investigations as an attempted coup against his government despite solid evidence on the schemes. The investigators and prosecutors conducting the probes were dismissed from their positions and some were arrested soon after the investigation. President Erdogan declared "all-out war" on the Gulen Movement, given its origins as a transnational religious civil society group inspired by Fethullah Gulen (a Muslim cleric now living in self-exile in the US), blaming them for plotting the corruption probes (Ozeren, Cubukcu, and Bastug 2020). Since then, the president's political rhetoric has increasingly targeted members of the Movement (Stockholm Center for Freedom [SCF] 2017). Erdogan's severity took the form of outright demonization and vilification of the Movement in the aftermath of the

failed coup attempt in July 2016. Although he blamed the group for plotting the corruption probes and the coup attempt, Gulenists have explicitly denied their involvement in both efforts (BBC 2014; Saul 2016). It was reported that Erdogan used some 240 different concepts to insult the Gulen Movement since the investigations were conducted (SCF 2017). In his address to the nation after the 2016 coup attempt, the president depicted informing on Gulen supporters as a “patriotic duty,” encouraging citizens to become voluntary informants that spy on their coworkers, neighbors, relatives, and even family members (TurkeyPurge 2016).

During this period, the Gulen Movement has also been publicly targeted by ordinary people, prompting thousands of group members to leave Turkey due to ever-increasing demonization and seek asylum in Western countries (Advocates of Silenced Turkey 2017). Those who could not leave have become targets of violent hate crimes. For example, inspired and motivated by the ongoing political hate rhetoric, a research assistant at Osmangazi University killed four of his colleagues in the faculty in 2018 for being alleged Gulen members (Fox and Alam 2018). The murder suspect had previously lodged complaints about 102 academics with “FETO” (a derogatory term used by the AKP government while referring to the Gulen Movement) membership accusations (which led to their dismissal from academic positions) and in his first statement in police custody claimed to have felt no repentance for his act (Akca 2018). This case has raised many questions about the devastating effect of political hate rhetoric and whether it fuels hate crimes among the Turkish populace.

## **Current Research**

This study examined through victim perspectives the relationship between politicians’ hate speech against the Gulen Movement and the hate crimes committed by ordinary people. We assessed whether participants were victimized more frequently after the corruption probes and the coup attempt in Turkey, and analyzed victims’ perceptions on whether political hate speech is a factor that motivates the hate crime perpetrators. In addition, this study explored how hate crimes influenced one’s daily life practices and social interactions.

## **Method**

A mixed-method sequential explanatory design was used. This meant that the findings underwent a qualitative phase following the collection and analysis of quantitative data. The latter process provides a general understanding of the research problem through statistical analysis, whereas the former helps to refine and explain the findings by exploring participants’ views in greater depth (Ivankova, Creswell, and Stick 2006). In the first step, surveys were conducted with 99 members of the Gulen Movement who had recently left Turkey and immigrated to Canada due to fear of and actual persecution. Next, the survey results were explored through semi-structured interviews with 10 participants.

### ***Participants and Procedure***

Ninety-nine individuals who immigrated to Canada from Turkey participated in this study. Participants were recruited from the Turkish population living in the Greater Toronto Area and self-identified as a member or supporter of the Gulen Movement. A snowball sampling method was used to select participants, of whom the initial few were found through the researchers’ personal network and subsequently asked to refer other potential individuals to participate. Data collection occurred between March 2018 and January 2019.

Of the 150 group members approached, 66 completed the survey online and 33 filled out the paper survey. The vast majority of respondents immigrated to Canada from Turkey within the last two years before the data collection date, with 96% reporting a very strong or strong sense of belonging to the Movement. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics detailing participants’ demographic characteristics.

**Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for the Demographic Variables**

Variable	<i>f</i>	<i>p</i>	Variable	<i>f</i>	<i>p</i>
<b>Gender</b>			<b>Length of residence</b>		
Male	68	68.7%	Less than six months	41	42.3%
Female	31	31.3%	6–12 months	27	27.8%
<b>Age</b>			13–24 months	23	23.7%
18–29	12	12.3%	More than 24 months	6	6%
30–39	36	37.5%	<b>Sense of belonging</b>		
40–49	44	45.9%	Very strong	71	71.7%
50–59	2	2.1%	Strong	24	24.2%
60 or older	2	2.1%	Moderate	0	0%
			Weak	3	3%
			Very weak	1	1%

Following the survey, respondents were asked if they would like to participate for interview. Ten participants volunteered to be interviewed in person and audio-recorded with consent.

### *Instruments*

The survey and interview guides used in this study were adapted with permission from an ongoing research project (see Helly et al. 2018) examining hate crimes against Muslims in Canada. In the survey, participants were asked how frequently they experienced seven different types of hate crimes due to their affiliation with the Movement in three different periods: these were before the corruption probes in 2013, between the corruption probes and the coup attempt in July 2016, and after the coup attempt. The types of hate crimes related to verbal attacks, online hate crimes, property-related crimes, threats, physical assaults, victimization by the criminal justice system, and institutional damage. The frequency of victimization was assessed on a five-point, Likert-type strength-of-agreement scale, ranging from 1 (“never”) to 5 (“very frequently”). Respondents were also asked whether they had heard or witnessed any of the seven types of hate crimes that may have been inflicted on another group member.

In the second part of the questionnaire, respondents were given a list of 50 hate phrases that President Erdogan used against the Gulen Movement. These were randomly selected from the 240 phrases reported by the SCF (2017). Then, participants were asked whether they had heard any of these expressions from people other than the President or a politician. They were also asked how strongly they believed these hateful discourses against the Gulen Movement affected perpetrators’ behavior toward them and how strongly they believed that Turkish citizens decided on and changed their attitudes toward group members based on this rhetoric.

The third part of the questionnaire was designed to measure how participants’ daily lives were affected by the hate crimes to which they were subjected. This section included 13 items assessing whether respondents took more personal security measures and whether they changed their daily routines, in turn. Finally, we asked whether respondents reported the hate crimes they experienced to any authority in Turkey and, if not, why.

After gathering and analyzing the survey data, we conducted interviews with participants who were willing to disclose further information about their experiences. We asked about their encounters with hate crime and the motivations of perpetrators to elaborate on the survey findings. Specifically, we asked about the political ideology and/or affiliation of perpetrators, whether and how this ideology and/or affiliation influenced their attitude toward the participant, whether the political hate speech used by President

Erdogan and other politicians had any effect on perpetrators' behavior, and how these events affected their daily lives and the group to which they belonged.

### **Data Analysis**

We conducted a one-way, repeated-measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) to examine the mean differences in the frequency of participants' hate crime experiences during three time periods: these were before the corruption probes in 2013, between the corruption probes and the coup attempt in 2016, and from the coup attempt to the data collection period. Audio-recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim, and a thematic content analysis was conducted for emergent themes.

## **Results**

### **Quantitative Findings**

A one-way, repeated-measures ANOVA was conducted to evaluate the null hypothesis that there was no change in the frequency of hate crime victimization before the corruption probes in 2013, between the probes and the coup attempt in 2016, and thereafter. The results in Table 2 indicate that both events had a significant effect on each type of hate crime.

**Table 2: One-way Repeated Measure ANOVA Outcomes**

Type of crime	ANOVA
<b>Verbal attack</b>	Wilks' lambda = 0.32, $F(2, 93) = 100.156$ , $p = 0.000$ , $\eta^2 = 0.68$
<b>Online hate crimes</b>	Wilks' lambda = 0.38, $F(2, 89) = 71.011$ , $p = 0.000$ , $\eta^2 = 0.61$
<b>Property-related</b>	Wilks' lambda = 0.48, $F(2, 84) = 46.148$ , $p = 0.000$ , $\eta^2 = 0.52$
<b>Threat</b>	Wilks' lambda = 0.45, $F(2, 86) = 51.773$ , $p = 0.000$ , $\eta^2 = 0.55$
<b>Physical assault</b>	Wilks' lambda = 0.67, $F(2, 81) = 17.40$ , $p = 0.000$ , $\eta^2 = 0.30$
<b>Criminal justice system</b>	Wilks' lambda = 0.42, $F(2, 77) = 52.407$ , $p = 0.000$ , $\eta^2 = 0.58$
<b>Institutional damage</b>	Wilks' lambda = 0.30, $F(2, 85) = 97.20$ , $p = 0.000$ , $\eta^2 = 0.67$

ANOVA: analysis of variance

A follow-up comparison indicated that each pair-wise difference between the three periods was significant for all types of hate crimes ( $p < 0.01$ ). In particular, there was a significant increase in victimization frequency after each incident, which suggests that the participants experienced hate crimes more frequently (see Table 3). The largest effect was observed in verbal attacks and institutional damage. Some 87% of participants reported that they had heard or had witnessed one or more types of hate crimes committed against other group members after the two events.

**Table 3: Mean Frequency of Hate Crime Victimization in Three Different Periods**

Type of crime	Mean victimization frequency		
	<i>Period 1*</i>	<i>Period 2**</i>	<i>Period 3***</i>
<b>Verbal attack</b>	1.91	3.17	3.88
<b>Online hate crimes</b>	2.26	3.41	4.16
<b>Property-related</b>	1.29	1.74	2.97
<b>Threat</b>	1.38	2.25	3.14
<b>Physical assault</b>	1.13	1.46	1.88
<b>Criminal justice system</b>	1.30	2.15	3.25
<b>Institutional damage</b>	1.55	2.92	4.09

\*Period 1: Before the corruption probes; \*\*Period 2: From the corruption probes to the coup attempt; \*\*\*Period 3: After the coup attempt

Respondents tended to agree on questions regarding the effect of political hate speech. Of note, 97% reported that they had heard from non-politicians one or more of the hate phrases used by politicians against the group, while 87% strongly or very strongly believed that the hate speech of President Erdogan and other politicians led perpetrators to target members. In addition, 95% of respondents strongly or very strongly believed that the discourse not only convinced but also negatively changed Turkish peoples' attitudes toward the Gulen Movement (see Table 4).

**Table 4: Perceived Effect of Political Hate Speech on Perpetrators' Behavior and Attitude**

	<b>Very strong</b>	<b>Strong</b>	<b>Moderate</b>	<b>Weak</b>	<b>Not strong at all</b>
How strongly do you believe these words and other hate speech by Erdogan and other politicians against the Movement affected the perpetrators' behavior against you?	80	6	0	0	6
How strongly do you believe that people in Turkey made up their minds and changed their attitude toward the Gulen Movement based on Erdogan's and government officials' hate speech?	78	11	0	0	3

Participants were asked whether they reported hate crime incidents to the authorities, and if not the reason(s) for their reluctance. As shown in Table 5, some 91% of the respondents stated that they did not report incidents to authorities, as the majority (35.4%) expressed fear of being targeted by the police or judiciary as a result (see Table 5).



**Table 5: Reasons for Not Reporting Hate Crimes to Authorities**

Reasons for not reporting	Frequency	Percentage
I thought that I might be targeted by the police or judiciary if I report	35	35.4
I thought that the perpetrator might do worse things to me if I report	13	13.1
I thought nothing will change	11	11.1
I thought it was unnecessary	2	2
Other	19	19.2

In the final part of the survey, participants were asked along a 13-item inventory whether their hate crime victimization experiences had affected their daily lives. The results are shown in Table 6.

**Table 6: Effects of Hate Crime Victimization on Lifestyle**

Changes in lifestyle	N	Percentage
Improved home security	66	72.5
Improved vehicle security	55	60.4
Started to avoid walking in certain places	76	83.5
Started to avoid attending community/cultural events	48	52.7
Moved house/apartment	64	70.3
Changed neighborhoods	63	70.8
Changed children's schools	50	54.9
Changed jobs	27	37.4
Changed location of business	34	44.2
Closed business	48	58.5
Changed how I dressed	43	51.2
Stopped going out at night	47	56
Stopped using public transportation	33	41.8

### *Qualitative Findings*

Eight distinct themes emerged from the interviews. Five were perpetrator-related and three were victim-related (see Table 7).

**Table 7: Emergent Themes**

Themes	N
<b>Perpetrator-related themes</b>	
Political hate speech as a motive	10
Perpetrator(s) as acquaintances	10
Fear of being stereotyped as a motive	8
Perpetrators from other political factions	7
Turkish State activities abroad	7
<b>Victim-related themes</b>	
Alienation from Turkish society	9
Disappearance of self-defence opportunities	8
Alienation from the Turkish community in Canada	8

*Political hate speech as a motive*

The timing of a change in perpetrators' attitudes toward participants indicates how the rising political hate speech in Turkey fueled hate crimes against Movement members. In particular, all respondents believed that offenders were encouraged by President Erdogan's hateful rhetoric against the group. One elder female interviewee who was physically assaulted by her younger brother and verbally assaulted by three of her siblings said (after mentioning her experiences) "whenever Erdogan started to use these words against Hizmet, my siblings started to behave like this [assaulting her verbally and physically]." Another participant mentioned that people were mobilized against the Movement specifically after attending pro-Erdogan rallies.

Respondents also mentioned the president's use of religious rhetoric as a factor that increased the effect of his hate speeches, specifically on more religious AKP supporters. One participant explained this effect as follows:

Specifically, because he [Erdogan] used religious concepts in his speeches, people thought that he is a religious person who regularly practices the religion. At least he used to seem so; he was holding the Qoran in his party rallies, [and] his daughter wears a headscarf. People were saying that they [the AKP] liberated the headscarf in the public sphere so that women could enter public offices. So, they gained the trust of religious people with these [actions], and when they delivered these [hate] speeches [against us] naming us infidel, deviant, etc., the hatred amongst the people against us was displayed through physical and verbal abuses.

*Fear of being stereotyped as a motive*

According to victims in this study, fear of being stereotyped as a Movement member was one key motive driving hate crimes. Eight expressed their beliefs that some perpetrators were intentionally assaulting them to avoid being labeled as a Gulen supporter or to prove that they were not a member of the group. The political environment had been so intense in Turkey that if they had not victimized them, they would have been labeled as a Gulenist and, thus, subjected to victimization as well. To this end, one of the respondents stated that he had many friends share anti-Movement posts on social media but did not believe they actually endorsed the content:

I've seen such posts from several friends. However, I recognized that some of them were sharing such posts online due to their fear of the government. Some of them were doing this intentionally, by mentioning me in their posts. I did not use social media for a long time after those posts because I thought I could not cope with them.

### *Perpetrator(s) as acquaintances*

Without exception, all participants expressed the view that they were victimized by known acquaintances (i.e., family members and close friends) rather than by foreigners or strangers. This was especially true for those who were public officials, who said they were being targeted by their colleagues. Other participants told how their relatives or neighbors physically and/or verbally assaulted them after the government began targeting the Movement. One stated that “even though I was in the US when the coup attempt broke out, my old close friend found my phone number and insulted me.” Another participant told us that one of her friends from the Movement who was pregnant was forced by her father to divorce her husband and abort her baby just because her husband had ties with the group. Some of the interviewees mentioned having broken family ties due to the political nature of the discourse and subsequent hate crimes motivated, in turn. To this, one participant stated:

there are hundreds of women with their kids kicked out of their parents’ homes after their husbands were arrested for being a member of the group. Parents [were] denied their children with the fear of being targeted by neighbors.

### *Perpetrators from other political factions*

Some perpetrators were motivated regardless of their political stance. Seven respondents stated that although some were not supporters of President Erdogan, they were influenced by media-driven hate propaganda against the Movement, as it is almost completely under government control. They mentioned ultranationalists, secularists, and nationalists among those who committed hate crimes due to the rising hate rhetoric of politicians. One participant who was verbally assaulted by a colleague due to his affiliation with the Movement said:

he [the perpetrator] was not a fan of the AKP [the ruling party]; however, since the AKP started to target the Hizmet Movement, he has been encouraged by the war declared by the AKP and did this. Otherwise, there had been nothing like this [between us] before.

### *Turkish State activities abroad*

The majority of participants repeatedly mentioned the activities of the Turkish Embassy, consulates, and individuals connected to the Turkish National Intelligence Agency. They stressed the fear of being informed on, abducted, and brought back to Turkey by these state entities in the same manner to which some Movement members were subjected in select Eastern European countries such as Kosovo and Moldova. Abductions were one of the most significant fears cited. Whenever participants mentioned the Turkish authorities abroad, they also noted abductions of their fellow members by these bodies. Strikingly, these fears persist in Canada and the US, with almost all the respondents expressing the fear of even being around Turkish embassies. One participant reported that the Turkish Ambassador in Toronto established ties with various religious groups through donations, and then attended masjids for Friday Prayers and gave khutba (a sermon delivered at noon), demonizing the Gulen Movement in the eyes of other Islamic groups in Toronto.

Another respondent mentioned his experience of being physically assaulted in Egypt, where he was brutally attacked by Turkish Embassy employees and his daughter’s Turkish identity card was seized illegally. One recalled his friend’s experience with a boss at a pizzeria in which the perpetrators threatened to inform Turkish intelligence agents in Montreal of his presence, and that he would be abducted and flown back to Turkey. In this example, the shop owner is alleged to have told the victim that Turkish intelligence is quite active in Montreal and that they often make “visitations” to gather information about Gulen supporters. One respondent stressed the ongoing threat in European countries, noting that a Turkish cabinet member visited Poland and gave interviews on all television channels arguing that the Movement members are terrorists. The respondent expressed his deep concern, asking, in response to prompts about daily routine, how individuals are meant to “go out in the night—how you are even going out in the daytime on such an occasion?”

### *Disappearance of self-defence opportunities*

Respondents mentioned the loss of opportunity and a means to defend themselves or express their ideas after the coup attempt. The fear of being assaulted prevented them from freely and publicly expressing themselves since the group became a government target. When asked about their reaction to verbal insults, one of the interviewees stated, "I could not even respond to the slurs." Another explained the level of risk reached after the coup attempt:

After the corruption probes, we could at least defend ourselves with counterarguments. However, after the coup attempt, we could not even talk about the innocence of the Movement. There were life-threatening risks.

In addition, all interviewees revealed in detail how police and other authorities would have targeted them if they had reported the hate crimes they experienced, especially after 2016. As one explained:

it was like confessing that you are a terrorist when you go to the police with such a complaint. Police would detain you without even informing your family for months. There was torture news all over the media.

Similarly, one respondent stated that "after the coup attempt, there was no other public agenda. Everybody in society and every news channel was directed towards vilifying the movement members." Pervasive media coverage targeting members of the Gulen Movement was raised as a concern and one of the reasons why many were victimized to such an extent that they were forced to flee the country.

### *Alienation from Turkish society*

Nine participants mentioned that they had isolated themselves from social interactions after the coup attempt to avoid being a target of hate crimes and/or hate speech. Some stopped using social media for this reason, while most expressed the belief that the fear of being victimized was a major factor for leaving Turkey. Dismissal from official public positions and the closure of key institutions were mentioned as other indicators of exclusion and alienation from society. In addition, participants noted the struggle to secure employment, as no one was willing to hire them due to their connection to the Movement and after being dismissed from their jobs following the coup attempt. As one respondent stated:

it was like the beginning of a genocide. We were forced to civic death. I knew about the Holocaust; I knew the apartheid. It was going in that direction. The kids were attacked by their teachers and classmates at school for having parents who are members of the Gulen Movement.

### *Alienation from the Turkish community in Canada*

Eight participants expressed their unwillingness to interact with other Turkish communities in Canada and especially supporters of President Erdogan, due to the fear of being insulted or reported to the Turkish Embassy. Some expressed their concerns about family members whom they left behind in Turkey and the potential dangers that their overseas relatives could face if informed by other Turkish-Canadians to the authorities. Evidently, the fear of being victimized persists even in Canada, according to one interviewee: "They [Gulen Movement members] still fear as if they are in Turkey. They fear for their relatives in Turkey."

Some respondents expressed the fear felt among Movement members afraid of contacting the Turkish Embassy and consulates, believing that government employees would illegally confiscate their passports. They stated that there were a few incidents in which embassy workers had seized members' passports when they were inside, as in "one pro-Erdogan restaurant owner in Toronto [who] openly declared that 'FETO' members were not allowed in his restaurant."

All respondents were hesitant to express their thoughts when dealing with other Turks in Canada to avoid adverse reactions. One explained, "I do everything not to meet with anyone who is Turkish and stay away

from them if I didn't know them before." Another articulated the reluctance group members felt to contact the local authorities in Canada even if they are being victimized. He stated:

Even though the legislation is strict here in Canada, the members [of] the Gulen Movement hesitate to express themselves not to cause social disturbances here. They choose to stay silent.

## Discussion

This study examined two different aspects of hate crime victimization. First, we assessed the relationship between politicians' growing use of hate speech against the Gulen Movement and the hate crimes perpetrated against members of the group. Second, the study examined the effect of hate speech and hate crimes on Movement members' daily life practices and social interactions. To understand the relationship between political hate rhetoric and the hate crimes committed against victims, we analyzed whether the frequency of participants' hate crime victimization changed after two important events occurred in Turkey—that being the corruption probes in 2013 and the coup attempt in 2016. In both periods, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and top government officials used increasingly inflammatory rhetoric against the Gulen Movement.

A significant increase in all types of hate crime victimization was noted after both occurrences. Among the types of hate crimes committed, the greatest increase was observed in verbal attacks and damage at institutions affiliated with the Movement. This parallel between rising political hate rhetoric against a certain group and the victimization of its members is similar to trends observed during election campaigns in other parts of the world—for example, in the US over the last three decades (Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism 2018) and in the recent Brexit vote in the UK (HateLab 2020a, 2020b). In the study context, the rhetoric used by President Erdogan and top government officials in Turkey stigmatized and demonized the Gulen Movement and, thus, created an environment in which violent hate crimes committed against members had emerged.

To understand whether and how political hate speech motivated the perpetrators of this violence, we asked a sample group in semi-structured interviews about their victimization experiences. The timing of a change in attitude—especially among one's acquaintances—toward group members highlights a parallel between a rise in hate rhetoric and hateful acts committed against group members. The combination of survey and interview findings (which represent the victim perspectives) suggests that offenders might indeed be motivated and encouraged by the increasing hate rhetoric politicians use against social groups. The nature of individuals' motivation to commit violent acts stemming from political hate speech is better understood through the themes that emerged following discussion. In this context, political fanaticism, combined with politicians' abuse of supporters' religiosity, created a climate of intolerance and suspicion toward the Gulen Movement. The hateful discourse that emerged coupled with these abuses of social power effectively changed the opinions and actions of pro-government supporters in Turkey against group members. Therefore, such politically charged rhetoric had reaffirmed and legitimated "the negative evaluations of difference" (Perry 2001: 185) and encouraged individuals to act against the Movement to serve the interests of those in power (van Dijk 2006).

Further, participants' experiences suggested that the political rhetoric used against the Gulen Movement readied members of dominant groups in Turkey to commit or condone acts of violence. President Erdogan's and the AKP government's use of hate speech effectively divided the public into "us versus them" or "good versus evil," which evoked and exploited the fears of Gulenists (Perry 2001: 185). Erdogan and other politicians within the AKP who denounced the Movement have especially substantial influence over their followers, particularly because they have been in power since 2002. Their presence in Turkey has been so powerful that people have even turned against their own families and friends, including their own children, siblings, and other relatives, in solidarity with the president. Although previous studies have shown that hate crimes are mostly committed by strangers, the number of cases that include

acquaintances is high. In one large-scale study, Chakraborti, Garland, and Hardy (2014) surveyed 1,421 victims of hate crimes and found that 29% of all respondents were victimized by people who were known to them, including friends, neighbors, colleagues, or other acquaintances, whereas 49% of the perpetrators were strangers. In Canada, according to a Uniform Crime Reporting survey, 36% of 641 hate crime offenders were acquaintances or family members of the victims (Statistics Canada 2016). Likewise, all interviewees in this study reported that they had been victimized by people with whom they previously had good relations. This shows how political hate discourse could alter the attitudes of dominant group members toward subordinate sects, regardless of familial affiliation.

Another important finding addresses how President Erdogan and the AKP have used religious rhetoric to mobilize their supporters. As shown, many perpetrators approved and embraced Erdogan's hate speeches and even used them against Movement members for a number of reasons. First, Erdogan appealed religious sources to justify and strengthen his position. Second, he has been very effective in mobilizing the masses, which have supported him politically throughout his tenure as leader of the AKP and as Turkey's president. In an analysis of hate crimes, Barka (2006) concluded that religious fanaticism that causes individuals to develop extreme worldviews may motivate them to perpetrate hate crimes against out-groups. Religiosity has become one of the "identity discourses" governments use to "do difference" and deem "others" as "deviant, dangerous and inferior" (Perry 2001: 180). In this sense, Erdogan supporters have recognized his hateful rhetoric was a call to action against the "others" (i.e., Gulenists), and have become willing to comply by committing wilful acts of violence (Benesch et al. 2020).

Also shown, hate crimes incited by politically charged hate speech have reached a dangerous level, such that the victims have been forced to leave their country or otherwise distance themselves from society. This is due to the fear of further victimization as well as losing a sense of belonging to country—both of which were the unbearable outcomes of strategic exclusion and demonization against members of the Gulen Movement. The social and historical realities of Turkish society highlighted in this study stress that instances of victimization have been common throughout different historical periods, although the actors and political ideologies involved. The findings indicate that similar to the vilification campaigns previously imposed against Armenians, Kurds, and Alawites in Turkey, ordinary people joined the war against the Gulen Movement, waged, motivated, and encouraged entirely by those in power.

Further, the study examined the repercussions of hate speech and hate crimes against the Movement, and the effects on members' daily life practices and social interactions. Similar to previous research on hate crime victimization (see Bell and Perry 2015; Perry and Alvi 2012), the survey and interview findings indicated that the victims made significant changes in their lives due to the fear of further persecution and deliberately alienated themselves from society. These changes included moving to another neighborhood or city, fleeing to another country, changing daily routines, avoiding certain places at certain times and attending group activities, and adopting more personal security measures. This alienation and willingness to reconfigure daily life persisted even after migrating to a foreign country, with some respondents preferring not to contact other non-Movement members of the Turkish diaspora.

Another effect of hate crime victimization was the disappearance of opportunities to express and defend oneself. Participants recounted how they avoided disclosing their identity and experiences not only to ordinary people, but also to the criminal justice system because they thought they would be further victimized. Indeed, these changes in social interaction and behavior among victim groups due to the *in terrorem* effects of hate crimes—that being the intimidation of a group through the victimization of one or a few members (Weinstein 1992)—were also noted in previous research. In particular, Perry and Alvi (2012) concluded from surveys and focus groups among seven vulnerable communities in Ontario, Canada, that hate crime victims adopt various strategies to cope with their vulnerability through changes in behavioral patterns and routine activities.

## Conclusion

This study explored the rising hate crimes inflicted against Gulen Movement members in Turkey since 2013, and the potential triggering effect of political hate speech. Through surveys and interviews with victims of hate crimes, the findings suggest that participants' victimization experiences increased significantly in tandem with rising anti-Movement rhetoric in Turkey. This was particularly prevalent after corruption probes were conducted against some cabinet ministers and top government officials in 2013, and following an attempted coup in 2016. Further analysis of victims' responses suggested that the perpetrators might have been motivated by denouncements from Turkish President Erdogan and other government officials against group members. The findings also suggest that the rising hate speech and hate crimes carried out against the Movement had devastating effects on participants' daily life practices and social interactions.

This study has partially explained the triggering effect of political hate speech on perpetrators through victims' perspectives. However, this poses a limitation, in that victims' assumptions regarding the motivation to commit hate crimes might not tell a whole story. To better understand how this mechanism works, future studies can investigate offenders' accounts through interviews and by examining court documents if these hate crimes are investigated in the future.

That said, the findings can inform policies that will prevent or decrease future hate crime victimization at both national and international levels. International bodies such as the United Nations and the European Union can call upon governments of their member states to more effectively fight against political hate speech and urge them to refrain from using loaded language that incites violence against dissident groups in their countries. Besides this, citizens should be better educated to critically decode the messages transmitted by politicians and act responsibly without resorting to violence. Most importantly, in line with Perry's (2001: 227) suggestion, we recommend that political parties and members of civil society develop a positive rhetoric of difference to temper "the flames of hatred" fueled by government voices. Indeed, the line between freedom of speech and *hate* speech that potentially motivates violent actions should be defined more clearly in the literature and within the context of criminal law so that the inflammatory discourse used by politicians can be eliminated or further reduced.

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