

Turkish religious movement secretly funded travels for lawmakers and staff

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A Turkish religious movement has secretly funded as many as 200 trips to Turkey for members of Congress and staff since 2008, apparently repeatedly violating House rules and possibly federal law, an investigation has found.

The worldwide moderate Islamic movement, led by religious scholar Fethullah Gülen, has been accused by the Turkish government of attempting a coup in that country. Turkish leaders have asked the United States to extradite Gülen from the remote compound in rural Pennsylvania where he has lived for 20 years.

The movement has founded hundreds of charter schools across the United States and around the world, has its own media organizations, and was deeply entrenched with the Turkish regime until a falling out two years ago. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan contended that Gülen was running “a parallel state” inside the country with the intent of undermining the government. In advance of Turkish elections in November, police raided the offices of Gülen-affiliated media organizations..

A dozen different Gülen groups have sponsored congressional travel since 2008 and have filed forms with the House certifying that they were paying for the trips. The House Ethics Committee approved all the trips in advance based on the forms the Gülen groups submitted.

But a *USA Today* investigation found many of those disclosures were apparently false. Some of the Gülen groups claimed to be certified nonprofits, but they do not appear in state or IRS databases of approved charities. Groups that did register with the IRS filed tax forms indicating that they did not pay for congressional travel. And five of the groups admitted to congressional investigators earlier this year that a Gülen group in Turkey was secretly covering the costs of travel inside Turkey for lawmakers and staff.

[Many seminary professors and administrators have also traveled to Turkey through Gülen movement organizations. For example, in 2014 a group from Phillips Theological Seminary in Tulsa, Oklahoma, traveled with the support of the Raindrop Foundation—another Gülen group—according to a news release from the movement.]

Congressional disclosures show Gülen-backed trips totaled more than \$800,000 in free travel for lawmakers and staff. That number likely underestimates the costs, since many of the in-country expenses were not reported. And it is not clear where the \$800,000 came from, since many of the groups involved do not appear to have the resources to pay for trips for large delegations.

The network of Gülen organizations is hard to untangle. The BBC reported in 2013 that “the movement’s influence extends far beyond Turkey, funding hundreds of Islamic schools, and think tanks and media outlets, from Kenya to Kazakhstan. It has attracted millions of followers and billions of dollars.”

USA Today made repeated efforts to reach the Gülen organizations sponsoring trips, including visiting the Washington, D.C., headquarters shared by several of them.

Only the Istanbul Center responded. Mustafa Sahin, academic affairs director, said, “I did not organize any trips with members of Congress and staff and do not really know how financial aspects of such trips were handled.” Other staff from that time period are no longer with the organization, he said.

USA Today identified 214 congressional trips sponsored by Gülen organizations that appear to be improperly disclosed. The trips generally have similar itineraries, with visits to the same historical sites and meetings primarily with Gülen journalists, lawmakers, and business associations.

In February 2015, Rep. Matt Salmon (R., Ariz.), who had taken a Gülen-funded trip to Turkey in 2014, organized colleagues to send a letter to Secretary of State John Kerry seeking his help in defending Gülen journalists who had been arrested by the Turkish government. Many of the signatories had taken Gülen-sponsored trips, or their staff had.

“There was widespread coverage in the American press about the Turkish government’s unacceptable actions to silence opposition media,” said Tristan Daedalus, Salmon’s spokesman. “Before he went on the trip . . . he had already met

with the Turkish embassy to discuss the imprisonment of numerous individuals trying to exercise their right to free speech.”

No one in Congress is likely to face penalties for accepting improper travel. The Ethics Committee concluded in July after reviewing a 2012 congressional trip to Azerbaijan that “all of the Members and staff who went on the trips did so only after getting Committee approval to accept the trips. Neither the Committee nor [the House Office of Congressional Ethics] found any evidence of any knowing violation by any Member or House staffer.”

However, “both the Committee and OCE found evidence suggesting that a number of parties outside the House may have affirmatively lied to and/or withheld information from both the Committee and the House Members and staff who were invited.” The committee therefore announced it was “referring the matter of third parties apparently engaging in a criminal conspiracy to lie to Congress to the Department of Justice for such further action as it deems appropriate.”

Anne Weismann, executive director of Campaign for Accountability, an ethics watchdog group, commented on the situation.

“The Ethics Committee is allowing members to hide behind its so-called approval process so they can take exotic vacations paid for by special interests,” Weismann said. —*USA Today*

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