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Sex, flies and videotape: the secret lives of Harun Yahya

Muslim creationist, cult leader, Dawkins' nemesis, messiah. **Halil Arda** tracks down the real Harun Yahya

[Halil Arda](#)



This article is also available in Turkish – [Adnan Oktar'nin gercek yuzunu gormek icin, buraya tiklayin](#)

Inspired by the high profile of its Christian American counterpart, Muslim creationism is becoming increasingly visible and confident. On scores of websites and in dozens of books with titles like *The Evolution Deceit* and *The Dark Face of Darwinism*, a new and well-funded version of evolution-denialism, carefully calibrated to exploit the current fashion for religiously inspired attacks on scientific orthodoxy and “militant” atheism, seems to have found its voice. In a recent interview with *The Times* Richard Dawkins himself recognises the impact of this new phenomenon: “There has been a sharp upturn in hostility to teaching evolution in the classroom and it’s mostly coming from Islamic students.”

The patron saint of this new movement, the ubiquitous “expert” cited and referenced by those eager to demonstrate the superiority of “Koranic science” over “the evolution lie”, is the larger-than-life figure of Harun Yahya.

Operating from Istanbul, Yahya is the founder of the Science Research Foundation, an impressive publishing empire that boasts more than 60 websites dedicated to his writings. It provides documentary films and audio recordings in fifteen languages, including Turkish, English, Russian, Amharic and Arabic, and claims to sell more than half a million books a year, including the infamous 850-page, fully illustrated *Atlas of Creation*, which was sent free in two volumes to dozens of universities, libraries and prominent scientists (including Richard Dawkins) across the world. In painstaking detail, with a mass of photos, graphs and statistics interspersed with verses from the Koran, the *Atlas* purports to prove that Darwin was utterly mistaken, that each plant and animal was created intact, and that no modification through natural selection ever took place.

Yahya has publicly offered a lucrative prize for anyone who can produce a “transitional fossil” – the lack of which he claims proves evolution to be false. When Dawkins publicly lampooned the research in the *Atlas of Creation* (he pointed out that one of the photos of a Caddis Fly was in fact a fishing fly, complete with metal hook, stolen from the internet, pictured), and labelled Yahya a charlatan on his website, Yahya used his considerable influence and battalion of lawyers to sue for libel and have Dawkins’s website banned in Turkey. This is just one of thousands of cases he has brought before the Turkish courts.



Despite the shoddiness of his science Yahya has found a ready audience among those looking for scientific justification for their rejection of the West. Over the past decades he has served as an adviser to several Turkish politicians, and received endorsements from across the Arab world including Saudi Arabia and Dubai, where his stalls feature prominently at book fairs. He has also proved a fascinating subject for the Western media, offering all-expenses-paid flights to Istanbul to any journalist wishing to interview him, and making himself available for radio interview whenever required. In recent years he has been interviewed by the *Irish Times*, by American National Public Radio, by Gordon Liddy on Radio America, by the American science magazine *Seed* and even by The *Skeptic magazine*. While coverage in the West tends to treat Yahya’s scientific claims with derision (though all are still posted on his website as evidence of his growing influence), he is treated far more seriously across the Muslim world. From daily newspapers in Egypt and Bosnia to influential satellite TV stations like al-Jazeera and (the Iran-funded) Press TV, to small Muslim

broadcasters in the West like Radio Ummah and Radio Ramadan, Harun Yahya's argument, with its appearance of scientific credibility, its crowd-pleasing critique of Western materialism and its promise of the imminent collapse of the "Darwinist Dictatorship", is enthusiastically welcomed by a new audience hungry for compensatory narratives of Islamic superiority. As the American journalist Nathan Schneider argued, to judge Yahya's message on its scientific content alone misses the point: "its power, for those who are not scientifically literate, lies in its vision of redemption."

As well as being confidante to Islamist radicals, Yahya has received endorsements from conservative congressmen in the US for his strong stance against Islamic terrorism, is feted by extreme orthodox Sanhedrin Rabbis in Israel for his anti-atheism, and has ambitions to create a Turkish-Islamic union, a new Ottoman Empire girdling the world from Eastern Russia to Western Nigeria, which would unify the Islamic world under Turkish leadership.

But how many of those who enthusiastically swallow Yahya's message are aware that he is a diagnosed schizophrenic who, in 2008, was convicted of running a criminal organisation? If his final appeal before Turkey's Supreme Court fails, he faces up to three years in prison.

How did such a man acquire the standing, and the financial resources, to be a player in global debates about the origins of life and the future of relations between Islam and the West? To answer this I have travelled repeatedly to Istanbul over the last few months (at my own expense), contacting sources and speaking to former members of his group, to journalists and political commentators who have followed his bizarre career and to legal experts who have defended individuals targeted by Yahya's organisations. Many of my interviewees spoke on condition of anonymity, out of fear of the barrage of court cases his defectors and critics have been facing in recent years, described by one of his former acolytes as a campaign of "legal terror".

As I arrive in Istanbul in July 2009 I am told that while he awaits the outcome of his final appeal Yahya can be spotted visiting Istanbul's high-end shopping malls Kanyon and Istinye Park, accompanied by an entourage of men and women dressed in expensive, identical, designer clothes, their eyes concealed behind sunglasses. In his trademark garb – well-groomed beard, white linen suit and designer shades – he cuts the figure of a man of authority and influence, a man confident in his own importance. But is anything about him what it seems?

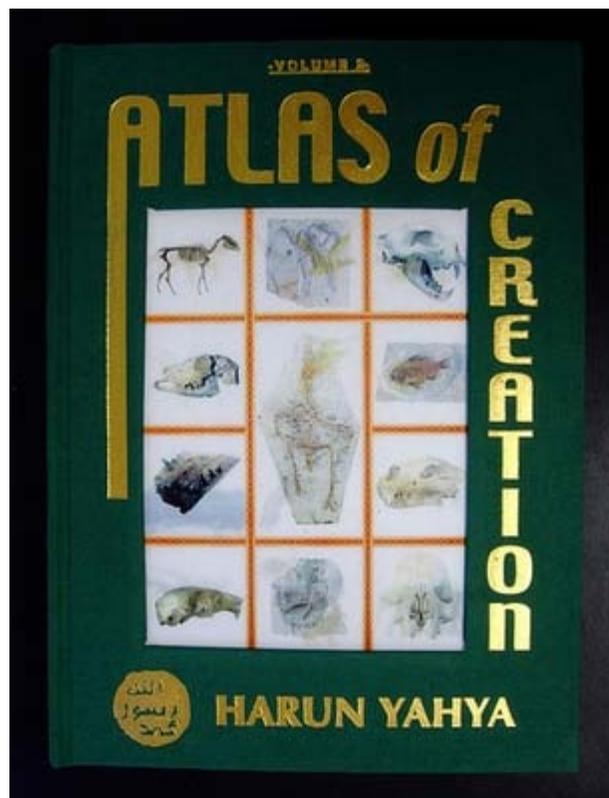
Certainly not the name Harun Yahya, which is a pseudonym used mainly for his operations in the English-speaking world. His real name is Adnan Oktar though in Turkey he is also known as Adnan Hodja (Preacher Adnan) and, to his followers,

he is Adnan Agabey (Big Brother Adnan). Born in Ankara in 1956, by the late 1970s he was a student at the Academy of Fine Arts in Istanbul, where he studied interior design. During this time he fell under the influence of the ideas of a charismatic Islamist preacher and moderniser, Said-i Nursi, in particular Nursi's marrying of Islamic mysticism with scientific rhetoric.

It was in the years of violence and repression following the coup of September 1980, which installed a military junta, that Adnan Oktar began to emerge as a public figure in Turkey. In an environment of political and cultural instability, with Turkey threatened by Cold War politics from without and the clash between Kemalist secular modernisers and a rising tide of Islamic militancy within, the stage was set for a new character, a modern Turkish-Muslim man. On to this stage walked Oktar, clutching the first of his books, *Judaism and Freemasons*, a derivative retread of anti-Semitic clichés in the manner of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, which identified Jews and the masons as the devious obstacles to the emergence of a new, powerful Turkish-Muslim nation. "The principal mission of Jews and Freemasons in Turkey," Oktar wrote, "was to erode the spiritual, religious, and moral values of the Turkish people and make them like animals."

Following publication Oktar was arrested, charged with promoting a theocratic revolution, a crime against the secular code. He eventually served 19 months, though he was never formally charged. During this period he was confined to a prison clinic, and then Bakirkoy Mental Hospital, where he was diagnosed with an obsessive-compulsive personality disorder and schizophrenia. Though I have seen the formal diagnosis myself, it is still not clear whether the symptoms were genuine. Some, like his former colleague Islamist author Edip Yuksel, who was imprisoned in 1986 at the same time, believe Oktar was faking to avoid compulsory military service and criminal charges. ("Which is ironic," wrote Yuksel, "since he was indeed mentally ill; he was a delusional maniac.") Already by this point, Yuksel reports, Oktar believed himself to be the Mehdi, the messiah foretold in Sunni theology.

While Oktar was building a public profile through his books, the real work was taking place backstage, as he began to assemble a group of followers dedicated to his twisted vision. Combining his



undoubted charisma (something even his most ardent opponents concede) with a gift for manipulation,

Oktar set out to build a cult around himself, drawing extensively on the techniques pioneered by messianic gurus like Charles Manson and Jim Jones, and in particular employing the strategies of the Moonies, the Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh and Scientology in targeting disaffected but affluent and educated young people, insisting they turn their worldly goods over to the cult, and vigorously enforcing rigid hierarchies and punitive rules.

Though, as with all cults, it is extremely hard to understand what draws young, rich and educated people in, Dilek, a former follower of Oktar, gives something of the flavour. Now a suave businesswoman in her late 30s, Dilek remembers how she first met Oktar, visiting him while he was still in mental hospital, after her then boyfriend had turned out to be a follower. "I was expecting someone who frightens you off, someone terrible," she told me. "He was the opposite. He was tall, with rosy cheeks and blue eyes. He was laughing a lot, he was full of love." She was seduced.

On his release Oktar began to hold meetings in cafés and private residences in Istanbul's posh suburbs, where a growing number of rich and beautiful young people gathered for debate and prayer. Soon Dilek donned a headscarf, but only outside her parents' house, so as not to alert them to her new-found religious commitment. All her friends in the group were graduates of expensive public schools, educated in foreign languages, and most were the children of rich families and many of well-known personalities. In the early days the discussions invariably led to Oktar's particular interest in Jewish conspiracies. "There was a chilling hatred against Jews and

Freemasons," Dilek recalls. "The Jews were the people who ruin the world, and we were the good Muslims to fight against them."

Such "awareness-raising" meetings and discussion groups are part and parcel of Islamist group mobilisation. Yet Oktar's group soon took a different turn. "Suddenly Adnan Hodja repudiated all oral traditions relating to the words and deeds of Muhammad (*hadith*) and decided that the Koran would be the only point of reference," says Dilek. "Henceforth, he reduced the five daily prayers to three, and he dropped the veiling of women. He told us the Mehdi would emerge from Turkey, and he would come with an army of youth. He never said that he was the Mehdi himself, but we all believed that he was."

Throughout the 1980s and early '90s, Oktar built up his community. Followers were especially active in the swanky summer resorts along the shore of the Sea of Marmara. A friend of mine, who spent most of her holidays in the late 1980s at her parents' summer flat in the area, recalls how the followers' targeting worked: "They bought flats there and singled out attractive girls and boys. The boys were very good-looking, boys who can easily charm you. I guess this is why they started with the boys. Once the girls entered the cult, they had to give up sexy fashion, so they wouldn't be able to attract new members. But for the boys, the rules were more relaxed, so that they could continue recruitment."

The social organisation within the group was becoming rigidly hierarchical and, as is common in messianic cults, sexual relations were tightly controlled, with the putative messiah given access denied to others. Oktar considered all female members his legitimate possession. Berk, a recent defector after seven years, describes the groups: "There were sisters (*bacilar*), concubines (*cariyeler*) and brothers (*kardesler*), the male members. The brothers were allowed to marry the concubines, while the sisters were all married to Adnan Hodja." Of course these marriages were not legal, but they were treated as such within the group. As with Scientology, discipline was maintained through humiliation, the threat of expulsion and physical violence. "I know personally," Berk told me, "that Oktar beats the sisters."

Oktar also insisted on uniformity in dress, behaviour and even home furnishings. "Everyone had to be the same," says Berk. "The hairstyle, the shoes, the jackets. It had to be the most expensive brands, like Versace and Gucci, and it had to be exactly how he wanted it to be. Even our communal flats had to be furnished according to his taste. It had to be heavy antiques, all with gold leaf and dark wood." Video cameras were installed in the communal apartments, which allowed Oktar to exercise control over his followers and outsiders. As the criminal indictment vividly illustrates, young girls were lured into sex parties with the promise of being admitted to the group, but ended up having to perform sexual acts with

men of influence, whom the group needed for its economic and political success. The encounters were filmed and used to coerce the men in question to act in the group's interest. In witness statements, the models Tugce Doras and Seckin Piriler give detailed accounts of how members of the group treated them as "sex slaves" and how Oktar and his followers compelled them to perform oral sex and other sexual favours.

No matter how bizarre the rules, Oktar was able to provide them with apparent legitimacy through his reading of the Koran and Islamic history. Concubinage was justified by reference to the Ottoman harems, while passages of the Koran were recited to justify the practice of severing the ties of the young followers to their families. As a leading legal scholar involved in some of the court cases against Oktar puts it: "In [Oktar's] reading, the love for mother and father is an offence to God. Parents are seen as the executors of God's will to raise the child. Once the child reaches adulthood, their role is fulfilled. If the parents happen to join, they are considered pious and may become fellow comrades. If they remain 'infidels', they are considered enemies." It was with this justification that the followers cut off relations with their parents, on whose financial and social resources, however, the group ultimately depended. The indictment details the way in which followers were encouraged to plunder their parents' bank accounts and sell their assets.

With the local elections in 1994 came an unforeseen opportunity for Oktar. The hardline Islamist Welfare Party (*Refah Partisi*), the predecessor of the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP), won control of the municipalities of Istanbul and Ankara. But the new Islamist mayors (in Istanbul this was Recep Tayyip Erdogan, now Turkey's Prime Minister) lacked the expertise and the social and economic networks to govern effectively. They needed allies who were both sufficiently Islamic and well resourced. With his eye for exploiting the main chance, Oktar stepped forward. The journalist and editor Fatih Altayli, who has taken on Oktar repeatedly and had to fight off dozens of libel cases as a result, sees this as a crucial moment of consolidation: "In 1995 and '96, companies from Oktar's sphere of influence made big business deals with municipalities under the control of the Welfare party, especially in Istanbul and Ankara. During a raid at a meeting of the group, for instance, the police arrested Oguzhan Asilturk, an acting minister in the Welfare government, and one of the leading ideologues of political Islam in Turkey. It was really during these years, that they gained a lot of economic clout. Followers even established companies in Dubai." Some followers joined the trail of Turkish investors to Central Asia and set up businesses with the money they had extracted from their parents, with profits routed back to Oktar.

Another military intervention, the "bloodless coup" of 1997, saw the government of Erbakan forced to step down and the

Welfare party disbanded. Oktar lost his political influence (something he has never regained with the current Islamist AKP government, who are eager to steer clear of him). Nothing if not bold, Oktar rebranded again.

In 1998 the Science and Research Foundation, the group Oktar had formed in 1990, launched its campaign against Darwinism, distributing tens of thousands of free copies of his book *The Evolution Deceit* in Turkey, paving the way for the *Atlas of Creation* and Oktar's new role as the spokesman for Muslim creationism.

It is highly doubtful whether any of these books – or indeed any of the 150 books he claims to have written – were actually written by Oktar. Berk, who was part of the inner circle at the time, confirms this: "There is a group of followers who are commissioned to write the books. For every book, they will take a few key sources written by Christian creationist authors, mostly from the US. They plagiarise the chapters and paragraphs that agree with their creationist approach. Then they add the photos, a few ayat from the Koran, and sometimes a bit of a commentary. None of the ideas belong to Oktar."

Sensing another opportunity immediately after 9/11, Oktar instantly shed his formerly virulent anti-Semitism and published a piece called "Islam condemns terror", designed, apparently, to curry favour with America. Oktar's group already had established good relations with US congressmen in 2000, when his Science Research Foundation received the endorsement of seven members of Congress and retired Senator Steve Symms, who described it as "a major influence for good among the younger population of Turkey" and praised its "commitment to democracy, preservation of national and moral values, and respect for law".

Since then Oktar has become an ardent



proponent of interfaith dialogue, attempting to unify believers of all stripes against the corrupting influence of Darwinism, which he now holds responsible for Fascism, anti-Semitism and the Holocaust. Most recently, he has been talking about the "Turkish-Islamic Union", which would bring peace to the entire

Muslim world under the leadership of Turkey.

Oktar's ideological and political promiscuity seem to support the claim that he has no genuine beliefs at all, and merely opportunistically jumps on issues which will further his notoriety, following the lead of smarter followers. As one former follower told me, "We had something to please everybody: Ataturk, *namaz* (prayer), creationism and, if need be, cocaine."

But with so many ideas taken up and discarded, and their leader facing jail, might the group be nearing exhaustion? True, the Science Research Foundation and the followers have initiated thousands of court cases. Three hundred alone were brought against the model and one-time sympathiser Ebru Simsek, who spoke out against Oktar after she refused his advances, and a barrage of faked naked photos of her were made public. Oktar's followers have shot thousands of compromising videos of everyone who has come into intimate contact with the group. They have intimidated prosecutors, judges and lawyers with endless streams of complaints and faxed denunciations and printed libellous advertisements in the Islamist media, defaming their critics. They been especially effective on the internet, setting up numerous websites to denounce their enemies, while using the Turkish courts to silence them – the Dawkins site is just one of dozens they have had banned. "They may be only a few hundred people," one lawyer told me, "but the damage they have inflicted is considerable. Damage to the families, to the judicial system, and to Turkish politics."

However, and despite the serious shortcomings of Turkey's legal system, they have eventually lost every single one of the cases they have brought, thanks in large measure to the courage of solicitor Rezzan Aydinoglu, who works virtually full-time on behalf of Oktar's victims. According to investigators most of the business ventures in Central Asia have failed. Both factors will have eaten into Oktar's resources.

And there may be deeper, structural reasons for the group's decline. In the late 1980s, after several babies were born to group members (whether Oktar's or not is unclear), Oktar forbade sexual practices that would lead to pregnancy (his followers were limited to anal or oral intercourse). Since then there have been no more births in the group. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Oktar's formerly aggressive recruitment has abated, too.

What remains is a closed community of broken individuals. Berk, who has had to endure his fair share of slander and court cases, nevertheless feels compassion for his former comrades: "You have to understand that these are people who have sold everything they had; they sold what their parents had. They possess nothing. Many are now in their late 30s and 40s. They have lost their families and their social networks,

and they have lost the ability to socialise. The only thing they know is to talk about Adnan's distorted version of Islam." Dilek, who broke with the a few group years ago, left two sisters behind. Her family sees them once or twice a year, when they visit guarded by a group of brothers. "They are like zombies," she told me. "As if there is nobody inside."

Oktar continues to be a public figure in Turkey, where a two-part, five-hour interview with him was screened on national television in August. The final ruling on his appeal is due in October, and Razzan Aydinoglu told me it is very likely he will lose. But this may be just the kind of thing he would enjoy, turning it into evidence of his martyrdom.

Clearly Oktar is a master of manipulation, a "cunning charlatan" as Erip Yuksel calls him, but it is not this alone that has allowed this deluded, empty man to achieve the prominence he has. He is a symptom of our own sickness. Thanks to the "War on Terror", Oktar could paint himself as a credible alternative to radical Islam; thanks to our timidity and incompetence around issues of faith he can gain credibility as a representative of Muslim sentiment and a champion of "inter-faith dialogue". And, most of all, for many disoriented Muslims, he provides a compelling vision of a superior Islamic science.

He is a deluded megalomaniac who has artfully exploited the global resurgence of religious sentiment to cheat us all. A ludicrous man for ludicrous times.

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