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# [Gulen-inspired Schools in the East Africa] Secular Alternative in Kenya and Pragmatist Approach to Development in Uganda

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## **Introduction**

The Gulen-inspired schools, which have originated in Turkey and spread across the globe in more than a hundred countries, are sometimes perceived as Islamic schools. It is so mostly because the businessmen who have financed the establishment of these schools and the teachers who have dedicated themselves to founding and running them at the expense of leaving their home comfort and migrating to most deprived parts of the world both seem to have been inspired to do so by the Turkish-Islamic scholar Fethullah Gulen.

A qualitative field research about Kenya's Gulen-inspired schools suggests that the schools have been functioning not only as a secular alternative to religious, Christian missionary schools and Islamic schools, but also as barriers to potential ethno-religious conflict between Kenya's local Christian tribes and its politically empowering Muslim minority. Kenya's rigged presidential elections in December 2007 triggered fatal tribal clashes between the dominating Kikuyu tribe and the other tribes, most notably the Luo tribe to which Raila Odinga, the leader of the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) and the main political contender belonged. The elections and the ensuing tribal clashes provided the Muslim minorities an opportunity to act together for the first time in the history of Kenya, thereby making them a unified political force. The Muslims' political triumph of sort in political realm, the dominating discourse of their hitherto marginalization due to the dominant influence of the missionary organizations in the public sphere, Somalia's overwhelming influence in the northeastern and eastern provinces of the country provide necessary, and possibly sufficient conditions to exploit and spark a conflict between the Christians and Muslims in Kenya. Though it is difficult to measure the level of their influence, the organizations affiliated with the Gulen community in Nairobi seem to have been instrumental in discouraging the Muslim Nubian tribe from taking place in the tribal clashes in Kenya's Kibera slums during the post-election chaos. Similarly, the Gulen-inspired civil society initiatives in Uganda seem to have introduced the local Ugandans with a pragmatist approach to development by seeking to instill in them the notion of relying on their own resources instead of international aid. This paper intends to draw a picture of the development of Gulen-inspired initiatives and their possible impact on Kenyan and Ugandan societies.<sup>1</sup>

## **Gulen-inspired Schools in Kenya**

The first Gulen-inspired school in Kenya was opened in 1998 in a building rented in the most impoverished part of Nairobi, neighboring the infamous Kibera slums, which are also known as the tin houses and the second largest slums area in Africa. Ten years later, the school,

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<sup>1</sup> This conference paper is based on the author's interviews with the respondents in both Kenya and Uganda conducted in April 2008. The data from the interviews conducted in Uganda are yet to be incorporated. As such, the paper is still in developing stage.

which provides both secondary and high school-level education, has been moved to its new modern campus which includes several classroom buildings, indoor sports complex, soccer and basketball fields, refectory, and dormitory buildings. The new campus has been sponsored by the Turkish businessmen from Turkey's Antalya province who throughout the construction of the campus not only provided funds but also occasionally traveled to Nairobi in groups to work in the construction. On these trips, the sponsors also brought along their colleagues who have never donated to the construction of such schools before, and encouraged them to be part of the effort. In addition to this school, there are also one coed primary school and one girls' secondary school in Nairobi. Similarly, there are one coed primary school and one boys' secondary-high school in Mombasa, Kenya's second largest city on the coast of the Indian Ocean with predominantly Muslim population. As such, in total there are six Gulen-inspired schools in Kenya.

### *Two Different Education Models*

There are two types of education systems in Kenya: one is the Kenyan model, and the other is the British. While the Kenyan model is characterized by overwhelming amount of theoretical learning and excessive amount of homework assignments, the British system is characterized by its emphasis on student's social development up until high school and on scientific learning in various fields based on the student's skills there after. In the Kenyan model, the student starts his or her education with English language training in the kindergarten at the age of 3, and continues onto primary school until the age of 11. Throughout this time, the student receives a memorization-oriented education and is required to do extensive amount of homework assignments. In order to finish the primary school and be able to go on to secondary-high school, the student is required to take a nationwide primary school completion test called (Kenya Certificate of Primary Education - KCPE). A substantial percentage of the primary school graduates are eliminated in this test and lose their chance to continue their education. Those who can make it to secondary-high school continue their similarly memorization and homework assignment-oriented studies toward the nationwide KCSE (Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education) test which they are required to pass at the end of the high-school education in order to be able to continue their university-level studies. Not only because of the difficulty of this test, but also because of the limited number of universities available, majority of the high school graduates lose their chance to go on to university level. Therefore, it becomes extremely important and competitive for the students to do well throughout the secondary and high-school years if they want to go to university. In the end, even if a student passes the KCSE with a sufficient score, he or she has to wait for a year or two in order to be placed in a relevant program since the universities available at the moment fall short to meet the demand.

The British education model, on the other hand, is rather much focused on social development of students until the end of the high-school. Throughout this period, the O-level education aims to develop students' inter-personal skills, aptitudes, and general knowledge of various disciplines from arts to sciences. The schools providing the O-level education are the private schools practicing the British model and they are mostly ones that were established in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by the British missionaries. There are newer schools which run on a similar model. These are the ones which were established for mostly commercial reasons by the Indian entrepreneurs. Such schools provide students with technological facilities like

computer labs, sports complexes, and horseback-riding, and even aviation, courses. In parallel to the quality of facilities they offer, these schools charge students about ten thousand dollars per year while the public schools running on the Kenyan system charge about three thousand. After the high-school, students are subject to the E-level education for two years, in which they are intensively taught in advanced sciences which prepare them for their university level studies. Those students who complete this period successfully gain opportunity to go on to university level. At the completion of three more years again in the British model, they are granted university diploma in their respective disciplines.

### *Success and Growing Popularity*

The Gulen-inspired schools seem to distinguish themselves from the other public and private schools by providing both Kenyan and British model education while most other schools prefer to provide either of the two. The principal of the Gulen-inspired Light Academy in Nairobi notes that they do not want to forego the Kenyan model because it is academically very demanding for students, and as such those students who are able to succeed in the Kenyan model are likely to be successful in their studies at high-school and university level. He reminds that among the African students who are studying in various universities in Turkey, the most successful ones are the Kenyan students since they come to university with relatively better academic background and skills. The principal also notes that they are able to provide a quality education in the Kenyan model because most of the Turkish teachers working at the Light Academy have been trained at the top-notch universities of Turkey such as Bogazici, Marmara and the Middle East Technical Universities and are therefore able to teach all science disciplines.

The idealism and altruism of the teachers, who could normally utilize their academic credentials for lucrative jobs in Turkey and yet preferred to come to Kenya to teach, in a way is the greatest competitive advantage of the Gulen-inspired schools in Kenya. The principal states that thanks to his colleagues' productive dialogue with their students and to their collaborative hardwork, in 2007 the Light Academy ranked second among some five thousand private schools in the nationwide KCSE (Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education) test, and ninth among all ten thousand private and public schools in Kenya. The media coverage of the Light Academy's success in this nationwide test, he notes, attracted an extensive public attention to the Light Academy schools and the number of students who want to register the Light Academy has rapidly increased.

Within the general public, the Muslim minority of Kenya in particular seems to be following the Light Academy's success closely and enjoying it as if their own because they view Islam as a common denominator between themselves and the Turks who initiated the schools and are running them together with the local Kenyan teachers. According to Ahmed Alvi, education is essential to the Muslim minority's successful integration into the rest of the Kenyan society and to its appropriate representation within the socio-economic and political spectrum of the country. Alvi is a Pakistani-origin Kenyan-born businessman, whose father had moved to Garrisa, north eastern province of Kenya which is preeminantly populated by the Somalian refugees of Muslim faith, from Pakistan in 1972. Alvi notes that his father moved to Garrisa in order to serve as an Islamic social worker and help the Somalian refugees. Accordingly, he established Islamic institutes until he started their current family

business of automobile spare-parts import. Alvi laments that despite the fact that up to date there have always been various numbers of Islamic institutes and Islamic schools at all levels from primary to high school, the Muslim community has remained relatively uneducated or undereducated in Kenya. He suggests that the Muslim parents were disinclined to let their children continue their education after primary school because almost all schools available were administered by Christian missionaries, and as such they were afraid of their children growing apart from their Islamic faith as they progressed. According to Alvi, the Light Academy schools have not only provided the Muslim minority of Kenya their much sought opportunity to educate their children, but also give them confidence to mingle with the non-Muslim majority of Kenya without the fear of losing their Islamic faith. Alvi says that he first heard of the Gulen-inspired schools from a business partner in Turkey about two years ago when he started to develop business contacts there. The most important thing he learned from his Turkish colleagues, Alvi states, is the necessity of education, namely providing the new generations with contemporary education, and preparing the necessary infrastructure for that to happen.

The Light Academy school campuses, be they primary, or secondary-high school, seem to enjoy each other's growing reputation as it increases the popularity of them altogether. Akbalaban, the coordinator of the Light Academy schools, remarks that thanks to the growing reputation of the schools over the last decade, it is no more a challenge for the schools to attract students in general and the bright ones in particular. Currently, 350 students are registered in the Light Academy secondary-high school in Nairobi, and the school administration aims to raise this number to 550-600. Similarly, the Light Academy secondary-high school in Mombasa has 250 students, and that school's administration is also working to develop the necessary facilities and infrastructure in order to accommodate the increasing public demand for the schools. Moreover, the Light Academy primary schools both in Nairobi and Mombasa average 300 students registered. However, both schools' administrations are planning to either expand their facilities or build new campuses because the current school buildings transformed from houses do not meet the needs of the increased numbers of students anymore.

#### *Diversity of Students*

The ethno-religious diversity of the student body in the schools reflects the general characteristic of the city where they are located. For instance, in the Light Academy schools in Nairobi, the majority of the students belong to various denominations of Christian faith while there is relatively small minority of Muslim students of ethnic Indo-Pakistani origin because Nairobi's population in general is of Christian faith. In the schools in Mombasa, the majority of the students are of Muslim faith because the city's population is predominantly of Muslim faith. Nevertheless, there is again relatively small number of non-Muslim students. The school administration in Mombasa provides scholarship to 10 to 15 students every year from Garrisa, the city about four hundred miles north of Mombasa. The school administrator notes that Garrisa is among the most impoverished provinces Kenya, and heavily affected by the incoming flux of refugees from Southern Somalia. As such, not only the necessary facilities and infrastructure is not available to sufficiently educate the young generations in this city, but also they are exposed to not-so-moderate interpretation of Islam prevalent in Somalia. The school administrator notes that they started to give scholarship to a small

number of students in Garrisa two years ago, and they have been receiving increasing demand from the parents in Garrisa to send their children to the Mombasa Light Academy on those scholarships. Therefore, in parallel to the ethno-religious characteristics of the two cities, the religious affiliations of the students in the respective Light Academy schools are predominantly Christian in Nairobi and predominantly Muslim in Mombasa.

### *Diversity of Teachers*

The ethno-religious diversity of the student body seems to be prevalent among the faculty in all Light Academy schools as well. In two secondary-high schools in Nairobi, there are 15 Turkish teachers while there are 35 Kenyan teachers; and in the one in Mombasa, there are 11 Turkish teachers and 15 Kenyan. The number of the Kenyan teachers is relatively much higher at the primary schools of the Light Academy. On average, in either Nairobi or Mombasa, 25 to 30 of the teachers are Kenyan while only 6 to 7 of them are Turkish. The initial motivation for the Kenyan teachers, majority of whom are Christians, to work at the Light Academy schools seems to be merely utilitarian while that to stay on seems to be their conviction that the schools are unique in their way of educating the new generations of Kenya. Joseph Bogonko first heard about the Light Academy from his community church's priest. Upon his priest's recommendation, notes Bogonko, he took his child to the Light Academy to inquire further about the school. Since Bogonko's son did well in the nationwide KCPE (Kenya Certificate of Primary Education) test, the Light Academy offered him scholarship worth of seventy five percent of the tuition fee. That is how, explains Bogonko, his son was registered to the Light Academy five years ago, and he graduated last year to study agricultural science at the Jommo Kenyatta Univeristy next year.

Bogonko notes that his relationship with the Light Academy did not remain confined to regular parent-school relationship. Due to his interest in the school, he has joined the faculty as a life science teacher, and later on become an administrative board member. He stresses that not just because he was a parent and a board member of the school, but because he believed in the contribution the school was making to the Kenyan society he took a personal responsibility in promoting the Light Academy schools to his colleagues and friends who were yet to hear about the school. He underlines that it was not a difficult task to do so because the schools was already gaining prominence in the media because of its growing success in the nationwide KCPE and KCSE tests. However, notes Bogonko, it is not only the academic success that distinguished the Light Academy from other schools, but the unique way of interaction, as he puts it, between the students and the teachers has attracted more students' and parents' attention to the school: "This unique style of the teachers here at the Light Academy really change the students. The teachers do not treat the students like mere children, but like their friends. On various occasions like national holidays, the teachers prepare feasts for the students and serve food to their students. In other schools, there would always be a distance between teacher and student, let alone the former serving food to the latter. Because they become like friends of each other, the students emulate their teachers. They become more responsible and idealistic to serve Kenya. I and other parents have noticed a big change in a good way in our children's conduct and relating to us parents, as if they have learned a different language here at the Light Academy."

### *Instilling Idealism*

Instilling such aspirations in students seems to be at the heart of the overall education the Light Academy schools provide in Kenya. Akbalaban, coordinator of the Light Academy schools, suggests that due to a severe income inequality within the society, an average Kenyan views education merely as a means to obtain a degree and get a job paying lucrative salary. For that reason, explains Akbalaban, unlike the other Gulen-inspired schools in different countries, the Light Academy schools have so far focused on providing attractive on-campus facilities to students and preparing the students for the nationwide KCPE and KCSE tests which are quite influential in determining which university the student will be attending and with which profession he or she will graduate. Nevertheless, he notes, throughout their continuous dialogue with the parents, either via parent-teacher meetings at school or visits to students' homes; they have evaluated the students' progress with the parents and the students, and been more or less able to communicate them the importance of achieving success at the international art and science contests as a means to serve their society. Akbalaban states that communicating such idealism is essential to the continuous dialogue among the Turkish and Kenyan teachers, and the students and parents of the Light Academy. In this regard, throughout the year, the school administrations bring teachers and parents, as well as teachers and students, together on various social occasions like festivals or holiday celebrations.

### **Gulen-inspired Charities in Kenya**

There are two Gulen-inspired charity organizations operating in Kenya, which are respectively the Omeriye Foundation and the Respect Foundation. While the Omeriye Foundation provides services in the fields of education, relief and healthcare; the Respect Foundation focuses its efforts on interfaith dialogue aiming to bring together deeply fractured faith communities in Kenya to cooperate in community projects.

#### ***Omeriye Foundation***

The Omeriye Foundation was established in Nairobi in 1997 by the Turkish teachers and few businessmen in cooperation with a small number of local Kenyans. The latter consisted of the community leaders with whom the affiliates of the Gulen movement had developed friendship since they first arrived in Kenya. Omer Kutlu and his friends were first to arrive in Kenya in September 1996. The first thing they have done was to look for local people with whom they could share their education projects and from whom they could seek support for the fulfillment of these projects. The former Kenyan Supreme Court justice, Ahmed Amin and his lawyer son Omer Amin were of the first Kenyans to assist Kutlu and his friends to initiate the projects by helping them rent the school building which would soon become the Light Academy secondary-high school. Amin notes, "I was impressed with Kutlu's and his colleagues' determination to fulfill these education projects though I was a bit doubtful as to whether they could be successful because many other Muslim charities failed. However, the projects have become so successful and rapidly expanded that we only agreed to help when Kutlu and his colleagues suggested us founding a charity organization which would provide aid to the poor who could not afford sending their children to school."<sup>2</sup> Akbalaban notes that the Omeriye Foundation has been welcomed by the local authorities for its indiscriminating work and assistance to every community in Kenya regardless of its ethnic, tribal and

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<sup>2</sup> Excerpt from the author's interview with Mr. Ahmed Amin in Nairobi, Kenya on 23 April 2008.

religious identity; and as such was granted the “charitable trust” status even though the Foundation had not particularly requested it.

#### *Food and Cloth Donations*

In line with its founding mission, the Omeriye Foundation has expanded its scope of activities outside the education into aid and healthcare in the following years. Mehmet Yavuzlar, a volunteer coordinator for the Gulen-inspired institutions in Kenya, notes that even though the Foundation’s main focus is on the educational projects, its activities also include food and clothing aid, communal iftar dinners in Ramadan in which both Muslims and non-Muslims participate, meat distribution and medical checkups in the rural areas several times a year. The Foundation utilizes the annual occasions such as the month of Ramadan and the following Eid-ul Adha in order to accumulate resources from the donors in Turkey, and accordingly use those resources to sponsor the Foundation’s food and clothing assistance in Kenya. That is, the Foundation contacts with businessmen in Turkey, who are also inspired by Gulen’s ideas, to encourage them to sponsor communal iftar dinners in different cities and towns of Kenya. Since it is a common practice for such businessmen to sponsor communal iftar dinners in Turkey as well, the Foundation easily finds potential sponsors for the iftar dinners in Kenya. The very fact that with the same amount of donation they can feed more people in Kenya than in Turkey encourages these businessmen to seize the opportunity. The Foundation holds such communal iftar dinners mostly in relatively impoverished towns outside the cities like Nairobi and Mombasa. Also at the end of the month of the Ramadan, on the occasion of the Eid-ul Fitr, the Foundation collects clothing donations from Turkey to be distributed in Kenya during and after the Eid-ul Fitr. Moreover, throughout the month of Ramadan, the Foundation also organizes the high-level Iftar Dinner events in Nairobi and Mombasa to bring together the opinion leaders, local and governmental officials, journalists, academics, business leaders and others. At these events, the Foundation informs the participants about its activities so far and its vision for the future in pursuit of their support for and involvement in the activities of the Foundation.

Similarly, after the month of Ramadan, taking advantage of the Eid-ul Adha, the Foundation again collects meat donations from Turkey where Muslims sacrifice livestock as part of religious duties and share a third or more of the meat yielded with the poor. Yavuzlar stresses that the Foundation has been quite successful in accruing a substantial amount of meat from Turkey because the donors are quite generous when it comes to Africa and as such they not only donate a portion or total amount of the meat yielding from their livestock sacrifice, but also donate extra in the form of cash donations which the Foundation uses to buy livestock to be sacrificed and distributed to the poor in Kenya.

#### *Healthcare Assistance*

In addition, the Foundation conducts health controls in Kenya’s rural areas several times a year inviting groups of volunteer doctors and nurses from both Turkey and Kenya. Yavuzlar notes that due to its logistical difficulty to bring groups of doctors and nurses from Turkey the Foundation mostly relies on the Kenyan doctors and nurses. The Foundation contacts the Kenyan doctors who were educated in Turkey and encourage them to utilize their resources to carry out the health controls. The Islamic Development Bank (IDB), a subsidiary organ of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), provides scholarship to 15 Kenyan

students every year to study either medicine or engineering in the OIC member states, one of which is Turkey. Therefore, notes Yavuzlar, there are quite many Kenyan doctors in Nairobi, Mombasa, and Garissa, who received their medical degrees from Turkish universities, and the Foundation is able to utilize their resources in bringing together doctors and nurses who would volunteer. The Foundation receives help from the donors in Turkey mostly in forms of medicine to be distributed to the poor free of charge during the health controls.

Continuing such health controls and possibly increasing their frequency, the Omeriye Foundation is planning to establish a regional hospital which will serve the entire East Africa, primarily Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. According to Yavuzlar, it would be relatively easier for the Foundation to establish a large regional hospital instead of separate smaller ones in each country because the latter would both increase the operational costs and make it difficult to recruit sufficient number of medical personnel to serve in these hospitals. Instead, the Foundation aims to serve the patients from all three countries at the regional hospital to be built in Kenya's capital, Nairobi. Not only in the healthcare sector but also in others, it is quite common for the regional and international organizations as well as corporations to be headquartered in Kenya and serve the entire East Africa out of there since the three main countries of the East Africa were originally unified until the British colonial partition, and sort of reunified after the end of the end of the British colonialism. That is, citizens of the three countries freely travel within these countries and the businesses are subject to similar market rules and regulations. Therefore, a regional hospital in Nairobi would be easily accessible to the patients from outside of Kenya as well. Yavuzlar notes that a philanthropist businessman from Kayseri province of Turkey has already pledged to sponsor the establishment of the hospital including its construction. He explains that the businessman who has been involved with the Gulen movement's activities in Turkey owns a hospital in Kayseri, and has been planning to open a hospital in Africa and yet had not decided on what particular country the hospital would be. Once Yavuzlar and his colleagues shared their hospital project with this businessman whom they got to meet through another friend who again was involved with the Gulen movement, the businessman decided to establish his hospital in Kenya. The Omeriye Foundation administrators note that they have already started to search for an appropriate location for the hospital and are looking forward to starting the construction in 2009.

### *University*

Finally, the Omeriye Foundation is currently working on a university project which again aims to serve the entire East Africa while based in Nairobi, the capital of Kenya. Yavuzlar notes that the businessmen groups in Antalya province of Turkey, who have been sponsoring the construction of the Light Academy's new campus and other school buildings, promised to sponsor the construction of the university campus in some three years time. However, stresses Yavuzlar, Pakistan-origin Kenyan businessman Ahmed Riza who reportedly seems to be quite enthusiastic about the university project offered to purchase an already existing university campus with buildings on it and to donate it to the Omeriye Foundation if the latter agrees to start running the university right away.

Cengiz Akbalaban, coordinator of the Light Academy schools, argues that there are quite many Kenyan business leaders with Indian subcontinent descent who may potentially

sponsor the future educational projects, and some of whom, like in the case of Ahmed Riza, have already pledged their support. The second and third generation Kenyans with Indian subcontinent ancestry constitute a considerable percentage of the well-educated and economically well-doing class of the society. Among them, stresses Akbalaban, are such wealthy Muslims who want to do charity for the community, but are discouraged from donating because of the corruption prevalent in the society in general and in the charity organizations in particular. Due to the legacy of the colonization, there seems to have developed a sense among the Kenyans that the white always give and have to give to the black, and that they do not ask about the fate of what was given. In this regard, the local philanthropists find it difficult to donate their charities knowing it would eventually end up squandered. Mehmet Yavuzlar stresses that they have preferred not to accept any donation from the local business leaders to be used at the Gulen-inspired organizations, but have encouraged those donors to sponsor the construction of such separate projects as schools, libraries, and hospitals if they are willing to do so.

Disturbed with the socio-economic underdevelopment of the Muslim minority in Kenya, such Muslim philanthropists seem to have tried to deal with the problem by establishing Islamic schools, Quranic courses, and one Polytechnic University in Mombasa. Moreover, those 15 Kenyan students who were given scholarships every year by the IDB (Islamic Development Bank) have been asked to study either engineering or medicine as the two were deemed the urgent need of the developing Kenyan society. However, such heavy emphasis on engineering and medicine seems to have entailed shortage of grade school teachers, thereby forcing the Islamic primary-secondary-high schools to hire teachers from mostly Saudi Arabia and Sudan. Akbalaban states that one of the priorities of the Omeriye Foundation is to encourage the Kenyan business leaders to provide scholarships to as many students as possible and let these students study fundamental arts and sciences to become teachers at the grade schools. In this regard, Akbalaban reports that the Light Academy schools provide scholarship to a certain percentage of students every year. This figure is 12 percent of the students being educated in the Kenyan system in Nairobi and 40 percent of them in Mombasa. The reason of the increased percentage for Mombasa, explains Akbalaban, is that the Light Academy schools in Mombasa try to attract student from the neighboring cities such as Garrisa as well. The schools do not provide scholarship to students being educated in the British system, because those parents who prefer their children to be taught in the British system are already more than able to pay for the tuition. Akbalaban notes that the scholarships are partially derived from the tuition revenues accrued from the other paying students, and partially from the funds donated by groups of businessmen from Alanya and Antalya provinces of Turkey, who respectively sponsor the Gulen-inspired charity works in Nairobi and Mombasa.

### ***Respect Foundation***

The other charity organization run by the Gulen-inspired Turkish community in Kenya is the Respect Foudation. The Foundation's focus seems to be on interfaith and intercultural dialogue. However, given its efforts to educate various ethnically different Muslim groups in Kenya, intrafaith dialogue seems to be among the Foundation's activities as well. There are various Muslim groups across Kenya including Nubian tribe living in the central Kenya, mostly in the Kibera slums, Somalians most of whom are refugees who fled from Somalia

and living in Garrisa, Arabs living in and around Mombasa, and Pakistani-Indians whose forefathers were brought to Kenya by the British colonialists in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

All these different ethnic groups' interpretation and application of Islam in their daily lives seem to have been heavily affected by their cultural practices. For instance, Somalian refugees seem to have an understanding of Islam that is influenced by the Wahhabi tradition, which may be due to the Saudi social workers working among the refugees fleeing from the ongoing conflict in Sudan, while the ethnic-Pakistani and Indian Muslims seem to be well-integrated in the Kenyan society and to have more laid-back interpretation of Islam. Similarly, the ethnic Arab Muslims in Mombasa seem to be laid-back and business oriented people reflecting Arabic traditions from the way they dress to the way their houses are designed while the Nubian Muslims living in the central Kenya reflect more of the local Kenyan characteristics just like the other Kenyan tribes such as Kikuyus, Luos, and Kalenjins. Though all these groups are different from one another in the way they interpret Islam and apply it in their daily lives, their common denominator is the fact that they are relatively underdeveloped and undereducated compared to the non-Muslim majority of the Kenyan population. This is primarily because almost all of the public schools were run by the various Christian missionary organizations, and naturally the curriculum of these schools were designed to include courses on Christianity, and the students regardless of their religious affiliations were expected to attend these courses as well as the church services. As a result, most of the adult Muslim citizens of Kenya, except for the ethnic Pakistanis and Indians, are most likely not to have education beyond secondary school level.

Tackling the educational backwardness of the Muslim minority of Kenya is a priority of the Respect Foundation. In this regard, the Foundation organizes seminars and computer courses for the mosque imams in the Kibera slums. The Kibera slums reportedly constitute the second largest slums area in the continental Africa, the largest one being in the South Africa. According to the Kibera mosque's imam, approximately half of the Kibera population is Muslim, and the other half is Christian.<sup>3</sup> Within both groups exists different ethnic groups such as Kikuyus, Luos, Kalenjins and the others. Alper Kilic, a director at the Respect Foundation, notes that the Foundation provided computer training to the mosque imams, created a mosque library by donating a substantial number of books, and distributed stationary material and books both Muslim and non-Muslim children in order to help them gain reading habit.

At this point, interfaith dialogue between the Muslims and Christians of Kenya seems to be a distant achievement for the Respect Foundation. It is mostly because both Muslims and Christians are quite cautious against losing their respective members to the other side. That is, Christianity have spread throughout Kenya and remains under the control of the extensive number of missionary organization since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the due course, Islam has been perceived pretty much as the "other" and everything that Christianity was not. At the same time, Christianity has been perceived by the local Muslim tribes as the "other" and everything that Islam was not. Therefore, there seems to have developed a deep rift between the two communities over time even though this cautious view of one another does

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<sup>3</sup> Excerpt from the author's interview with the respondent in the Kibera slums in Nairobi, Kenya on April 27, 2008.

not seem to have put the two on the collision course. The stories produced by both side about the other partially have been effective in developing a malignant image of the other. Although these stories may be far from truth, it seems that various versions of such stories have been told frequently among both Muslims and Christians, thereby drifting both sides apart from each other. Ibrahim, a Muslim from the Nubian tribe, tells that it is widely believed by the Muslims that the Muslim children attending the missionary schools are poorly fed while their Christian friends are well fed, and that they are asked to believe in Jesus but not Muhammad if they want to eat good food like their Christian friends do.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, notes Ibrahim, the Christians believe that if a Christian converts to Islam, he or she is exposed to a conversion ceremony in a mosque where the entire mosque attendants spit on the person's face in order to clear him or her of the sins that he or she has committed until then. Such widely held misperceptions of the Muslims and Christians about one another seem to make it difficult to establish an interfaith dialogue at this point.

However, states Fatih Mert, executive director of the Respect Foundation, the university students both Muslim and Christian are more open to dialogue and less affected by such stories.<sup>5</sup> In this regard, the Foundation organizes seminars for and conversation groups among the students of the Jommo Kenyatta University in order to foster interfaith and intercultural understanding. Mert laments that the Muslims and Christians of Kenya are quite different from those of Europe or the United States, and that they both are relatively more radical about their beliefs, and as such it is difficult to have a sustained dialogue between the two at the institutional level, at least for now. Nevertheless, the Respect Foundation volunteers, who are Muslims themselves and not affected by the prevalent stories, seem to be reaching out to both Muslim and Christian organizations and trying to communicate the importance of interfaith dialogue to the opinion leaders on both sides through individual encounters or social programs.

### **Analysis and Conclusion**

Turkey recently hosted the first Turkey-Africa Cooperation Summit, which brought together political, business and NGO leaders of some 50 countries from Africa with their Turkish counterparts to discuss possible avenues of cooperation for a common and prosperous future. The Istanbul Declaration and Cooperation Outline for Africa-Turkey Partnership, which has come out of the deliberations of the four-day conference, set out the practical framework of the prospective partnership, which was also described as "solidarity and partnership for a common future." The document identified a range of areas of cooperation between African countries and Turkey, which included intergovernmental cooperation, peace and security, trade and investment, agriculture, small and medium-sized enterprises, health, infrastructure, energy, transportation, telecommunications, culture, education, media and communications.

As articulated in the language of the recent cooperation summit and implied in Ankara's overall efforts to boost Turkey's long-ignored relations with Africa on the basis of equal and rational partnership, Turkey's approach to Africa seems to be slightly different from that of other developed or developing countries. For so many years, the first world has considered -- and probably to some extent still does -- Africa as a burden which it has to bear. Conscious

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<sup>4</sup> Excerpt from the author's interview with the respondent in Nairobi, Kenya on April 28, 2008.

<sup>5</sup> Excerpt from the author's interview with the respondent in Nairobi, Kenya on April 29, 2008.

of their responsibilities to help Africa prosper or as some would argue, feeling responsible for their historical role in the underdevelopment of the continent, the notable Western European countries, which also happen to be the leading colonizers of Africa in the 19th century, allocated their resources partially to aid Africa. Whether the aid to Africa is working or not is a major question in the contemporary development studies that is yet to be answered.

Why would Turkey's evolving relations with Africa be considered any different from those of Western European countries? One reason could be that in the psyche of the African leaders or the Africans in general, Turkey, as opposed to the Western European countries, is not viewed as a former colonizer that exploited their respective countries' resources. The second factor could be that the African leaders consider Turkey as not so different from their own countries as Turkey is still a developing country, and thus easier to work with.

It seems like the answer to this question lies at the micro level. After all, the intergovernmental affairs are pretty much influenced, if not solely determined, by the individual perceptions of the peoples of their mutual history and culture. In that regard, Turkey enjoys not only the advantage of not having any colonial experience with the African countries, but also that of being well-represented in these countries from the very beginning. In the last decade of the last century, a number of Turkish teachers and businessmen inspired by the contemporary thinker and scholar Fethullah Gülen set out to open schools in Africa's most impoverished corners, leaving everything, including their personal aspirations, back in Turkey.

One of many such examples is that of Omer Kutlu. Graduating from a prominent law school in Turkey his early 20s, instead of pursuing his law career for an affluent life, Kutlu decided to move to Kenya -- the location of which he couldn't even point out on a map at the time -- when he encountered the opportunity to initiate a school project in that country. Hardly speaking English, let alone the local Kiswahili language, Kutlu and his companions first tried to become acquainted with the country and its people with whom he had had no contact whatsoever previously, and sought local partners who could possibly help them establish the school they had in mind. A former Kenyan supreme court justice of Pakistani origin notes that from the very beginning he had known that Kutlu and his friends were quite different from the other Turks he had come across: "I used to meet many Turks either in Europe where I was educated or at the international conferences elsewhere. The problem with them was that they did not seem to have any sense of identity, but an identity dilemma, not sure of where they belonged."<sup>6</sup> However, the former justice noted: "There was something totally different about Mr. Kutlu and his friends. They knew exactly who they were, and they were very resolute to start a school here in Nairobi where they could provide modern education to Kenya's children. Then I said to myself that I had to be with these young Turks and help them start the school."

Another example is that of Ilhan Erdoğan. Having participated in several school projects in Central Asia in the 1990s, Erdoğan set forth with his wife and a toddler to start a school in Kampala, Uganda, after spending a year or two in Kenya. He recalls the hardships he and his

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<sup>6</sup> Except from the author's interview with the respondent in Nairobi, Kenya on 23 April 2008

wife had to endure in the beginning just to be able to settle in Uganda, where not many other Turks lived. "The several hours we had to wait at the customs before entering Uganda were probably the most difficult hours in my life." The difficulty was essentially because Turkey had not had any diplomatic representation in Uganda, and only last week -- a decade later -- did Ankara announce that it will open an embassy in this country. Like his colleague Kutlu, Erdoğan spent his early years in Uganda trying to get to know the local people and encouraging them to be part of the education project he had in mind. Today, the school he and his colleagues started educates some 200 students, who compete with their counterparts in international contests, be it math, sciences, humanities or computer technology.

A local businesswoman who runs several hardware stores in Kampala notes that she had been to Turkey on a trip organized by Erdoğan, during which she visited the schools established by the Turkish businessmen. "We saw the school in Nazilli. It was a very good school. We, the Ugandan business leaders, will do the same here in our country." She notes that she and her husband, along with the other Ugandan business owners, frequently come together with the teachers of the Turkish Light Academy to discuss ways to improve the school facilities and hopefully open another school. For the record, both Erdoğan and his fellow Turkish teachers still live with their families in the small houses which they themselves constructed near the school campus.

The dedication of the late Erkan Çağıl, a businessman from Turkey's eastern city of Erzurum, to development work in Tanzania illustrated that of many other similar businessmen who sold their businesses in Turkey to start from scratch in various countries of Africa in order to sponsor school projects in these countries and help Africans change their bitter fate. Amid the criticisms from his friends and relatives, Çağıl closed his business in İstanbul and moved to Darussalam, Tanzania, in 2005, where he had visited the Turkish schools for the first time in 2001. Reportedly, his dream was to build a university in Darussalam, which would surpass any other university in Africa in terms of both quality of facilities and the education it offered. Yet he passed away in a car accident, leaving his colleagues behind to fulfill his dream, and has already become a symbol of the friendship between the Tanzanians and the Turks.

### ***Turkish Light Academy: the light of Africa***

The impact of such individual accounts of dedication and sacrifice likely have gone far beyond the individuals involved and have started to influence the perceptions at the national and international level in Africa-Turkey relations.

Recently graduated from the Turkish Light Academy in Nairobi, Richard Otolo is a devout Christian who regularly attends church services and sings in the church choir. His father was killed by the al-Qaeda bombing of the US Embassy in Nairobi in 1998 while he was working as an engineer in the building next door. When asked about how he feels about Muslims after what happened to his father, and how he felt attending a school run by Kenyan as well as Turkish teachers who happened to all be Muslim, Otolo noted: "The Turkish teachers are Muslim. But religion was not an issue here. There is a freedom here. The Light Academy is quite different from other schools. [...] The teachers stay on campus after classes and help us with our studies. We ended up being really good friends with our teachers. In other schools,

it is different. There is this barrier between teacher and student. That is not the case here at the Light Academy. They are not only my teachers but also friends. Even after graduation, we are still in touch. In other schools, once you graduate, you do not remain in touch with your teachers. Sometimes when you see your teacher on the street, you try to avoid having him see you."

Mr. Verre teaches business studies at the Turkish Light Academy. After growing up and being educated in an impoverished eastern province of Kenya, Verre joined his Turkish colleagues in the early years of the school. "I have been working here now for some seven years. I have good relations with my students and colleagues. They are from a different culture, which creates a multicultural environment on the campus. The school has exchange programs with Turkey, though I have never been to Turkey so far. So it has been quite a good experience for me." Verre takes a rightful pride in the Light Academy's accomplishments. "I remember, when it started about 10 years ago, our school's space was very limited and in an impoverished building. Now, when I look around, I see a modern and huge campus with different facilities. This is the most important accomplishment of the school, I believe. Secondly, when we did our first national KCSE (Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education) exam in 2002, we were nowhere on the map of Kenya. However, when we look at it today, we can say that the Light Academy is likely to be the light of this country, because the success graphic is always showing a positive trend. We ranked 10th, then eighth and then seventh. Finally this year [2007], we ranked second among some 5,000 private schools in Kenya." As he speaks of every success of the Light Academy as if his own, Verre's words explain the general characteristics of Turkish-Africa relations, and of what sort of impact the Gulen-inspired initiatives in Kenya or Uganda may have accomplished. That is, neither Africans nor Turks see one another as different, but as equal partners who are dedicated to changing the bitter fate of Africa and are looking forward to rejoicing in the better future together.