



# Turkish Islam in Africa: a Study of the Gülen Movement in Kenya

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# MAMBO!

Recent research findings in Eastern Africa

## Turkish Islam in Africa: a Study of the Gülen Movement in Kenya

Gabrielle ANGEY

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*This paper addresses the current expansion of a religiously motivated educative movement coming from Turkey, the Fethullah Gülen movement, in Africa and more specifically in Kenya. First it will highlight the stakes raised by the definition of the movement and the nature of its action. Then it will strive to demonstrate the existence of a “joint-venture” between the Turkish state and the movement of Fethullah Gülen. Lastly it will examine the impact of the movement on Kenya, a retreating state, and the project of creating an “indigenized” elite in the country.*

### The Gülen movement: a movement hard to characterize focusing on conservative education

The Gülen movement was founded after Fethullah Gülen. Gülen was a Turkish thinker and former Imam who left Turkey for the United States, officially for health reasons in 1999, due to conflicting relations with the Turkish state. The movement was at first a national movement constitutive of a Turkish Islam that kept expanding under the absence of its leader. The movement, hard to characterize on a religious perspective, positions itself in the continuation of a famous historical brotherhood, the Nakshbandiyya, one of the biggest Muslim brotherhoods in the world, and recognizes the legacy of historical mystics. Yet, nowadays, despite its obvious religious inspiration, its members, the Fethullahci (the followers of Fethullah Gülen) refuse to be designated as a brotherhood (*tarikat*). It is interesting to notice that the qualification of the movement has shifted according to its level of insertion in the globalization process, from *cemaat* (communauté) to *birlik* (cultural union) and eventually to the current terminology of *yurttaş hareketi* (civic movement)<sup>1</sup>. By doing so, the movement, increasingly

internationalized, tends to conceal its religious dimension and rather emphasize humanitarian and universal dimensions<sup>2</sup>. Consequently, the movement, born in a Sunni context yet borrowing to Sufi influences, can hardly be positioned as a religious movement.

The Gülen movement is not a religiously inspired network only: it is also concerned with business (e.g. the large businessmen union TUSKON is acquainted to them), the media (the very famous Turkish newspapers *Zaman* distributed internationally is affiliated to the movement, and the TV channel Salmanyolu openly claims its acquaintance to the movement), arts (the most powerful Turkish foundations of writers and journalists is close to the movement), charities (a NGO named Kimse Yokmu was created by the brotherhood) and most of all education, with schools set up worldwide. This network drifted therefore from a nationally-based movement in the 1970s to an international network currently present in more than 110 countries.

Education is at the centre of the Gülen project. Indeed, according to Gülen, educating rationality should be the way to reach a critical, thus true, faith. For Gülen «*a lack*

1 Terminologie utilisée par tous les membres de la confrérie interrogée

2 Olivier Roy, *L'Islam mondialisé*, La couleur des Idées, Seuil, 2002, p 128

of religious education creates atheism, but the lack of scientific education results in fanaticism»<sup>3</sup>. This explains why the Gülen movement has set up schools in more than 70 countries in the world. In Africa only, 34 schools have been opened until today. In Kenya, the movement has built schools since 1994. Today, there are a total of 6 schools called «Light Academy» (4 in Nairobi and 2 in Mombasa). Teaching is conservative in content. Students receive classes of «moral guidance» where they are taught how to respect elders, not to drink, how to behave chastely before marriage. Teaching also conveys a nationalist message, since the Turkish identity of the schools is proudly underlined. The religious dimension of the schools is a source of inspiration for the Turkish missionaries but is very discreet in the education given to Kenyan students. Indeed, the transmission of an ethics of behaviour is the priority. As the political scientist Bayram Balci, underlines, «the most important thing for the *cemaat* (literally, the community, meaning the believers of the Movement) is not conversion to religion but the diffusion of an ethics of behaviour». Yet, even though there are no classes of religion as such, the religious values of the movement are circulated through another channel<sup>4</sup>. The method used by Gülen cannot be described as a direct form of proselytizing, or *da'wa* in the sense of *tabligh*. *Tabligh* is said to be inefficient since it is seen as a patronizing way of persuading people based upon a relation of inequality between the teacher and the receiver. Instead, Fethullah Gülen promotes *temsil*, which means exemplarity. The tutors (*belletmen*), composed of Muslim students coming from Turkey to study at the university of the hosting country and who take care of the students living in the dormitories after school time, as well as the school teachers

3 Hakan Yavuz, Turkish Islam and the secular State, The Gülen Movement, Syracuse University Press, 2003, p.38

4 Bayram Balci, *Missionnaires de l'Islam en Asie centrale, Les écoles turques de Fethullah Gülen*, Istanbul, IFEA, 2003, p. 224.

of the movement do their best to embody moral values and principles in order to stand as examples for their students. They must not smoke nor drink; they have to make their diary prayers, respect the Turkish nation, and fast during Ramadan. Being exemplary in their conduct, *belletmen* and teachers strive to attract students to get interested in the way Gülen ideas might influence them. As a consequence the Gülen method can be considered as an indirect form of proselytizing.

Yet, the schools do not only accept Muslim students: Christians are also welcomed. Eventually what matters for the Fethullahci is to transmit conservative values inspired from the great religions in general. While Christianity is accepted, atheism is very badly regarded.

### The expansion of the Gülen movement in Africa and Turkish diplomacy

The settlement of Gülen schools in Africa for the last 15 years relates to multiple reasons. Firstly, the movement is dedicated to leading a mission in the neediest regions of the world, Africa embodying extreme poverty. This can be explained by the self-sacrificial dimension of the commitment of the Turkish Fethullahci when coming to an African country. Indeed, « *this religiously motivated global education movement is a way of bringing God back to one's life through the ethic of self-sacrifice and hard work*»<sup>5</sup> This commitment has been compared to the action of the Jesuits by the scholar Bayram Balci<sup>6</sup>. Then, the link between the importance of commercial exchanges between Turkish and African businessmen and the settlement of schools in Africa is obvious, as Turkish businessmen are the subsidizers of the Light Academy schools. Lastly, the Fethullahci nurture

5 Hakan Yavuz, Turkish Islam and the secular State, The Gülen Movement, Syracuse University Press, 2003, p.26.

6 Bayram Balci, op.cit., p.234.

the missionary idea of trying to bring religion in regions of the world having a high potential of conversion<sup>7</sup>. In Africa, Kenya is an interesting case study. Indeed, 90% of the population is Christian, settled in the interior of the country, while the tiny Muslim minority is mainly concentrated on the coast. The settlement of a Muslim movement in a Christian country is consequently interesting to study. Moreover, Kenya represents an important economic stake, as its exchanges with Turkey have grown dramatically in the recent years, reaching 86 million Dollars of Turkish exports towards Kenya in 2010<sup>8</sup>.

In this regard, the action of the Gülen movement fits in the Turkish state strategy of "Opening up to Africa", launched in 1998 to "increase the role of Turkey" in international relations<sup>9</sup>. This program aimed at expanding economic, cultural and political links with sub-Saharan Africa, which had until then been left aside, to the profit of more traditional allies of North Africa such as Libya. This strategy reached its acme on October 17<sup>th</sup> 2008 with the election of Turkey at the seat of non-permanent member of the UNO with 151 positive votes of which 51 coming from African countries (out of the 53 African countries represented). In Africa, this policy is mainly aimed at deepening economic exchanges. The Turkish state is using the Kenyan Light Academy schools as an in-between for its policy of power in Africa<sup>10</sup>. The Light Academy schools are seeking legitimacy through the support of Turkish officials, while the Turkish state is using the schools and the Fethullahci in Kenya (that is to say, teachers, businessmen, students) as Turkey's "cultural ambassadors".

7 René Otayek, *Islam, Etat et société en Afrique*, Editions Karthala, 2009, p 10

8 Sylvain Geranton, *Les ambitions économiques et commerciales de la Turquie en Afrique de l'Est*, Service économique régional, Ambassade de France au Kenya, 22 février 2011

9 Discours de Recep Tayyip Erdogan, suite à son élection au siège de l'ONU, 2009

10 Olivier Roy, in Bayram Balci, *Missionnaires de l'Islam en Asie centrale, Les écoles turques de Fethullah Gülen*, Istanbul, IFEA, 2003

For instance, the Turkish ambassador in Kenya, Tuncer Kayalar showed its support to school projects, notably by participating to conferences called «Interfaith dialogue and Gülen's thoughts» in May 2011<sup>11</sup>. Abdullah Gül, the incumbent President of the Turkish Republic at the time, opened the Light Academy secondary school during a diplomatic visit in 2008. These visits benefit to the schools in terms of prestige, and give them a social legitimacy in their hosting countries. On the other hand, the actors of the Gülen movement use their schools as an intermediate to «lobby for Turkey»<sup>12</sup>. Thus, they organize meetings between Turkish and Kenyan businessmen in the schools. They can also organize trips to Turkey for Kenyan MPs: in 2010, 30 MPs were sent to Istanbul and Ankara through the Light Academy channel, meeting with their Turkish counterparts there. According to the head of the schools of the Light Academy, M. Engin, «it is thanks to the existence of our schools that diplomacy between the two countries is growing»<sup>13</sup>. The Turkish state, less efficient on the Kenyan field, is trying to associate with the movement's action as the latter proved successful into conveying a positive image of Turkey in Kenya.

### A movement well greeted by a retreating Kenyan state

As the historian H el ene Charton showed, the 1980s constitute a turning point in Kenya. Indeed at the end of this decade, Kenya, like many other African states, was facing debts and had to call for the help of international organizations. It was compelled to adopt structural adjustment plans in various sectors, including the education system. As a result of the withdrawal of the state, private

entrepreneurs were prompted to invest in the educative system. Facing this diversification of educational offer, the wealthiest Kenyan families started developing strategies in order to guarantee success to their children<sup>14</sup>. Consequently, from 1999 to 2009, the number of private primary schools was multiplied by 8 in Kenya. These private schools sought to reach excellence by getting the best results in the national exams: the KCPE (*Kenya Certificate of Primary Education*) and the KCSE (*Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education*)<sup>15</sup>. Those exams are critical into determining the further orientation of students to different secondary schools and colleges which provide neither the same quality of teaching nor the same chances of success in the future professional life. The wealthiest Kenyan families enrol their children into private schools to get the best chances to integrate the most prestigious national universities.

In this new educative landscape, Gülen schools rapidly reached impressive results on the national plan, becoming one of the best schools of the country («*2<sup>nd</sup> Best Private School – countrywide*», and «*9<sup>th</sup> Best School Overall – countrywide*» to the KCSE in 2007). Such high level schools are aimed at creating new elite. A parallel can be drawn between the Turkish schools of Fethullah Gülen and the Aga Khan Foundation schools<sup>16</sup>. This Muslim Ismaili Indo-Pakistani community established schools which reached the level of the best Kenyan schools<sup>17</sup>. In Kenya, there are many Aga Khan Schools settled in Nairobi since 1974 and an Academy (a whole campus from primary to University) in Mombasa since 2003<sup>18</sup>.

The existence of schools directed by the Turkish and the Indo-

Pakistani communities of Kenya is testimony of the communitarian fragmentation of the country structuring a diversity of religious practices. The political scientist Ariel Crozon demonstrated that the Muslim population of Kenya, representing approximately 5 to 10% of the population<sup>19</sup>, is composed of divided Muslim communities. They are very heterogeneous, since they correspond to the diversity of regions of origin (Hadramawt, Oman, India, Highlands of Kenya, Somalia), and are linked to different historical waves of immigration<sup>20</sup>. The Gülen movement constitutes a new Muslim community, completing this «divided Umma of Kenya». After the community of the Muslim Indians of Kenya, it intends to create a new network of elite who may be able to play a significant role in the future political life of Kenya. As a consequence of the retreat of the Kenyan state from its social responsibilities, the state regards the Gülen schools as an opportunity. Among members of the movement, the relationships with the Kenyan state are presented as very good. M. Murat, a Turkish teacher working at the Light Academy of Nairobi declares: «*Kenya was a welcoming country because it already had many nationalities. It is very common for a country to come and be willing to open a school*». The Fethullahci try to bring «*some ambition*» to Kenya, preparing and sending students from all over the country to international competitions abroad as well as organizing, in Kenya, student competitions which gather together East African students. The official objective of the movement «*is to make Kenya a leading country in East Africa and in Africa as a whole concerning education and international competition, to later insert it in the world competition*»<sup>21</sup>.

11 Conf erence organis ee le 29 mai 2011   l'Auditorium de la Secondary Boy School de la Light Academy Nairobi, o  Tuncer Kayalar, Ambassadeur de la R epublique de Turquie est venu rendre hommage   l'action des  coles G ulen pour la paix.

12 Entretien men e le 18 mai 2011 avec M. Murat

13 Issu d'un entretien men e le 3 juin 2011, avec M. Engin, directeur des 6  coles de la Light Academy Kenya

14 H el ene Charton, op.cit., p.233.

15 Ibid, p.235

16 Farhad Daftary, *The Isma'ilis: their history and Doctrine*, Cambridge University Press, 1990.

17 Michel Adam, *L'Afrique indienne, Les minorit es d'origine indo-pakistanaise en Afrique orientale*, Karthala

18 Issu du site officiel de l'Acad mie Aga Khan de Nairobi, <http://www.agakhanschools.org/>

19 Fran ois Constantin, « Les communaut es musulmanes d'Afrique orientale », *Travaux et Documents du CREPAO*, n 1, Universit  de Pau, 1983, p.64

20 Ariel Crozon, « L'umma divis e, Les communaut es musulmanes du Kenya », in *Le Kenya contemporain*, Karthala-IFRA, 2010, p.173.

21 Entretien men e le 18 mai 2011   la Light

From a strategic point of view, the Gülen network is using the resources linked to its transnationalism to get the support of the Kenyan state by showing that the presence of the movement on the Kenyan territory can bring benefits in terms of education.

The support of the Kenyan state is testified by the good relationships of its officials with the schools. Kenyan President Mwai Kibaki and Prime Minister Raila Odinga visited the schools of Nairobi Light Academy respectively in 2008 and 2011. The Kenyan Minister of Education recently travelled to Turkey in a delegation led by the Light Academy. The Kenyan state regards the schools as a bridge towards the deepening of economic exchanges with Turkey. The visits of Turkish officials always surrounded with Turkish businessmen illustrate this intensification of economic relations between the two countries. The declaration of Prime Minister Odinga, at the opening of the Secondary Boy's School of Light Academy in 2011, tends to confirm it. As was reported in the *Daily Nation*, «Mr Odinga urged investors to take advantage of Kenya's attractive business climate declaring "You can bring your capital and take it out whenever you want," he said, adding "the government had removed all restrictions on foreign exchange»<sup>22</sup>. This speech shows that the Kenyan officials see the opening of Turkish schools as a sign for increased trade exchanges with Turkey.

### Gülen's offspring: creating a "golden generation" («altın nesil»)

Producing a golden generation (or *altın nesil*) which would trigger a worldwide social change is a central objective of the Fethullahci. Ideally, this golden generation would consist of "educated representatives of the understanding of science, faith, morality and art who are the master builders of those coming after us"<sup>23</sup>. For Gülen himself,

*"combining knowledge and human values, this new generation will solve the problems of the future"*<sup>24</sup>. This echoes the words of M. Murat who stated in an interview that the aim of the Light Academy schools in Kenya is «to bring up intellectuals of the country who later will spread the same ideas to their country man"<sup>25</sup>. Initially, this golden generation was to be embodied by Turkish Muslims only. But since the 1990s and the transnationalization of the Gülen movement, the expression of *altın nesil* has encompassed any individual formed in a Gülen school who mixes faith and intellectual excellence and dedicates himself/herself to the upbringing of a moral society, a "golden age". This call for an *altın nesil* can be regarded as a strategy to create a leading elite structuring a Muslim network of power beyond borders.

This *altın nesil* designates first of all the Turkish heirs of the movement. In Kenya they consist of the Turkish students sent to Kenyan universities to study. They are characterized by «religious piety and communal ascetic life, political conservatism and nationalism, social success with the mission of living only for the goals of the movement»<sup>26</sup>. Turkish students who live in Kenya tend to define themselves as the *altın nesil*. But this quest can also be seen as an attempt to "indigenize" the movement. In Kenya, the Fethullahci are trying to create a Kenyan elite who will constitute the local executives of the movement. In Nairobi, since 2005, *belletmen* are recruited among Kenyan students who graduated from the Light Academy secondary school. Those supervisors will later be recruited as teachers. Yet the success of this initiative is limited. Indeed, the students are often not even informed of the existence of a spiritual leader named Fethullah Gülen who inspired the creation of their schools. Then, if the Fethullahci succeeded into

teaching a true behavioural ethics to their students, on a long-term basis, most of the students cut the string that links them to the network of the Light Academy after they leave school. As a consequence, very few Kenyans become true Fethullahci. At last, a small number of Kenyan students are sent annually to Turkey (15 scholarships granted by the Light Academy in 2010-2011). As showed by Balci, the movement is not tightly set up in its countries of mission, and strives to strengthen its presence only through the action of its Turkish supporters in the field<sup>27</sup>

The movement of Fethullah Gülen successfully turned from a national Turkish Muslim movement into an internationalized network. In doing so, its discourse has become less focused on the religious foundation upon which the movement initially emerged to the benefit of a syncretistic conception of spirituality, morality and proper conduct of life. The presence of successful Gülen schools in Kenya is seen by Turkey and Kenya as an opportunity to deepen commercial exchanges between the two states. Even though the impact of those schools on Kenyan society and the renewing of national elites seems currently limited, a long-term study may be able to reveal the consequences of the emergence of an internationalized African elite aware of this "Turkish Islam"<sup>28</sup>

27 Bayram Balci, op.cit., p.268.

28 Hakan Yavuz, Ibid

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Academy de Nairobi  
22 Extrait de l'article « Turkish investors eye Kenyan school sector », 22 février 2011, www.nation.co.ke  
23 Hakan Yavuz, op.cit., p.57.

24 Ibid  
25 Extrait d'un entretien mené à Nairobi le 18 mai 2011  
26 Hakan Yavuz, op.cit, p 58