

The Business of Muslim Integration¹

The Formation of Islamic Civil Society in Non-Muslim Countries

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Good evening. I am honoured to be here and I hope you will enjoy my short lecture. Probably, many of the things I will say will already be familiar to many of you.

But first, let me ask you three simple questions. Please answer them without thinking too long:

1. Do you have many Muslim, Hindu or Sikh colleagues? And if you are non-Muslim, how many times have you visited a mosque or temple and how many times did you visit a Muslim, Hindu or Sikh friend's house and had dinner there?

So, one tentative conclusion we can draw here is that most of the contacts different ethnic or religious groups have is on the shopfloor, and while doing business

2. What is your company doing for Eid-al-Fitr? Have you celebrated *iftar*?

Why not? But you do celebrate Christmas?

3. What is Saudi Arabia's greatest asset?

Practically all your Muslim colleagues and customers would all have said Mecca. I'm not saying one answer is more correct than the other, but rather that the different answers arise from different worldviews. Whereas for non-Muslims, Saudi Arabia means oil and turmoil, for Muslims it means Mecca and Medina.

And a fourth surprise question: Is Bin Laden still alive?

Introduction

Tonight I will speak of Muslim integration, or, to be more precise, the integration of Muslims in non-Muslim countries. An alternative title, but less catchy, of this lecture could be "The Formation of Islamic Civil Society in Non-Muslim Countries." I will speak of two trends, which are happening at the same time. Then I will speak of some implications of these trends. The first trend is occurring among Muslims. The way Muslims in Europe are organizing themselves is changing as well as their economic participation.

The second trend is occurring in the business world. Companies are increasingly taking part in civil society, and that companies are increasingly hiring minorities and catering specifically to minorities.

A small disclaimer: Before I continue I want to make clear that although each country is different, I am speaking here of more general trends taking place in Western Europe. And where I speak of Muslims, I could also speak of other religious minorities or substitute the word Muslim for a specific ethnic minority. However, since there are now so many Muslims in Western Europe, they form as such perhaps the largest of any minorities across Europe, diverse though as the group of Muslims is.

Increasing Muslim Integration in Civil Society and the Economy

In the last decades, Muslim immigrants have come to Europe in millions, and they are one of the fastest growing segments in European societies. Also, Muslims, or rather, Muslim

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integration, are seen by many as problematic: they are generally less well off, are less well educated, they seem to be tenaciously clinging to their cultural and religious practices (thereby seemingly rejecting norms and values of the society in which they live), and, since 9/11, Muslims are often associated with extremism and violence. But Muslims and Islam, their religion, are here to stay. Their integration has become one of Europe's main concerns.

The integration of Muslims in various countries is an ongoing process and there have been significant changes in (1) the way Muslims organize themselves to take part in civil society as well as (2) changing patterns of participation of Muslims in the economy. I will develop both these elements.

Muslim civil society organizations

We are now in a period in which, Europe-wide, Muslims are organising themselves into a full-blown, mature civil society. We are now seeing, across Europe, immigrants from diverse backgrounds, organising themselves on the basis of the religion they share: Islam. Citizens are finding their voice as Muslims.

This marks an important change to earlier patterns, where immigrants would most often organise locally on ethnic basis, to confront specific issues. A group of say Moroccan immigrants in a smallish town in France would form an organization to run a mosque. They might also jointly organize the hajj and funerals in the home country. In one neighbourhood, Turks, Kurds, Arab Moroccans, Berber Moroccans and Iranian shi'as might all have their own mosque, their own shops, and their own hajj/ funeral organizations, without any contact occurring among them. Many of the grass-roots organizations were single-issue organizations: the focus was on one issue and the focus was mostly local.

These organizations are still there, mainly run by the older generation of immigrants, many of whom are still oriented to the old country. Efforts to unify or integrate the plethora of organizations into larger wholes were mostly unsuccessful, and very few nation-wide organizations came up, although most countries have one or two. I guess in the UK the MCB would be a prime example of such a successful, cross-ethnicity, nation-wide and multiple-issue organization. There are however few such organizations, and all Muslim communities in Western Europe suffer from fragmentation and competition.

Younger Muslims realize that in order to exert influence on a national scale, they will have to organize nationally. Also, governments are fed up with the fragmented Muslim inhabitants, and in France and Belgium for example have taken the lead in setting up nation-wide, cross-ethnic Muslim organizations. By far the most organizations are still mono-ethnic however, although they are profiling themselves more often as Muslims now.

These changes are important. Islam has now become a unifying factor stronger than the fragmenting forces of national and ethnic backgrounds. It also signifies a shift in self-identification: people are more often seeing themselves as Muslims first, and being of Turkish descent later. These organizations are outward-looking take a public role, and actively take part in national discussions, they do not shy away from making political statements.

So, civil society organizations, acting as pressure groups for certain groups, are diversifying. In the future, Muslims will have an increasingly coherent and powerful voice to demand changes in policies and practices. Islam is here to stay, and Muslims respectfully demand recognition of their unicity.

Economic participation

The rise in mature Islamic civil society organisations goes hand in hand with the development of Muslim-run and -owned businesses, which are now entering the general market, and no longer catering to specific ethnic groups. These Islamic business people and their companies also play a role in civil society.

Immigrant communities all over Europe have often monopolized a certain area of economic activity. For about twenty years, practically all shoarma and falafel eating places in Amsterdam were run by Egyptians. Hassidic Jews 'do' diamonds in Antwerp. Ghanaians do all the cleaning at Amsterdam airport. Mourids do much of the street vending in France as well as New York. Self-employed immigrants more often than not either run small restaurants or small shops, and very often they cater to their own community. In the deep Turkish recesses of a German city, a Turkish shop owner might not even speak German very well, having his admin done by a younger cousin, selling only Turkish products to mostly Turkish customers.

This is changing as a new generation of immigrant's children comes of age. Of course, that is only to be expected. The small storeowner now caters to non-Muslims as well, offering products especially for them. After an absence of about fifteen years, the large cities in Western Europe have now seen the return of the small, family-run supermarkets. The greengrocer is back. No longer hemmed in by ethnic, national or religious background, Muslim business people are increasingly engaged in different fields of economic activity. Very often, they bring with them different ideals on how to run a company, and different ideals of the companies' role in civil society.

Muslim friends of mine set up a small consulting firm, helping others out with 'interculturalisation' problems. They are, in their free time, also teaching inner-city Moroccan youth in high schools. The company sees this as duty, as well as of course a good public relations stunt.

Established (Traditional) Companies

This is the first trend I spoke of in my introduction: the way Muslims organize and the economic participation of Muslims are changing. The second trend concerns increasing participation in civil society by established business, as well as companies becoming more dependent on civil society's approval of their policies and practices. Companies have taken on a greater diversity of employees and they are catering to a more diverse group of customers. They are using ethnomarketing tools to get their message across. They are also held accountable in ways they were not in the past.

Companies like British Airways, Shell and Virgin are all active participants in civil society. They run a variety of philanthropic projects which have great public relations value and which show the social heart of the company. These companies and many other large companies take great pains to profile themselves as responsible members of the community. This trend is likely to become much stronger in the future.

Also, many companies are consciously diversifying their workforce (or at least they say they are trying) and they are also increasingly making adjustments to accommodate specific groups of customers. HSBC, for example, now offers Islamically-correct bank accounts and mortgages. British Airways states that it trains their employees in dealing with diversity. Their program is called: *Uniquely Different: Equally Valued*.

The business sector will increasingly become an integral part of civil society, and not largely withdrawn from it. They have also become vulnerable to its moral judgment. Businesses must therefore reposition themselves in the societies in which they operate and reflect the cultural and religious values of their employees and customers. For companies especially this means big changes. Companies have to show they truly respect the values of their employees and customers, be they Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus or Christians. I argue that playing an active role in civil society will become an absolute must for businesses in the future: core business, not a side issue.

In order to profile themselves in society, businesses will involve themselves with the environment, the elderly, sports, refugees and so on. For example, Shell builds schools in Nigeria, British Airways funds immunization projects in Angola. Businesses strive for enhanced social acceptance and legitimacy through these activities. In ways different than before, companies are now held accountable by the public.

Where large and global companies lead, smaller and more local companies will follow. The nature of business will undergo fundamental changes in the coming decades: the changes regard the position and role of companies in society. Companies are no longer just about making profit: they have a public role and are attributed a moral duty to be active in civil society. The business-scape is fundamentally changing.

Implications

I have thus far described two trends: (1) the ongoing and accelerating integration of Muslims in Western Europe through new patterns of participation in civil society and the economy; and (2) fundamental changes in the business-scape regarding the role and position of companies in society and the influence of civil society on business. In short, while companies are becoming more socially responsible, Islam has entered the business-scape. Muslims are gaining an increasingly powerful voice through new types of civil society organizations.

Companies must also develop ways of dealing with scrutiny other than try and prevent it. Keeping issues private and inside the company will no longer work, word will get out and criticism will follow. A company's reputation depends on how well it deals with the new forms of scrutiny.

Religious issues are becoming part of business in ways they were not before and they are here to stay. Many companies have so far been religion-neutral, meaning they consider it a non-issue. Companies have therefore ignored religion and religious issues, dealing with them only when forced to. We respect you, dear employees, in equal measure, as we are all the same. However, observant Muslims, Hindus, Jews often find this approach disrespectful, as they are not free to be themselves. They feel restricted and therefore unequally treated.

From a social-scientific point of view, we are witnessing processes of secularization and de-secularization occurring simultaneously. Secularization has been happening for decades and continues as, for example, headscarves are banned in French schools, and as possession of Bibles even among Christians is decreasing. See also the Spanish government's recent proposals to change the position of the Catholic church. On the other hand, de-secularization is also happening, religion is re-entering public discourse through the promotion of faith-based initiatives and the like. Believers of all sects are becoming more vocal and organized to (re-)gain recognition. Perhaps it is the public assertion of Islam that is regarded as most problematic throughout Europe.

Through globalization and immigration our societies have become more complex. Governments are uncomfortable with these changes and are uncertain how to react. Witness the French government's unease with headscarves as just one example. All Western European governments are re-appraising their policies.

Companies also are uncomfortable with their new roles, new employees and new customers. Witness here the plethora of interculturalization experts, diversity consultants and so on. Companies are experiencing problems in recruitment and especially retention of minority employees, provided they can find suitably educated people. Libraries are filled with books on the subject. It is evident, also through the language employed by companies regarding these issues, that minorities and religious issues are usually seen as problematic.

So, Islamic issues are part of the business-scape and won't go away and Muslims have increasingly powerful voices in demanding that companies take them seriously and respect

their cultural and religious values and requirements. Changes that can be expected are that whereas now, a company may do its Muslim employees a huge favour by giving them a day off to celebrate Eid al Fitr. In the future, a company will be frowned upon if it doesn't offer a day off, and it will likely be publicly criticized. Who wants to work at a place where they don't respect your religion? In my many conversations with fellow-Muslims, I notice a lot of resentment on these issues.

Companies must respect values and differences and reflect these values in order for employees and customers to be able to recognize themselves in the company. These values include cultural and religious values. This is becoming core business for companies and will for many companies require a change in business approach.

Dealing with Islam and Muslim Integration

How then, to deal with religious and cultural issues in a changing business-scape in which a companies' policies are held up to public scrutiny and in which companies will be criticized and pressured by an increasing diversity of civil society groups.

The greatest determining factor in how a company deals with issues such as diversity, religion, ethnic and religious minorities are the perspectives of managers of (1) the company and (2) reasons for diversity. I will expound on both.

Managers tend to see their organizations as tight, integrated wholes, in which people throughout the organization are in general agreement on things and in which there is consensus. There is a clear role for the management. Leaders choose the basic change and/or are responsible for implementing it. They engineer changes and then pull the levers. The organization is seen as a logically constructed, mechanistic system in which the management identifies some destination (a vision or end state) and then drives the organization in the right direction while watching at checkpoints along the way. This approach assumes that change is a linear process and that the changed vision or new end state is fixed and can be collectively shared.

However, organizations have sub-cultures, are internally diverse if not divided, and foster conservative and bureaucratic attitudes. Not only are people within organizations often unwilling to change, they are active agents and cannot easily be controlled through pulling 'levers'. Management is not a matter of controlling but more akin to negotiation and consultation.

It is therefore difficult to predict what the result of change will be. In fact leaders may not be able to send clear signals at all since whatever they do will be interpreted and reinterpreted in unexpected and unintended ways by different people in different parts of the organization. Organizational members are not passive recipients of culture change, they are imaginative consumers of leaders' visions. As managers must deal with diversity, a change in perspective is necessary.²

Ely and Thomas found that three perspectives on workforce diversification can be identified, and that these different perspectives have an impact on how the integration of minorities goes. From one perspective (*discrimination and fairness*), an organization diversifies because it feels it must reflect society, to ensure equality and eliminate discrimination (HSBC). From the second perspective (*access and legitimacy*), a company diversifies to gain access and legitimacy in diverse markets (HSBC). The assumption that diversity is a source of inspiration and will improve work is the basis of the third perspective (*integration and learning*)(BA).

² The preceding paragraphs borrow heavily from a forthcoming publication of Donna Winslow and Jeffrey Schwerzel titled "UnChanging Military Culture."

These three perspectives on diversity in organizations have a huge impact on organizational functioning and workplace atmosphere. In all three situations, the company has diversified and experiences tensions as a result. However, the differences in the perspective espoused by a company determines how it deals with these tensions.

The first perspective promotes the view that everybody is equal: cultural differences are routinely ignored and minorities should assimilate. This causes tensions. In the second perspective, crudely put, an organization ‘employs blacks to deal with blacks’, and these black employees then do not rise in the company chain. Minority employees are taken seriously in so far as they can relate to the customers. This perspective as well as the first, stimulates tokenism, what the Dutch call *Alibi-Alis*. The third perspective is also not without tensions, but should in the end lead to full mutual acceptance of cultural and religious differences. This perspective, in order to be successful, demands lots of patience and open communication to explain views and opinions. Each perspective has associated risks and benefits.

Let’s go back to the questions I asked at the beginning. Whether your company is organizing any special activities regarding Ramadan now becomes a question with different implications in the light of the different perspectives I just mentioned.

Company leaders should make Muslim integration their business, and ask themselves the question what diversity means to them.

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References

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