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Fostering Contributive Citizenry:

**Promoting Faith-Based Civic Engagement
in Muslim-Minority Communities**

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Synopsis

Faith-based civic engagement plays an influential role in numerous countries worldwide. In recent years, the emergence of Muslim faith-based organizations in Western Europe has garnered attention, particularly in the United Kingdom and in France. This paper presents findings from an in-depth sociological research study that examines the significance of this phenomenon and explores the challenges it faces. The study highlights how Islamic social work endeavors to help both Muslim and non-Muslim recipients. This engagement aims to promote impartiality and inclusivity and foster contributive citizenry in countries where Muslims are still often perceived with suspicion. Through this approach, faith-based civic engagement seeks to bridge communities and foster harmony in society.

Introduction

In Western European Countries, Muslim civil society organizations (CSOs) have extensively increased over the last twenty years. Islamic centers, as well as grassroots associations inspired by the Islamic faith, offer various welfare activities and charity services to both Muslim and non-Muslim recipients. While these organizations take various administrative forms, including grassroots associations, charities in the United Kingdom, Islamic Centers, and NGOs, they all seek to have an impact on society while claiming a link to Islam. Some of them focus on alleviating poverty, while others address identity-based conflicts such as racism and violent extremism undertaken in the name of religion. From food pantries in streets of deprived neighborhoods to campaigns to counselling, volunteers often explain having found inspiration and motivation to help others in the teachings of Islam. While Muslim welfare providers clearly help both Muslims and non-Muslims, social engagement is sometimes cumulated with proselytising or religious services, blurring the traditional line between welfare and religious activism. Moreover, many of these faith-based organizations work both locally and abroad, offering humanitarian aid in remote contexts in addition to their usual social work projects in their cities. Through their concrete engagement in society, they participate in the positive integration of Muslims in societies in which they are a minority.

Rationale and motivations behind 'Islamic Social Work' in Europe

Although the Muslim presence has significantly grown since the second half of the 20th century in various European countries, charitable activism and social engagement of Islamic organizations have gained importance and visibility only in the last few decades in the United Kingdom, and even later in France and Switzerland. If Muslim FBOs have recently become important providers of social services in various Western countries,

this engagement had long been neglected or ignored. Indeed, Muslim organizations used to focus on organizing worship and providing basic religious education for a long time. Nevertheless, firstly in the UK, some Muslims began to consider the need to provide welfare services for two reasons: first, the idea was to respond to specific social needs of Muslim recipients respecting their cultural and religious rules; secondly, the teachings of Islam give a priority concern to charity and solidarity, which motivated some Muslims to develop charity projects. In the 1980s, the NGO Islamic Relief was then launched in the UK, followed by diverse other humanitarian initiatives to help needy people around the world. In parallel, Islamic centers and grassroots associations began to consider specific needs of Muslims in the country by providing counseling and other services, taking into account religious and cultural expectations of the public. Later, this community-based approach to social work gave place to the development of social work engagement open to a wider public, including non-Muslims. Therefore, numerous Muslim organizations have extended their services beyond the limited realm of Islamic congregations to reach beneficiaries from various ethnic and religious backgrounds.

It is interesting to note that most of this engagement is carried out by grassroots associations that are independent of large religious organizations and transnational movements. Moreover, individual initiatives gave birth to projects and organizations, far away from any top-down organizational strategy. In this regard, this new kind of faith-based organizations is freeing itself from the ideological and theological grip of formerly hegemonic movements to reappropriate the interpretation and practice of Islam in the light of local social realities.

Motivations of Muslim leaders and volunteers are diverse and cumulative. Many of them explain implementing Islamic teachings through charity for the sake of God. Also giving altruistic reasons, they insist that every needy human should be assisted, independently of his faith. Yet, some of them explain that Muslims are 'brothers' and must be treated even more carefully, sometimes justifying a community preference on religious grounds. In addition, it is common to hear that charity is a good means for spreading Islam (or doing da'wah) and promoting a positive image of Islam in society, to gain public and institutional recognition. In short, religious, humanist, and pragmatic considerations are cumulative and intertwined depending on the context.

Serving Muslims or the wider community?

Islamic-inspired social work organizations engaged in Muslim-minority countries such as Switzerland, France, and the United Kingdom usually focus on the fight against exclusion. The usual food distributions in the streets attract needy people from diverse ethnic backgrounds, including Muslims and non-Muslims.

All the observed Islamic organizations in these three countries dealt with all beneficiaries without discrimination or preference. In this regard, we can claim that these Islamic associations help all the poor without privileging the Muslims. In the cases showing a predominance of Muslims amongst the beneficiaries, the providers explain that they simply targeted the areas more affected by poverty and exclusion, and that Muslims are overrepresented in these environments. Islamic Relief used a similar narrative to explain why most of its projects take place in Muslim-majority societies. Similarly, Islamic centers providing free tuition for school children always welcome those who are not Muslim. In this regard, Muslim faith-based organizations promote contributing to the common good, and clearly claim neutrality and impartiality.

Philanthropy and *Da'wah*

Nevertheless, other situations raise controversies regarding the neutrality of Muslim providers. On various occasions, faith-based organizations combine charity services and religious talks, thus blurring the line between philanthropy and *da'wah* (the call to Islam). In other national contexts, it has been observed that some FBOs take advantage of welfare projects to spread religious messages by giving booklets to the recipients or delivering proselytizing talks. However, most of the Muslim associations engaged in social work refrain from mixing both engagements, by simply assuming that *da'wah* is given by exemplarity, meaning it should be merely considered as a positive side-effect of the charity work. Beyond these cases, other situations are more ambivalent: during the month of Ramadan, numerous faith-based organizations delay the time of food distribution to accommodate the religious needs of fasting beneficiaries, although many of the recipients are not Muslim. In a context of strong secularism, these organizations usually face criticism from institutions and politicians that accuse them of instrumentalizing charity for proselytizing purposes. However, these remarks are often excessive. Islamic organizations can argue that they combine charity and religious services without exercising any discrimination. They deliver their social work services to all regardless of their faith and, in addition, undertake specific actions related to religious education or *da'wah*. If such a stance is generally well understood and accepted within Muslim communities, it continues to raise concerns and suspicions among non-Muslim organizations reluctant to the accumulation of religious and charitable commitments. In these cases, it would be important for the stakeholders to deliver clear communication on their objectives, purposes, and intentions to mitigate misunderstandings and avoid public condemnation.

Institutional relations: pragmatic cooperation and nagging suspicions

While there is a general trend in Western Europe towards collaboration and the development of partnerships between the state and Muslim organizations, authorities and public institutions' stance in relation to these FBOs remains evolutive and highly dependent on the national context. The rise of religious violent extremism over the last decade has fostered public institutions to identify Muslim partners to tackle radicalization. Public funding has then been allocated to various Islamic organizations to develop projects for preventing violent extremism. Although this trend shows promising signs in the integration of Muslims in public affairs, several institutions send ambiguous messages to the Muslim community by trying to identify the 'good' and 'bad' partners based on their religious identity, or even shape Islamic discourses suiting mainstream political or ideological agendas. While this state interference in Islam is nothing new in the context of non-Muslim Western countries, it remains problematic insofar as it exerts increasing influence on the identity and practices of Muslim FBOs. The latter are often expected to comply with dominant ideologies, which continuously evolve according to political trends. To mitigate this risk, the development of strong Islamic institutions working at both a theological and political level is necessary to support FBOs working in the field. For the time being, the various initiatives remain scattered, with little or no federation, which keeps Muslim grassroots organizations in a vulnerable position.

Is 'Islamic Social Work' truly Islamic?

Although Muslim FBOs claim to act according to Islamic principles, it can be argued that many of the so-called 'Islamic' projects are not based on any genuine religious guidelines. Rather, their link to Islam often remains limited to a proclaimed identity, or a blurred intention to act within an Islamic framework which has not been clearly defined. In many cases, even the Muslim identity of the organization is debated.

One of the crossroads between Muslim thought and charitable activism concerns intentions behind involvement in social work. In the field, we find a large number of volunteers who explain that they are serving others in order to earn hasânet (or spiritual rewards) while it frequently appears that they are neglecting the real needs of the beneficiaries. Indeed, the quest for hasânet too often continues to overshadow the Prophet's higher teaching of loving for others what we love for ourselves. Another common misunderstanding concerns the interaction between social work and proselytism: while some think that charity is merely a tool for da'wah, the Quran teaches that altruism and welfare services are unconditional injunctions. In this regard, Muslims should strive for the common good and uphold both Muslims' and non-Muslims' welfare, not only to comply with societal and political expectations in a multicultural state but also to remain faithful to the fundamental teachings of Islam.

Scholars should work on elaborating a genuine Islamic model of social work to orientate and frame the practice in the field. This purpose requires a renewed and profound Islamic education, not only to make Muslims aware of their mission but also to bring the universal values of Islam to a wider audience.

Building bridges between communities

One of the major ongoing issues affecting Western European nations lies in the lack of social cohesion between their citizens belonging to various sociocultural and ethnic groups, which occasionally leads to conflicts, violence, and riots. Recently, France witnessed riots and lootings following the killing of a teenager from a North African background by a policeman in a suburb of Paris. The outcome of these few days of incidents was the death of several individuals, numerous injuries to rioters and police, and material damage estimated at over one billion euros. Last year, several World Cup matches were also followed by tensions fueled by ethnic discourses of hatred from both native Europeans and French citizens from North African backgrounds. While some accuse the state of pregnant racism inherited from colonial times, others blame the young rioters and point out the lack of authority and the absence of a moral framework. In any case, most agree that the harmony of society is undermined not only by major social inequalities but also by divisions between different groups of citizens based on both social class and ethnicity. Muslims are overrepresented in marginalized groups, and public opinion increasingly considers them as problematic people. In this tense climate, Islamic organizations involved in social work play an important role at two levels: on the one hand, they try to prevent young people in deprived neighborhoods, including a majority of Muslims, from taking part in crime, riots, drug dealing, and other forms of violence; on the other hand, they show the broader society that Muslims also bring added value through their welfare engagement and charity projects. They demonstrate their concern for their country like any other citizens. However, their added-value and contribution are still denied by several individuals, analysts, and politicians who continue to consider these faith-based organizations as supports for a so-called agenda of Islamization and conquest of the West, although data and analysis on Islamic social work clearly rejected this hypothesis.

Conclusion

Over the last years, Muslims have increased their faith-based civic engagement in Muslim-minority communities, particularly in Western Europe and North America. In the region of Paris (France), Muslim associations have proliferated over the last 15 years, whereas they were practically non-existent before 2008. Through their contribution in social work as well as in other fields, many Islamic organizations add value to society and prove that Muslims can also be contributive citizens, even in countries where they still suffer from a negative image or marginalization.

Nevertheless, beyond positive examples and success stories, we can still identify shortcomings and challenges that should be seriously addressed to improve further welfare contribution of Islamic organizations.

On the one hand, we find grassroots projects addressing poverty, exclusion, or other social problems in the name of Islam, which have a direct impact on society and people's lives. On the other hand, scholars reflect on Islam and social work, identifying principles, norms, and guidelines of the Islamic Revelation that should be applied in the field. But an important gap still exists between both these levels, as a lack of communication and absence of cooperation generally disconnect scholarship from activism. There is, therefore, a crucial need to bridge the gap between theory and practice. For doing so, we trust that genuine scholarship could and should lead the way of Muslim organizations engaged in the field, for the benefit of all. If action is the key, knowledge is needed to orientate the efforts in the correct direction.

Therefore, the current need is to develop scholarship on Islamic philanthropy and social work, train activists, and spread awareness of this engagement. Enhancing advocacy is also a crucial step to communicate with the broader society and highlight the positive contributions of Muslims in societies in which they are a minority, still often suspected or marginalized. Furthermore, cooperation with other actors, such as Christian FBOs, should be encouraged and developed. By enhancing their contribution to the common good, Muslims could eventually demonstrate their full integration into society and their presence as an asset to the national community.

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About RPCS

The Research Programme in the Study of Muslim Communities of Success (RPCS) is developed as part of Muis' efforts in advancing religious thought leadership for the future. The programme seeks to develop contextualised bodies of knowledge on socio-religious issues that are typical for Muslim communities living in secular states and advanced economies. The RPCS focus will be on developing new understanding, interpretations and application of Islamic principles, values and traditions to contemporary issues and challenges.

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