

5 Islamic Social Services in Switzerland: Crossing Religious Boundaries to Benefit Society as a Whole

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5.1 Introduction

In Switzerland, as in other European countries, grassroots Islamic associations have developed initiatives to address the needs of the broader population, as well as those of Muslim communities. This chapter is based on a case study of a small number of Islamic organisations in Switzerland that tackle social exclusion and religious radicalisation through faith-based projects. It outlines the projects' specificities by exploring the role of Islamic references in social work practices – and thus aims to initiate reflection on the inclusion of such projects within mainstream society, observing relationships between Islamic associations, the state, and civil society.

For decades, following their settlement in non-Muslim societies, Muslims in western Europe and north America focused on organising worship and education to meet their basic religious needs (Cantori 2021; Brodard 2022).¹²⁹ With the exception of the United States, where Islamic presence was strongly influenced by those Afro-Americans who converted to Islam, Muslim communities in the West did not generally develop religious-based social projects until the late 1990s and the beginning of the twenty-first century.¹³⁰ Since then, a new range of Islamic-based social welfare services and initiatives has emerged in various European countries, although most

129 French academic literature addressed the different steps of Muslims' settlement in France since the second part of the twentieth century, see Césari 1998.

130 In his autobiography, Malcolm X showed the importance that the Nation of Islam gave to social work and community empowerment. The New Yorker Imam Siraj Wahhaj testified to having been involved in a war on drugs in Brooklyn with his fellow Muslims in the 1980s. The local Muslim community tackled drug trafficking issues in the neighbourhood. These brief examples highlight an early concern of Afro-American Muslims to address social issues in their local environment (see also: Brodard 2014).

focus on Muslims through a community empowerment consideration. More recently, a novel kind of social engagement has been devised by Muslims and Islamic organisations that aims to reach the broader society beyond the boundaries of Muslim communities.¹³¹

5.2 From Community Development to Local Social Work Practice

Islamic social engagement has often been conceived of and studied in a community empowerment context – a practice conceptualised as “Islamic social work” by Rosalind Warden in her PhD research on an Islamic organisation providing social welfare services in Wales in the United Kingdom (Warden 2013). In this framework, Islamic organisations and mosques help their fellow coreligionists by facilitating access to education, housing, work, and social welfare. This approach remains predominant in a number of European countries where the main Islamic social engagement has prioritised Muslim communities. But more recently, a new way to involve in Islamic social work has emerged in several countries, including Switzerland, where Muslims implement activities and projects that aim to reach needy people regardless of their religious belonging or convictions. Engagement is hence designed at the local social scale, beyond the “boundaries” of the Muslim communities themselves. Welfare services and projects whose beneficiaries include both Muslim and non-Muslim residents aim to tackle various social issues such as poverty, homelessness, or drug addiction, and to foster integration and citizenship amongst Muslims and minorities. The key actors thus show concern for wider society and the needs of the local population; their involvement in the social field therefore seems to indicate a step towards the public sphere, alongside responsiveness to the current societal challenges.

However, the social welfare services implemented by Muslims vary strongly according to different organisations and project managers who devise services differently due to different purposes, objectives, and religious understandings. Therefore, several factors, including the political context surrounding social challenges and ideological trends within Muslim communities, shape a range of viewpoints on Islam and aid. It is useful to notice that the social engagement of Muslims in Switzerland, as well as in other countries, remains overall an individual practice motivated by faith. Most charity and assistance are provided by Muslims individually, often outside of any forms

131 The denomination “Muslim communities” is more often used in plural in this chapter, since it refers to various Muslim organisations and populations whose diversity prevents us from identifying them as a sole and unified community.

of association or collective organisation. Despite the link between both individual and collective faith-based practices, the Islamic welfare activities of individual actors, a topic explored in a PhD research study (Martens 2013) and an article by the same researcher (Martens 2014), will not be addressed here. Rather, this chapter focuses on Islamic organisations and collective projects through observing three main on-site case studies of associations that provide faith-based social services in Switzerland. After a brief presentation of the associations' profiles and ongoing projects, I highlight a few points to discuss the challenges faced by Islamic social work in non-Muslim countries.

5.3 A Problem of Terminology

Current studies on Islam and Muslims often encounter problems in the use of concepts and terminology. For a long time, Islam was discussed from a Eurocentric perspective using a common series of concepts, often derived from Christianity, to describe Islamic phenomena. This explains the difficulty in identifying an accurate terminology to define Islamic practices and concepts for categorising data accurately, without overlapping with Eurocentric and Christian denominations.¹³² For instance, terms like *Khidmah*, *Zakat*, or *Sadaqah* are difficult to translate.¹³³ In a similar vein, the concepts of *social work* and *humanitarian work* are difficult to situate within Islamic tradition and history, since they refer to particular social and historical contexts even if they have been used in different Muslim societies over the last few decades.¹³⁴

Additionally, there is no consensus on the definitions of the concept of *Islam* itself, although commonly used in public discourse and academic writing. A Muslim theologian perspective would approach the definition of Islam through the lenses of orthodoxy and orthopraxy, implying a dimension of power, legitimacy, and authority within the religious tradition. Conversely, some anthropologists would conceptualise Islam only through its concrete

132 At a theological level, it is well documented that from its early stages Islam developed a multitude of norms and recommendations to help the poor and tackle various social issues. Indeed, the outcomes of prophetic and Quranic recommendations about concrete involvement in the field could today be termed Islamic social work or Islamic humanitarian aid. For example, one article notes the influence of Islamic texts on humanitarian aid (Krafess 2005), a point moving beyond the social sciences to address more theological considerations beyond the scope of this chapter.

133 These terms refer to key concepts in the traditional Islamic literature. *Zakat* can be defined as compulsory alms while *Sadaqah* describes a wider practice which includes both donation and positive behaviour. *Khidmah* is normally defined as a “service” given to the creation (including humans) for the sake of God.

134 For example, the concept of Muslim NGOs has been borrowed from the Western “development system” denominations since the 1970s (Juul Petersen 2014).

manifestations within a society, ignoring the textual tradition and a theological perspective, thereby providing relativist conceptions of Islam depending solely on Muslims' practices. To overcome this dichotomy, the anthropologist Talal Asad proposes the term *discursive tradition* to qualify Islam (Asad 2009), which he suggests can encompass both the principle of unity of this religion and the diversity of its forms and interpretations (Meziane 2017).

In another context, the sociologist Nilüfer Göle addresses the difference between the “production of an ideological corpus” and the “production of a collective imaginary” within the Muslim community (Göle 2013, 171–173). This suggests that the “Islamic habitus” or identity trends among Muslims should not solely be investigated within the scholarly speech of religious “authorities”. Therefore, following the contributions of both Talal Asad (2009) and Nilüfer Göle (2013), this chapter assumes there may be some variation between the “Islamic practices” of the associations and the “Islamic theological discourses” to which they may refer, considering that both may influence the other. It thus focuses on the concrete practices of the faith-based organisations using an empirical approach, without addressing theological analyses.

Moreover, traditional Islamic theology¹³⁵ does not consider the common division between the sacred and the profane that is derived from secularism. In their article *Muslim Perspectives on Welfare*, Harlley Dean and Zafar Khan discuss the specificities of Islam, contending that “it eschews the dualism of the Western Enlightenment and thereby the inherently ambiguous distinctions between body and soul; between the secular and the religious; between state and church; between politics and morality; between public obligation and private belief” (Dean and Khan 1995, 194). For some Muslim believers, Islam is understood as a “complete way of life” and not as a religion that stays confined to a limited area (Barise 2005, 114). From this perspective, every field can be considered as religious – and Islam applies to any sphere of life, depending on the actor's intention.

However, Islamic presence in both western European countries and also in Muslim countries has led to sociological studies of Muslim communities and their practices that use common and local sociological terminology

135 Here, “traditional Islamic theology” refers to the mainstream “orthodox” theology that has been dominant within Muslim societies for the last century, mostly represented by the four main schools of Islamic jurisprudence (*Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i and Hanbali*). Since the eighteenth century, new theologies often qualified as reformist have emerged. However, most of these are in line with the “traditional” viewpoint of non-distinction between sacred and profane practices. For instance, we could emphasise the point that smiling when meeting someone can be considered as a *Sadaqah* and therefore as an act of worship according to both the traditional and reformist schools of thought.

that is consequently also adopted by the Muslim actors themselves. Thus, the engagement of Muslims in the name of their religion in the social field has been conceptualised as *Islamic social work* (Warden 2013), *Muslim charity* (Martens 2014) or the *Muslim charity sector* (Barylo 2016), *faith-based welfare services* provided by Islamic organisations or *Islamic social services* (Banfi 2013). All these terms combine a type of investment, which could be assumed to be social welfare services, and a qualification related to belonging to Islam, whether or not this applies to the organisations or their leaders. The combination of both features is used to define the personal or collective engagement of people who identify as Muslim in the field of welfare or social work, for either Muslim or non-Muslim beneficiaries. In some cases, the adjective *Islamic* underlines an ambiguity in definition: does the term refer to Islam as a core of values and norms that are supposed to define social engagement, or does it simply denote the religious identity of the organisation and its leaders? As introduced above, this point addresses not only the question of the role of Islam and its norms in the social engagement of Muslim associations, but also the meaning of the definition of *Islamic* and deeper reflection on the interaction between scholarly theological discourses and the concrete religious practices of Muslims.

5.4 Methodology

A large range of Islamic organisations implements social welfare services in distinctive ways according to the contexts and cultures of aid or the ideologies within the organisations. Most associations involved in the field have been set up in western Europe and north America within the last two decades, they have constantly developed new strategies and visions. Hence, welfare social services provided by faith-based organisations within an Islamic framework evolve in *ongoing* processes both with regard to theory development and practice. Said processes remain unchartered and call for further research. These points justify using case studies as a methodical approach to *Islamic social work*. This methodological choice furthers an inductive approach that aims to study the field without restrictive theoretical frameworks (Hamel 1993). It intends to explore the phenomenon of grassroots Islamic social work through a broad collection of empirical data within various projects and organisations as a first stage, and as a second stage conducts a critical analysis of these social work services, including a discussion on wider issues. This latter stage implies expanding the analysis beyond individual cases towards a broader conceptualisation, as the case study approach recommends (Yin 2014).

For this study, field research was conducted within different organisations using a qualitative method borrowed from the ethnographic field. The research first included a *long-term participant observation* in Islamic communities and mosques at the grassroots level in order to apprehend the main ideological and theological frameworks, and to accumulate some knowledge of Islamic organisations and community social engagement. Conducted in France and Switzerland, the research study began with an ethnographic immersion that allowed us to identify the Muslim organisations involved in the charity field. This improved the understanding the internal issues and challenges related to social work and social engagement within these organisations and the broader Muslim communities.

The Islamic projects identified take a variety of forms and aim to tackle a range of social issues.¹³⁶ Focusing on issues related to the wider society beyond community borders, the associations and projects studied here sought to address the interconnected problems of social exclusion and identity-based conflicts. The selection was done based on two criteria crucial to the research question. The first identified faith-based organisations led by Muslims who wanted to tackle social exclusion, poverty and identity-based issues related to racism, violence, and religious extremism. A second criterion required projects to attempt to reach the broader society beyond Muslim communities. Both criteria drastically restrict the field of investigation in Switzerland: only three relevant cases were identified. Therefore, a previous two-year empirical research on Islamic social work in Paris, France (Brodard 2011), was included to broaden the reflection and offer a comparative angle, as well as some shorter and more informal research studies previously conducted in the United States of America (2009–2011) and the United Kingdom (2016–2017).

In Switzerland, the empirical research conducted between 2016 and 2018 included a case study and utilised ethnographical methods, such as participant observation and in-depth interviews. Data collection was often possible only through informal and non-recorded interviews, while the conventional interviews often led to “official” discourses that censored more controversial elements (Brodard 2020). Most interviews were held with the organisations’ leaders and volunteers (Brodard 2021). It is important to note that access to Islamic organisations at the specific time required establishing

136 The social issues targeted by the Islamic organisations studied here include poverty, youth unemployment, inclusion of migrants and refugees, drug addiction, violence and petty crime, homelessness and exclusion. The organisations normally aimed to meet the needs of the population at the local level, which led them to design their projects according to the needs and problems they observed in their own environment.

close contact with leaders. The three main cases studied are introduced in the following. Theoretical issues are discussed thereafter.

5.5 Faith-Based Social Welfare Services in Switzerland: Insights into Three Islamic Associations

Although both researchers and members of the Muslim organisations asserted that social welfare services were widespread in Islamic associations and mosques in Switzerland, it was nevertheless difficult to identify organisations that extend their involvement beyond the Muslim communities.¹³⁷ The leader of the Islamic Social Welfare Service / Service d'Aide Sociale Islamique (SASI) thus maintained that it is only his organisation that provides real social welfare to the wider society, whereas, according to him, the (few) other Islamic projects in Switzerland exclusively target Muslims. While SASI in Geneva was certainly the first and most active Islamic organisation in social work in the country over recent years, two other cities, Lausanne and Biel, also host Islamic organisations that have developed faith-based projects to tackle social issues beyond the boundaries of their faith such as exclusion, unemployment, and identity-based conflicts.

5.5.1 Tackling Social Exclusion

The Islamic Social Welfare Service / Service d'Aide Sociale Islamique (SASI) has delivered social welfare services for about ten years in Geneva. This section outlines the specificities of the organisation and charts its evolution through time, from when the mosque developed a community-orientated social welfare sector up until 2018 when SASI struggled to be independent and ensure impartiality in its social services.

In 2009, a mosque launched a social service to tackle poverty, exclusion, and inequality. Later, this service gained independence in its management through support from the municipality; it thus became SASI. Since its beginning, it has been managed by a Muslim man who regularly attended the mosque's activities and thought there was a pressing need for social welfare involvement within the Muslim community and beyond. Over the years, SASI implemented various projects successfully. The activities devised by SASI can be analysed from a common perspective, since they focus on poverty and

137 This shared mistaken belief was detected in my exploratory researches and informal interviews, during which academic staff and community members insisted on claiming that several Islamic-based social welfare projects existed in various parts of Switzerland, and that they addressed the wider society and not only the Muslim communities. The reasons of such a belief will be addressed later in this chapter.

exclusion. I focus this overview on the social round-ups, before turning to points related to the general focus of this chapter.

At the beginning of his social involvement with the mosque, the main leader of the emerging association developed social round-ups and food distributions in the streets of various neighbourhoods. First, with his family, he walked around different central areas to meet homeless people and provided them with food and clothes. He explained this initiative saying that he sought to put his faith into practice, which implied contributing to meeting the needs of the homeless people he saw daily in the city. Later on, he found volunteers, mainly young Muslims, who accompanied him once or twice a week on these food distributions. Over the years, these social round-ups became regular.

The food distributions that took place twice a week in the evenings were frequently observed for this research.¹³⁸ Volunteers gathered at the main station and walked or drove to different parts of the city to meet homeless people and provided them with food, hot beverages, and other items. They went further in establishing contact with marginalised people who suffered from various difficulties such as poverty, loneliness, addictions, mental and psychological problems, illnesses and depression. The volunteers brought warmth and social presence which, in some cases, were as important as the material contribution.¹³⁹ The regularity of the social round-ups contributed to creating relationships between volunteers and homeless people, leading to a more effective social support process whereby several volunteers could play a crucial role in crisis prevention and resolution.

For instance, the patrol once met a homeless migrant who screamed and threatened to commit terrorist attacks. He was drunk and irritated, his words visibly uttered in despair. Instead of considering him a radicalised zealot, a group of volunteers decided to listen to him with empathy until the situation calmed down. The man could then put his suffering into words and shared his feelings in confidence and trust.¹⁴⁰ The example illustrates the role that volunteers can play in crisis management and conflict prevention, which goes beyond offering material aid. Due to its visibility in the streets,

138 These participant observations took place between 2015 and 2018, more regularly in 2017 and 2018.

139 The president of the association mentioned on several occasions that the best contribution and added value of those social round-ups was human contact rather than food provision. However, some volunteers, much younger than him, seemed to disagree by focusing more on the material side and neglecting contact and communication with the recipients.

140 This event was explained to me during a field observation by a leader and a volunteer of SASI in March 2017. According to the leader and the volunteer, the event happened in 2015, however, they could not remember the exact period.

this project's food distribution to the homeless has been among the most obvious and visible expression of the association's involvement within society over recent years.

In 2016, SASI's leader delegated the responsibility and management of the project to younger volunteers. A SASI youth team was launched and Muslim students and young people, most aged between 20- and 30-years-old, managed the activity twice a week. During the same period, SASI organised weekly welfare social services on its premises, inviting needy people to attend different types of activity. Most took place inside the mosque, situated in a central neighbourhood of the city. More rarely, activities were organised in a public hall lent by the local authorities. Every Monday afternoon, needy people came to the mosque to collect food and items. They previously had to be registered and were listed based on their social situation. Many were asylum seekers from countries such as Afghanistan, Iran, or Syria, while others came from Latin America or even Switzerland.

During the autumn of 2016, a French course was improvised after the food distribution in the same premises. Volunteer teachers gave a basic French lesson to participants with the help of a translator. However, due to the lack of volunteer teachers and organisational issues, the course was temporarily interrupted within the same year. During the same period, weekly culinary workshops were held, which were available to the same public. Their objective was for people to learn to cook healthy and cheap meals, taking into consideration factors of both economy and health. The activity also aimed to bring people together by fostering cooperation and mutual aid between different communities. Since most participants were migrant women, the workshops were also considered as a means of social integration by helping vulnerable people to acquire useful skills and self-confidence, as well as participating in social activities.

All these projects were open to people regardless of their gender, religion, or country of origin. However, the majority of the beneficiaries came from Muslim countries such as Afghanistan, Syria, or Iran. The leader of SASI explained this by the migration path of the asylum seekers and of the residents of the public houses. He played a crucial role through his intense personal involvement in the struggle against social issues. SASI's leader repeatedly claimed that the social services aim to meet the needs of everyone, regardless of their origin, religion, ethnicity, or gender.¹⁴¹ SASI also tried to design future projects to help reduce poverty and social exclusion at a local level. Among

141 The SASI leader regularly repeated this statement during all the periods of the field research from 2015 to 2018. His emphasis on impartiality in social welfare services could be driven by a perceived suspicion towards Islamic organisations.

ongoing projects, a support group for vulnerable people regulated by a social worker was considered but not implemented due to lack of human resources.

5.5.2 A Focus on Youth and Integration

In 2017, the Vaud Union of Muslim Associations / Union Vaudoise des Associations Musulmanes (UVAM), an umbrella organisation gathering most of the mosques and Islamic associations together in the French-speaking canton of Vaud, highlighted its social contribution and welfare services during its annual meeting. Several speakers presented an array of social services and initiatives implemented by the umbrella organisation or its affiliate mosques and associations in various locations. The presentations emphasised the positive outcome of those social projects and the added value of the local Muslim community for the common good and public interest. Between 2016 and 2018, UVAM organised several meetings and public events. Social projects and welfare services were shown to the public, who were invited to witness the recent development of various social initiatives at a local level. These were not just designed to target the Muslim community but also broader society without religious or cultural discrimination. Such events indicate that the Muslim community was particularly active in the field of social work and regularly involved in welfare projects. Meanwhile, the umbrella organisation had made efforts to obtain public and political recognition for the Muslim community in the canton.

Our data analysis shows that most social projects highlighted at the open days were one-off or short-term activities; they thus took place for specific periods but were not extended over time. Therefore, public events that highlight positive Muslim contributions in various fields might be understood by some as a wider communication strategy to present a positive image of the Muslim community in the quest for both public and political recognition in the region. Nonetheless, the umbrella organisation and its main mosque have implemented valuable social services that benefitted both Muslim and non-Muslim recipients, as will be elaborated in the following. Between 2016 and 2017, several projects were set up, including a sociocultural centre that intended to host youth on Friday and Saturday evenings. The sociocultural centre was created by middle-aged migrant Muslims who regretted that youth had no other option for entertainment other than going out to pubs or being on the streets with activities such as drug-taking or drinking alcohol. Therefore, they devised an alternative space for leisure activities so young people could go out in a safe and positive alcohol-free environment. At the same time, volunteers tried to build trust with youth through dialogue, hoping to

initiate discussions on issues concerning them.^{142 143} However, most young people at the centre came to enjoy the leisure activities, therefore, it was often difficult for volunteers to engage them in serious conversation. Open to every young person under 20-years-old regardless of gender, culture, and religion, the centre attracted a majority of Muslims. However, the presence of youngsters from other religious was quite usual.

Other social projects were developed in the region. Partially funded by public agencies, the umbrella organisation devised a coaching and counselling project to help youth access the labour market. It had a positive outcome, although it was affected by a significant turnover on management level. After two years of operation, the people in charge aborted the project without providing any clear reason.¹⁴⁴ Another project aimed to tackle youth radicalisation and social issues by providing one-to-one counselling. The person in charge left the project after about one year, due to overwork and the failure to gain support from the local authorities despite high expectations. After he went, the project collapsed. About two years later, the same person set up a team of skilled and trained Muslim social workers in order to design a new association. His aim was to create an Islamic social service that would address the needs of Muslims as well as non-Muslims.

The imam of the Muslim Cultural Complex of Lausanne / Complexe Culturel Musulman de Lausanne (CCML), one of the main mosques of the region, also played a key role in promoting welfare activities, social work, and engagement for the common good. Indeed, he expressed theological viewpoints that emphasise the nexus between faith and social welfare services. It is therefore interesting to examine his profile. Self-taught, he studied Islam for years and is particularly interested in Sufism (*Tasawwuf*), the spiritual dimension of Islam. Deeply rooted in the Sunni Islamic tradition, he however does not belong to a specific theological movement or ideological organisation. This imam developed and taught his own understanding; some of his viewpoints differed from other Islamic organisations. In that sense, his teaching cannot

142 Regularly UVAM invite the public to visit their affiliated associations in order to see activities that happen there. See many organisational documents of UVAM cited in chapter 6.

143 Some of the sociocultural centre's managers expressed their expectation of undertaking substantial discussions with the youth regarding their difficulties, identity, positioning towards religion and society and other issues and challenges. This concern to foster on-depth discussion and counselling was even depicted as the real purpose of the centre by some of them.

144 According to a board member of the umbrella organisation, the project was not renewed due to a lack of time and human resources, despite of the success of its implementation and positive impact for two years (statements collected in an interview in February, 2018).

be affiliated to specific transnational theological movements. Teaching the rationalist Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali's¹⁴⁵ books in the mosque, he often called the audience for debates and fostered the implementation of Islamic values in daily life. Therefore, he frequently addressed concrete social issues in his speeches, highlighting solutions from the Islamic tradition and encouraging his audience to put them into practice.

In the mosque, he repeatedly claimed that helping others and providing social welfare should be considered as *worship* in the same way as ritual prayers. The imam delivered speeches that urged worshippers to enhance their involvement in society for the common good, as well as develop their own social projects to tackle various global and local issues¹⁴⁶ and to meet the social needs of the local community. This attitude, specifically observed in this mosque, reveals a deeper relationship between spirituality and social work from an Islamic perspective. In that *Weltanschauung* (a whole world-view), the boundary between religious involvement and social engagement must be reconsidered, since both are implemented “for the sake of God” and are therefore considered as spiritual and religious work.

As highlighted above, social projects implemented by Islamic organisations in Switzerland, as well as in other countries, often try to address concrete issues at a local level. Since these projects are developed to meet gaps in the field, or locations where social problems are often identified out of clear religious concerns, they seem akin to secular associations without displaying any obvious faith-based trends. However, this point is mitigated by the fact that many of the Muslim actors consider their involvement within the social field as a spiritual act of worship. Some Islamic organisations also use their religious identity and community networks to address more specific challenges related to Islam and Muslims. The third case study thus shows another way of thinking and designing a faith-based social project from within the Muslim community. It was developed in the canton of Bern in the recent sociopolitical context influenced by Islamophobia and the fear of religious extremism.

145 He was a Muslim scholar, law specialist and rationalist born in Tabaran (1056/1111).

146 The imam addressed the need to tackle social problems that he had personally heard about or observed himself in the region, such as suicide, drug addiction, homelessness, and domestic violence. Moreover, he addressed the current ecological issue at the global scale. Systematically, he proposed solutions to tackle those different issues in line with Islamic teachings and ethics.

5.5.3 An Islamic Contribution Addressing “Radicalisation”

Tasamouh was launched in 2016 in Biel as a community project to respond to “radicalisation” and identity-based conflicts that involve Muslims as either offenders or victims. The project was devised by a practising Muslim woman to prevent religious extremism and address social issues affecting the youth in the region, as well as to counter Islamophobia by enhancing Muslim participation in the public sphere. Tasamouh was not presented as an Islamic project, it insisted on the religious diversity of its core members. Nevertheless, it can be affiliated with an Islamic engagement insofar as its two main leaders are Muslims who claim to work in the name of their faith. In contrast to the SASI and some of the Islamic social projects addressed in the second case study, Tasamouh does not provide material items but offered services based on counselling, mediation, and prevention. Its engagement focussed on two distinct fields. First, it worked concretely with the youth and their families through counselling and mediation; second, it implemented activities in the public sphere that communicated a more positive picture of Islam and Muslims to the broader society.¹⁴⁷

The first area of involvement is particularly interesting here as it represents an innovative community approach developed to address a local issue related to radicalisation that had become a wider challenge, highlighted in the news and by political discourses. The project intended to train counsellors and mediators to address the risk of radicalisation at the local level. In 2017, about ten people were trained to become cultural mediators. The participants included men and women, Muslims, Christians, and atheists from different cultural backgrounds. The points of view on Islam differed considerably amongst the Muslim participants. For instance, some were practising Muslims while others did not follow any religious worship. All shared common values, such as respect, integrity, openness to cultural diversity, and expressed the same commitment to tackle social issues and be a positive value for society. However, only two people, who were also involved at the head and management of the project, were really active in the field after the training. For various reasons, other members were not able to take part in concrete social services such as counselling or meetings with the beneficiaries. In her concrete work, the founder of Tasamouh revealed that she did not encoun-

¹⁴⁷ For instance, a public *Iftar* (collective meal which daily breaks the fasting’s period of Ramadan) was organised in the city center of Biel. More than 1000 people attended this event, including politicians and local authority representatives. Tasamouh organised visits of mosques for schools and public events for refugees at different times.

ter cases of “real radicalisation”.¹⁴⁸ Instead, she worked with young people who had to deal with social problems such as addiction, depression, family conflicts, violence, or petty crime. She noticed that in another context, the behaviours of said youth would have been interpreted as mainstream social issues and not as signs of religious radicalisation. However, schools and statutory social services refer to youth as people who might become radicalised, merely because they had a Muslim background and occasionally used Islamic references in their speech, most likely due to identity trend or provocation. Mentioning only a few related cases, Tasamouh’s leader explained it is a common trend among young “Muslims”¹⁴⁹ concerned by social and familial issues to express themselves using Arabic words and religious references in a provocative manner. For instance, this behaviour can include anti-Jewish statements and threats of violence.¹⁵⁰

During team meetings and informal interviews, the founder of Tasamouh regretted the lack of financial and human resources.¹⁵¹ Several times she expressed hope that the association would be more active and effective, whilst deploring the lack of support from local authorities. She also thought that it was the authorities’ lack of confidence and trust that had caused the absence of state funding and support. This is a point relevant on a larger scale and must be studied in depth. In the city, radicalisation and religious extremism among young Muslims was highlighted in 2016 and 2017. Although Tasamouh was presented as a community response to these issues, the local authorities subsequently created a parallel project. Three different Muslim Tasamouh members pointed out that the absence of partnership could be due to the reluctance of the authorities to work with an “Islamic” organisation, despite its efforts to present itself as non-religious. For some of them, the attitude of the local authorities might reveal fear and reluctance to integrate Muslim actors into public policy.

Using the same logic, based on his own experience, a member of Tasamouh observed that statutory social agencies were in some cases reluctant

148 In that specific context, “radicalisation” was mainly understood by the organisation’s members as a process or behaviour which may potentially lead to terrorist attacks or departures to conflict zones in the name of Islam. This specific understanding of “radicalisation” also applies to ideological supports to terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS, even without deeds.

149 The term “Muslims” is put here in quotes as it does not refer to the religious belongings of the youth but to the way they are perceived, qualified, and labelled by some of the actors.

150 Information collected during two interviews (in November 2017 and March 2018 on Tasamouh premises) with the founder of the association.

151 Information recorded during a team meeting (February 2018) and other informal interviews conducted between January and March 2018.

to include their Muslim employees in addressing issues related to Islam and Muslims, even when social workers expressed a desire to use their cultural skills or religious knowledge to contribute.¹⁵² To an extent, the Tasamouh member supported the assumption that some authorities may be circumspect about working with Muslim experts because of their “suspicious” religious identity, and especially within fields where precisely Islam is considered a problem. In addition, participant observation and informal interviews with several officials supported this assumption, indicating that some statutory agencies’ employees expressed concerns about the lack of neutrality and impartiality of Muslims involved in social work.¹⁵³ Therefore, this point deserves to be explored further since it may reveal a contradiction within statutory social work in terms of discrimination and dealing with minority groups. On another note, in an article based on an empirical research study addressing cultural tensions in social work practice, Miu Chung Yan highlights both the positive and negative aspects of a shared cultural background between social workers and their clients, particularly stating that “shared culture and experiences are a unique set of resources through which workers can understand and help their clients better” (Yan 2008, 324). Whereas it does not seem considered as relevant in the statutory social work agencies, this point is in line with Tasamouh’s vision and strategy promoting an “intra-cultural” approach in social work.

Indeed, Tasamouh managers argue that common religious and cultural backgrounds between counsellors and the beneficiaries of social services constitute an important asset, especially considering Muslim youngsters and families whose lack of trust towards the authorities makes the intervention of statutory agencies difficult. Borrowing the concept of the intra-ethnic approach outlined by Emmanuel Jovelin (2002), Tasamouh qualifies their approach as “intra-cultural”, emphasising the added value of its involvement produced by a common cultural and religious background between mediators and recipients. Whereas some local authorities may consider such proximity a risk, Tasamouh promotes this approach by highlighting its positive outcomes.

In other Muslim contexts, the idea of encouraging an intra-cultural approach has already been widespread for several years, like in France. Dou-nia Bouzar (2001) addressed this trend nearly twenty years ago; she assumed that Muslim religious actors often took advantage of their stronger credibility

152 This point, which had seemingly not been fully explored in research studies, was highlighted during some of the interviews with Muslim social workers.

153 Interviews and participant observation revealed that within some statutory agencies, some employees and managers expressed concerns over the Muslim identity of some social workers. According to them, it bears the risk of proselytism and discrimination in their work with the recipients.

with young Muslims living in popular neighbourhoods as compared to statutory social work agencies. About ten years later, a part of my own research examines the shared cultural background between grassroots Islamic organisations and the beneficiaries of their social services in the Paris area, noting this intra-cultural approach positive impact on the acceptance and successful integration of these “social workers” in deprived urban areas (Brodard 2011).

Although Tasamouh claimed to focus on social work with youth, various meetings with the main actors showed that they also aimed to address issues at a political level.¹⁵⁴ On a number of different occasions, the leaders insisted on the failure of the statutory agencies to tackle social issues related to young people. Moreover, some members criticised the positioning of the local authorities: they insisted that they did not support them financially despite their positive work, which made it difficult for the association to continue its projects. It then appeared to some members that the government was not fulfilling its responsibilities in terms of social services. At the same time, it was emphasized that the local authorities did not care about Muslims’ needs and that Islamophobia often prevented Muslims from becoming reliable actors in society. On another occasion, some of the association’s members said that actually it was the duty of the government to develop further projects and services to meet the needs of the youth and to respond to the current “tragic” social situation of the town.¹⁵⁵ Such claims thus indicate that some of the volunteers considered social work as the responsibility of the government; this assumes they should not necessarily be involved in an assignment whose prerogative belongs to the authorities and statutory services. This positioning introduces a paradox inherent in the work of the members of an association whose main aim is to meet social needs. Moreover, Tasamouh managers pointed out the impossibility of volunteers sacrificing their time and energy without reward or recognition, while lamenting the inadequate response of local authorities. This point underlines a dependence on public policy as well as a particular way of designing the association’s strategy, which indicates that social work may be difficult to think about outside of political considerations. These characteristics represent a contrast with grassroots Islamic organisations in France and the United Kingdom.

154 As an example, among other things, Tasamouh participated in the organisation of a Muslim event, which gathered citizens, journalists, and politicians to discuss the conditions of citizenship and integration for Muslims in Switzerland.

155 On several occasions in 2017 and 2018, the two main actors of Tasamouh elaborated on the particular social issues of the city using a strong vocabulary to describe the situation. Such discourses were for instance observed during a political event held in Geneva in April 2018, where a member of the association informally gave some details related to the situation in his city to local journalists.

5.6 Specificities and Challenges of Islamic Social Work in Switzerland

Our data concern only three case studies in Switzerland. There is a small number of other Islamic associations and mosques that provide social welfare services in the country; however, they aim to meet the needs of Muslim communities and normally do not extend their contribution to the wider society. These local initiatives are often one-off social projects that mostly address issues related to education and sociocultural concerns.¹⁵⁶ Moreover, the projects are usually temporary. In this context, social work is only one small aspect of a broader religious involvement that emphasises worship and religious education. It is useful and relevant to extend the outlook of other European countries to identify similarities and distinctions in social engagement.

5.6.1 Insight into other Islamic Social Initiatives in Europe

In the United Kingdom and France, Islamic social work has developed over a longer time period and within other social and cultural contexts.¹⁵⁷ This short section is designed to point out some differences between these countries in order to underline the Swiss specificities.

First, the social projects of Islamic organisations in Switzerland often depend on non-community funding such as private donations or public subsidies, whereas their counterparts in France and the United Kingdom rely on financial resources mainly from within the Muslim communities themselves (Brodard 2011). During a political event, a leader of Tasamouh declared that the association would not accept funds from the Muslim community, more particularly from the mosques, explaining that such funding would place the association in a difficult position if the respective mosque were found guilty of something wrong. Similarly, the SASI leader has recently insisted on the necessity of mosques and Islamic organisations being fully independent to

156 Various mosques and Islamic organisations in Switzerland implemented one-off social projects. For instance, the organisation Ummah held a workshop on radicalisation for one day. It also organised a financial donation for refugees one time, as well as a blood donation drive in Switzerland at another occasion. Moreover, a mosque occasionally provided an asylum seekers' centre in Regensdorf with aid packages. Several mosques and Islamic centres extended academic support for children and teenagers. Occasional financial assistance to the needy was also provided within some mosques and Islamic centres in Switzerland.

157 The history of Islamic welfare and social services implemented by Muslims in the United Kingdom is documented in Rosalind Warden's dissertation (2013). For the French context, readers can refer to an empirical research study in Paris (Brodard 2011).

retain freedom in the design of the association's policy and projects. This Swiss specificity may also explain the considerable attention devoted to reporting to and communicating with the authorities and media, whereas grassroots Islamic associations in France prioritise communication within the Muslim community, usually avoiding the media and political spheres. The dependency on public funding can also explain the vulnerability of the Swiss projects, which often struggle to sustain their actions due to a lack of resources.

During my research studies, no consistent strategy for community social projects to be self-sustaining seemed to exist in Switzerland. Hence, the management of *Zakat* (Islamic compulsory alms) may be of particular importance in collecting donations from Muslims and using them in a more organised and collective way in the future, if we assume that Muslims in Switzerland may follow the same patterns as some of the British and French Muslim communities. In the United Kingdom, the National Zakat Foundation established the collection and distribution of *Zakat* exclusively at a national level. Such efforts were innovative and unique since until then *Zakat* had mostly been delivered outside of the country through personal relationships or Islamic NGOs. The National Zakat Foundation delivers *Zakat* to needy people facing poverty, as financial aid to heavily indebted people, to foster the rehabilitation of ex-convicts as well as to support students through scholarships – all exclusively in the United Kingdom. Between 2011 and 2018, more than nine million British pounds was distributed according to the website of the National Zakat Foundation (<https://nzf.org.uk>). Recently, the National Zakat Foundation considered financing social projects implemented by Islamic welfare organisations. The strategy announced was to empower the Muslim community in the United Kingdom to foster its independence. Similarly, in France, a *Zakat* project was set up a few years ago called Zakat France (<https://zakatfrance.fr>); Based in Lion, Zakat France was the first French organisation aiming at collecting and distributing alms at a local and national level.

Such *Zakat* initiatives could trigger a turning point in funding Islamic social projects in Switzerland. However, the mainstream theological viewpoint still identifies the potential beneficiaries of *Zakat* among Muslims only or those expressing the intention to convert to Islam.¹⁵⁸ This understanding could be an obstacle in the use of *Zakat* for social projects that address society

158 This is the current main theological viewpoint in Sunni Islam, shared by both the traditionalist movements (following one of the four major schools of thought) and the mainstream transnational movements such as the Wahhabiyya (often called Salafiyya) and the Muslim Brotherhood organisation.

as a whole beyond community boundaries, although some theological ideas claim that *Zakat* can also be delivered to non-Muslims without restriction.¹⁵⁹

An outlook on social projects held by Islamic organisations in various western European and North American countries emphasises the apparently similar ways of participating in society at grassroots level (Cantori 2021; Brodard 2022). Whereas mosques and Islamic associations continue to focus on the community and the specific needs of Muslims, it is increasingly common that Muslims organise collectively to address general social needs and tackle issues to benefit the broader society, in the name of their faith. Regardless of whether they are in Switzerland, France or the United Kingdom, Islamic organisations thus propose similar social programs related to local issues and needs. This common trend has motivated comparative studies between different countries, such as William Barylo's (2016) empirical research study of three European countries (the United Kingdom, France, and Poland). However, some differences between ways of thinking about and designing social projects according to the characteristics of both the Muslim communities and the sociopolitical systems can be highlighted. Some points on the specificities of the Swiss context are briefly presented below.

5.6.2 Acting Locally

The three organisations introduced above display a similar trend in the design of their social projects, they wanted to address local social issues and meet the needs of the surrounding communities. Whilst SASI focuses on its own city and ignores what is happening in other parts of Switzerland, Tasamouh builds its social engagement at a local level taking into consideration the specificities of the location. Consequently, these Islamic associations do not work together and do not create any network based on Islam or religious identity. Conversely, their networks are built on the proximity criterion, gathering associations from different religious and cultural backgrounds but working within the same geographical areas.

In other countries, such as the United Kingdom and France, it has been noticed that many different Islamic associations are likely to establish networks and partnerships regardless of distance (Barylo 2016). Networks are generally built on a sense of Islamic identity and the type of social service at play. For instance, an Islamic association in Bradford (United Kingdom)

159 In France, this position is held by the Moroccan group Al-Adl wa Al-Ihsan (locally known as PSM for Participation et Spiritualité Musulmanes) and by independent Muslim scholars or thinkers who address a new theological methodology differing from the traditional frameworks, such as Tarek Oubrou, Islam Ibn Ahmed, and Ousmane Timera.

that tackles homelessness built relationships with other Islamic organisations based in other cities further away such as Birmingham and London. In France, one can witness the same kind of partnerships, which take place due to criteria of faith and area of involvement rather than location. In Switzerland, Islamic organisations still seem to restrict their involvement to their local area, without thinking at a national or transnational level. The social projects were also first grounded in a mosque or an Islamic centre, which could create a stronger relationship with the local neighbourhood, as was the case for SASI. However, some organisations, such as Tasamouh, were created independently without any links to the mosques.

5.6.3 Partnerships and Funding

The field research first addressed the question of partnerships with civil society and local authorities. All the projects and associations concerned here worked in networks, at least partially, including religious or secular associations of the civil society as well as statutory agencies. As mentioned before, partnerships gather together organisations that share a common goal in terms of social work at the local level. The three different organisations studied also displayed a similar trend in funding policy, they mostly searched for public subvention and strive for political recognition. This point is certainly one main feature that distinguishes between the Swiss Islamic welfare associations and their homologues in other countries.¹⁶⁰

SASI has been searching for funding from both private and public sectors, avoiding Muslim community-based networks. It has tried to become financially sustainable without dependency on funds from the Muslim communities, even if this has not yet been achieved. According to its leader, showing evidence of impartiality in social work has been the main condition for obtaining public funding. In the canton of Vaud, the UVAM began to campaign to obtain state recognition of the Muslim community. In parallel, the managers of some community-based social projects expected public funding and support from local authorities, which did not transpire. According to some of the interviewees, this lack of funding triggered the failure of the social services, including a project aiming to prevent radicalisation and violence among the youth. One of the managers claimed that the absence

160 In an ethnographic research on Islamic social work in Paris and its suburbs, I noticed that in all cases studied, the Muslim associations were self-funded through private donations, mostly from Muslims. In those cases, public funding was generally not even considered as an option (Brodard 2011). In the United Kingdom, I observed the same trend in various charities, both in the London area and in west Yorkshire in 2016 and 2017.

of public recognition and political support was the main cause of the abandonment of projects, expressing disappointment that led to his decision to withdraw from social engagement within any Islamic organisation. For its part, Tasamouh has been working for about two years without any consistent public funding. Consequently, its managers deplored the lack of support of the authorities, announcing on some occasions that the project might have to cease due to lack of financial resources. From this perspective, the likelihood of success and sustainability seems to be closely dependent on partnerships, public funding, and political recognition.

Interestingly, the leadership of social projects did not consider financing from within the Muslim communities an option. Some leaders of the Muslim associations indicated publicly or privately their fear of being suspected or stigmatised if any of their donors were found to be involved in extremism or wrongdoings. This perception is not particularly linked to the Swiss context but to the broader Muslim communities, at least in western Europe and even in the United Kingdom, whose political system has for a long time been qualified by many as the “most open” for Muslims.¹⁶¹ The climate of suspicion and fear amongst Muslim leaders was recently highlighted by Samantha May (May 2017). Others emphasised that they want to remain independent in their work, considering that Islamic organisations or foreign countries may fund them if they abide by their rules. Finally, the *Zakat* and *Sadaqah* were never mentioned as a potential source of funding.

5.6.4 Communication and Public Recognition

The focus on communication is another particular feature of Islamic associations involved in social work in Switzerland, especially compared to other Islamic organisations from abroad whose involvements seem more results-oriented and less publicised. Indeed, empirical observation shows that communication to the media and events linked to political advertising or advocacy played a major role in two of the three cases studied here, whereas concrete social work remained at relatively low levels compared to the organisation of public events and participation in media and political activities. According to my observations, some people, including members of the Muslim communities and also academic staff, share the assumption that Islamic social welfare services exist in; they cited the names of various associations and argued that they provided sustainable social work.¹⁶² However,

161 This assumption is commonly shared by many practising Muslims met both in France and Switzerland.

162 This trend among academic staff and students was noticed during various courses, events, and informal talks in 2016 and 2017 in Switzerland.

field observations and interviews with members of the selected organisations suggested the opposite. Because some Islamic organisations advertised their contribution in this area, either through their websites or at events where different social projects and one-off social services were briefly featured, it thus seemed that they were providing sustainable welfare services to Muslim and non-Muslim citizens. However, a closer look revealed that in most cases, the social services highlighted were sporadic and highly dependent on external factors, such as uncertain financial and human resources. Additionally, some of the social projects presented publicly as success-stories were interrupted a few months after their initiation due to lack of funding or the removal of project managers.¹⁶³

Although this pattern did not apply to all associations, it highlighted a distinguishing feature in Switzerland, where many Islamic associations seem more involved in communication and public events than concrete social welfare services. This could be because some organisations prioritise other fields over social work. In one case, for the organisation the main challenge was the public and political recognition of the Muslim community. Within this context, social welfare services might have been used to show evidence of their positive contribution to the common good. In another case, highlighting the social projects seemed to have been partially considered as a strategy to negotiate public and political participation. Indeed, the latter association regularly asked to become a consultative partner with the authorities. Feeling left out of the political field and partially ignored by the state system, the association began to speak out against some of the local authorities, underlying their failure to tackle social issues and meet the social needs of inhabitants. This attitude, mostly observed in internal meetings, might also indicate actors' aspiration to advocacy and lobbying to act beyond social work at a more political level.

5.7 Conclusion

A serious study of Islamic social work in Switzerland cannot be conducted without a thorough understanding of Muslim communities: both aspects are related and should not be approached separately. Moreover, the Swiss case(s) should not be studied independently without a wider insight into other western European countries. In fact, although certain researchers and community actors may be reluctant to consider it, Islam in Switzerland is connected to Islam in the world, at least in its ideological and theological

163 This was the case of a project that was not renewed after two years of operation despite its positive outcomes.

forms. Indeed, the main religious currents that dominate the Islamic sphere in Switzerland today are transnational and grounded in other countries. Many ideas and concepts are also seen worldwide. For instance, the principles of *Zakat* transcend local contexts and the Muslim communities' understanding of charity from a religious perspective in Switzerland is also affected by a discourse shaped through scholars in other countries. Having said this, it is necessary to consider the local contexts and the sociopolitical specificities of the countries and regions that strongly influence how Muslims live their religion.

In Switzerland, although the limited case studies are not sufficient to propose a "Swiss" pattern, an array of trends demonstrate a contrast with some neighbouring countries. First, the social engagement of Islamic associations in Switzerland remains at an initial stage. The involvement of Muslims in the social field in the name of their religion began only recently and the few projects introduced above are in their initial stages. The cases studied here are grounded in three different cantons and therefore have to deal with various political and sociocultural frameworks, in which the place of religion and its links with the social and political sectors are viewed distinctively. This point underlines the difficulty of studying the theme of Islamic social work as a unique and unified phenomenon. Nevertheless, although they are settled within different social and political systems, Muslim organisations in Switzerland still display some common trends and characteristics.

The outcome of this study demonstrates the willingness and capacity of Islamic associations to address social problems beyond Muslim community boundaries, and to provide projects aiming to contribute to the common good. Various projects have been designed and implemented to address the needs of the local population, regardless of their religious affiliations. This new trend represents a shift, as previously Islamic social work was mainly approached through the Muslim community empowerment lenses. This recent expansion brings social engagement within Switzerland closer to what has been practiced in other western European countries, where Muslims have provided consistent social welfare services to the wider society for about a decade and have therefore made a positive contribution to society. In acting in this way, Muslims also work towards stronger integration, especially at the local scale.

Another point underlined by this study shows the dependence of the Islamic welfare organisations on public funding and state recognition. This indicates a certain fragility, alongside the incapacity of Muslims in Switzerland to self-fund their projects. In contrast Muslim organisations from other countries such as France, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America usually rely on their own resources (Cantori 2021; Brodard 2022). In these countries, Muslim communities have been settled for a long time and have

managed their religious, educative, and social projects quite independently, which could partially explain their relative self-sufficiency. Conversely, Islam in Switzerland is much more recent and seems to not have grounded itself yet on efficient and independent structures. Whereas the Islamic organisations are still mostly divided in terms of theological affiliations and nationalist belongings, the new associations involved in social work are more inclined to search for funding outside of the Muslim community and to turn to authorities to support their projects of general interest.

Finally, it appears that Muslim organisations involved in social work generally do not refer to clear religious guidelines to design their projects. In this regard, the link between Islamic norms and concrete projects is often unclear; the conceptions of Islam and social work are highly dependent on the organisations' leaders and project managers, without a shared community-based strategy or a common understanding being identified. Therefore, the social practices within Islamic organisations and their Islamic codes and values highly depends on the individuals who work and develop projects according to their own understanding of Islam. From this perspective, the Islamic identity of the leaders and volunteers plays a more important role than religious norms or theological considerations in the design and development of social work. Shared references to Islamic values and personal motivation based on faith and spirituality are therefore more important in these kinds of faith-based organisations than compliance to theological viewpoints. The concept of "Islamic habitus", outlined by Nilüfer Göle (2013), among others, could be particularly relevant to the study of these Muslim practices and identities. To explore this subject more deeply, a broader research study on the relationship between these faith-based organisations and Islamic theological discourses is currently being conducted (Brodard 2020) with the hope of proposing a new conceptualisation of Islamic social work.

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