

Innovative social work practices by Islamic grassroots organizations in Switzerland

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Abstract

In Switzerland, specific issues related to Muslims have recently emerged in public debates. In addition to the question of radicalization, Muslim migrant populations are affected by social problems such as crime, marginalization, and overrepresentation in prisons. This situation has drawn the state's attention to the need for implementing new responses to the challenges of religious extremism and social exclusion, particularly involving Muslims. While local authorities have organized trainings and projects to tackle these issues, Islamic grassroots associations have developed some initiatives to address the needs of the population, not only focusing on problems related to Islam and Muslims but also on Swiss society as a whole. Based on a case study of Islamic organizations providing social welfare services, this paper questions the inclusion of such faith-based projects within mainstream society and the area of social work, considering particularly the relation between Islamic organizations and the state.

Keywords

Charity; Grassroots Organizations; Islam; Muslims; Radicalization; Religion; Social Work; Welfare

Introduction

Following the settlement of migrants from a wide range of countries, most Islamic organizations in Europe and North America were founded with the aim of providing worship and Islamic education to meet the religious needs of Muslims, such as the organization of daily prayers and other regular rites.¹ Muslim communities² in the “West” did not generally develop faith-based social services till the late 1990s and the beginning of the twenty-first century. Over the past years, a new range of Islam-based social welfare services and initiatives have emerged in various European countries. Though most of them have been specifically focused on Muslims, recently a new kind of social engagement has been devised by Muslims and Islamic organizations with the aim of reaching the broader society beyond Muslim communities.

This study was inspired by empirical observations³ in the context of Western European countries and, more globally, in countries where Muslims constitute a minority. First, the observations showed the existence of social work practices within an Islamic framework: mosques and grassroots associations whose identity and references are built on Islam implementing social services addressing local issues such as social exclusion and identity-based conflicts. Similar services to those having been developed in the United States of America, the United Kingdom, and France over the last two decades have started being developed more recently in Switzerland.

The observations secondly revealed that some discourses using theological and normative Islamic references address social justice and propose solutions to tackle mainstream social issues usually targeted by social work. These discourses are being spread through mosques, conferences, videos, and articles. They may be contributing to the shaping of an Islamic theology of social work, something that has not been clearly defined as of yet.

Beyond both of these empirical observations, the link between faith-based practices of social work and theological normative discourses is unclear and unexplored. Moreover, the socio-political environment in which Islamic social work takes place has a strong influence on the possibilities of partnerships between Islamic social work organizations and both public and private agencies. In Switzerland, Islamic organizations involved in social work have developed some partnerships with statutory agencies and they have also established contact with local authorities. Some of these Islamic organizations providing a new kind of community-based social work are recognized by the state and

¹ In the French context, Jocelyne Césari’s book “Musulmans et Républicains, les Jeunes, l’Islam et la France” argued that the main concerns of Islamic organizations were initially the development of places of worship (Césari, 1998).

² The denomination “Muslim communities” is used in plural in this article as it refers to various Muslim organizations and populations whose diversity prevents them from converging into a single community.

³ I conducted various academic and independent field research related to Islamic organizations and Muslim communities in France (2009-2011), the United States of America (2009), the United Kingdom (2016), and Switzerland (2015-2018). The comments discussed in this paragraph apply to each of these countries.

considered as potential partners while others are perceived with suspicion. Unravelling the reason for this will be the aim of this paper.

Insights from academic literature

Situated at the intersection of different academic fields, this study cannot be approached through just one disciplinary lens. The areas that inform the research comprise social work, sociology of religion, political science and Islamic studies. As far as the view provided by anthropology is concerned, ethnographic studies on the subject in Switzerland are still lacking despite the effort of many political science studies over the last decade to conduct research on Muslim communities (see for instance Amghar et al., 2007). Observations show that the first Islamic social work initiatives in Switzerland started in the late 2000s, and other faith-based welfare projects or Islamic social work organizations were created after that time⁴. Given the recent nature of these faith-based initiatives, there is still a lack of Swiss data on this phenomenon.

Relevant literature on Islamic organizations and religious activism has, however, already been being produced in Switzerland's neighbouring country, France, since the 1990s. Several authors (Césari, 1998; Kepel, 1987; Kepel, 2000; Ternisien, 2002) have conducted investigations and research on the citizenship of Muslims and on Islamic organizations and transnational movements with a focus on their engagement in society. Later, Boubekour (2007) intended to draw the religious landscape of Islamic militant movements in Europe. Although this work does not focus on social services, it does shed light on activism within Islamic organizations and networks, helping to identify social and political dynamics within religious organizations and movements. In addition, research conducted in Lille (France) addressed the rivalry between statutory social agencies and Muslim preachers whose role in distressed urban areas could be perceived as social work and counselling (Bouzar, 2001).

More recently, Arslan and Marlière (2014) wrote a paper addressing the competition between statutory social workers and Islamic associations within poor and deprived urban areas in Paris. Their research displayed the legitimacy and success encountered by Muslim actors providing social services in contrast to difficulties met by official social workers in establishing relationships with youth coming mainly from other cultural, ethnic, and religious backgrounds.

The question of the lack of legitimacy of statutory social agencies within deprived urban areas had, however, been addressed by different authors before, including Duret (1996) who focused on the issue of the integration of "indigenous" social workers within statutory agencies. He showed

⁴ In 2009, a social service was launched by a mosque in a Swiss city for the first time, according to the claim of his founder. Observations and interviews confirmed his claim as no other Islamic organization or Islam-based project specifically dedicated to social work or welfare services have been identified prior to that year.

how these new social workers were selected and hired due to their cultural and ethnic commonalities with the beneficiaries, or because they grew up in the same neighbourhoods as the target groups. This “new” trend in social work was a step towards what Jovelin (2002) would later call the “intra-ethnic approach.” At that time, the religious background of service users was not yet emphasized as a main identity feature and youth from French housing projects and distressed neighbourhoods were first publicly perceived through their ethnic background (Arslan and Marlière, 2014: 69).

In 2011, an ethnographic study aimed to identify and analyse Islamic faith-based organizations providing social welfare services in Paris, France (Brodard, 2011). This study questioned the tension between partiality and universal logics within the organizations’ strategies. It argued that Islamic organizations focused on specific religious groups for community-based consideration, but also extended their services to the wider society, therefore promoting a universal aid and care approach. In accordance with the aforementioned papers, Brodard’s study also demonstrated that Islamic organizations had somehow succeeded in establishing themselves in disadvantaged and segregated urban areas where public agencies had failed.

More recently, William Barylo (2016) conducted an ethnographic study on Muslim charities in Europe. Based on his empirical research in France, the United Kingdom, and Poland, he wrote a doctoral thesis focusing on the engagement and motivations of Muslim volunteers which was followed by the publication of a book in English on the same subject (Barylo, 2017). Although these studies are very helpful towards exploring the subject of Islamic charities in Europe, Barylo’s focus on the actors does not fully lead to an understanding of Islamic organizations’ strategies. This would require an additional macro-level analysis.

Further research on the topic has been conducted by Rosalind Warden. Her doctoral research displayed a detailed description and analysis of a local Islamic social work organization in a medium-sized city in the United Kingdom, focusing on the specificities of its social welfare services and its use of Islamic references. In addition, it also addressed the perceptions and experiences of the beneficiaries (Warden, 2013). In 2017, her article entitled “Islamic Social Work in the UK: The Service User Experience” specifically referred to the latter aspect, examining the importance of such a faith-based approach to social work for service users and its contributions and outcomes in terms of social welfare (Warden, 2017). This paper utilizes the concept of “Islamic social work” to refer to the involvement of faith-based organizations that identify themselves as Muslim and provide social welfare services.

Academic literature has also focused on humanitarian work provided by Islamic NGOs outside of Europe (Benthall, 2003; Juul Petersen, 2014). Although it is useful to understand the nexus between Islam, activism, and social engagement, this literature generally refers to very different socio-political

contexts. Indeed, Islamic NGOs mostly intervene in countries where Islam has been present and dominant for centuries, whereas Islamic organizations in Western European countries provide aid and care within societies characterized by there being both secularism and a Christian heritage within their institutions.

Another in-depth study which has addressed Islamic social work practices within civil society, and which is closer to the subject of this paper but in the context of Jordan is that by Harmsen (2008). However, Islam is the dominant religion of Jordan while it is a relatively new and minority religion in Switzerland where it is still mainly perceived as a foreign tradition. In this respect, the several existing studies on Islamic social work and Islamic humanitarian NGOs do give some interesting inputs towards exploring this field, but they do not provide appropriate data and information towards understanding the subject in the Swiss context.

Academic literature on Islam in Switzerland has been emerging for about two decades with various studies having presented features of Muslim communities in Switzerland. First, studies focused mainly on Muslims as individuals through a sociological perspective (Schneuwly-Purdie et al., 2009). A second perspective examined Islamic associations in the context of their diversity and inclusion in Swiss society. This lens sought in particular to analyse the organization and management of Islamic associations throughout the country. A book by Christophe Monnot (2013) which gathered the work of several scholars examining Islam and Muslims in Switzerland is a precious contribution in this regard.

Further research studies focused on the concept of charity and welfare in Islam. These include, for example, Alioune Ndiaye's article "Islamic Charities in Switzerland and the Practice of Zakat" (Ndiaye, 2007). In the paper, the author provided an outline of *Zakat* practices in the Swiss context. Looking at the role of Islamic organizations in welfare and charity, Ndiaye mainly brought up the case of Islamic Relief and other international NGOs that provide social services and humanitarian aid abroad but not in Switzerland. He also argued in his paper that Islamic organizations in Switzerland "are involved in many different activities, of which charity is just one" (Ndiaye, 2007: 10). His paper was written at a time when no Islamic grassroots organizations dedicated specifically to social work existed apart from NGOs providing humanitarian aid abroad.

The involvement of Islamic organizations in humanitarian aid was also examined by Jamal Krafess (2005). His paper looked at Islamic aid and welfare practices using a conceptual approach, examining Islamic references and texts related to humanitarian aid, but not related to any particular context. His article therefore mostly concerns the field of theology and does not apply specifically to Switzerland.

More recently there have been two doctoral theses addressing the theme of Islam and charity practices in the Swiss context. In the first, Silvia Martens (2013) focused on the welfare practices of Muslims. She studied the ways Muslims in Switzerland individually and collectively manage and distribute *Zakat* and other alms. She also wrote about Islamic associations and networks that offer social services throughout the country and abroad. In the second study, Elisa Banfi approached the topic of Islamic charity work from a macro political science perspective (Banfi, 2013). Her research questioned the effect of institutional models and state-church relationships in Switzerland and in Italy on the strategic positioning of Islamic organizations and their engagement in social work in these countries.

Taking advantage of both of these most recent research studies, this paper aims to study Islamic organizations and projects specifically dedicated to social work. Its approach differs from the previous works introduced above mainly in that while the aforementioned recent studies focus mostly or exclusively on Islamic organizations providing Muslim communities with social services, this paper proposes to address welfare practices and social work services aiming to target society as a whole beyond the boundaries of Muslim communities. Most of the projects and organizations concerned have been created in recent years and have therefore not been previously studied by researchers. For these reasons, new empirical research was needed to collect unknown data and to develop theoretical analyses.

Research question

In Switzerland, Islamic grassroots organizations have been implementing social welfare services only for a few years. Conversely to the case in neighbouring France (Brodard, 2011), Islamic organizations in Switzerland have continuously sought to establish partnerships with statutory agencies, public authorities, and civil society agencies. However, the Islamic identity of these organizations often seems to be considered as a problem by potential partners. This could be explained by the perception of Islam and Muslims as a problem in some segments of Swiss society.⁵ Therefore, the involvement of Islamic organizations in social work tends to be perceived as contradictory: in the name of their Islamic faith and identity, religious actors pretend to tackle social issues and to bring about positive change within society whereas Islam and Muslim actors are described by some political groups and other activists as a “problem” (see Schulze, 2015).

In this specific context, this study questions the possibilities and tensions in partnerships between Islamic grassroots organizations and statutory agencies. Moreover, it explores alternative

⁵ A conference organized by Fribourg University in 2017 was entitled “Hostility towards Muslims: society, media, politics”. It gathered academic staff and state authorities and addressed stigmatization and hostility towards Muslims in Swiss society.

and innovative contributions in terms of potential social work that Islamic grassroots organizations can bring forth. As such, the research questions can be formulated as follows.

- 1) In the current Swiss context where Islam and Muslims are frequently publicly depicted as a problem, how can Islamic grassroots organizations carry out social welfare services?
- 2) How do they manage to build relationships and partnerships with statutory agencies and public authorities?
- 3) Which innovative and alternative social work methods can they promote through their engagement?

Methodology

The phenomenon of Islamic social work has been spreading for less than two decades throughout Western European countries⁶, and has been present in Switzerland for only a few years. As such, the first aim of this study was to provide an outline of the phenomenon by identifying Islamic-based organizations and projects providing social services on Swiss territory.

It is important to mention that social welfare services provided by faith-based Islamic organizations belong to an ongoing process which has not yet been solidified both in theory and in practice. Due to the lack of theoretical and empirical research about these new organizations, an inductive approach was necessary. This allowed for the conduction of field research without restrictive theoretical frameworks (Hamel, 1993). Such a context yielded the choice of a qualitative and ethnographic approach aiming to understand the development and changes within the given organizations and networks; the case study method was chosen. First, each of three cases were studied independently through qualitative methods such as participant observation and interviews. At a later stage, the cases were compared and a cross-analysis of both the cases and the academic literature led to a theoretical analysis and conceptualization (Yin, 2014: 48).

As mentioned above, Islamic-based social services have only been implemented in Switzerland recently without following any global management or shared strategy. Such phenomena are scattered across different regions of the country and no inventory is available to identify them. It was therefore necessary to investigate directly within Muslim communities in order to identify various projects and associations. To restrict the research to a manageable scale, some criteria were chosen for the sampling. Among them, it was required that the social projects had to address the broader society beyond the boundaries of Muslim communities. This criterion aimed to exclude numerous associations providing social services exclusively to attendants of mosques or solely

⁶ A few Islamic charities providing social work services were created particularly in France in the 1990s and even in the 1980s. However, they focused only on a few neighbourhoods or urban areas throughout the country and did not last long.

Muslims in order to focus on organizations and projects operating without religious discrimination and addressing the social needs of the entire Swiss population. Another important and restrictive criterion concerned the social issues the projects intended to tackle. It was required that social exclusion and identity-based conflicts had to be specifically targeted by the organizations. This was in order to exclude other activities related to leisure, sports, or culture. Finally, both of these criteria led to this paper's focus on only three cases which consisted either of a specific organization or a network of local associations implementing social projects.

Each of these three cases was carefully investigated for a period of two years (from 2016 to 2018), predominantly through ethnography. In addition to non-participant observation, on-site observations took place during social events and internal meetings. Participant observation was used as the main method to access the field and to collect data. First, participant observation was necessary to enter the Islamic organizations and to access their social activities as the managers of several organizations would not have accepted the presence of a "passive" researcher. Participation in various activities and projects was therefore needed to negotiate access to the field.

Indeed, participant observation, closely linked to ethnography, is often necessary to access the field and to gain the confidence of actors and stakeholders, as was pointed out by Vincent Romani in his research on the Palestinian territories where he claimed that participant observation was the only means to be accepted in the field as a researcher and to collect data (Romani, 2007: 28). Moreover, many sociological and anthropological studies on "difficult fieldworks" and "sensible topics" (Bouillon et al., 2005) were based on participant observation, such as Philippe Bourgois's study on drug dealers in New York City (Bourgois, 2013) and Loïc Wacquant's investigations within an African-American ghetto in Chicago (Wacquant, 2000). According to Boumaza and Campana (2007: 8), the category of "difficult fieldworks" extends to controversial topics and stigmatized or proselytized groups. Muslim communities in Switzerland have been stigmatized by both the media and political discourses, and some Islamic organizations were reluctant to be surveyed or investigated even for academic purposes. In this specific context, participant observation allowed the researcher to be gradually accepted by the organizations' managers and volunteers.

Participant observation can also lead to the collection of a wider range of data which would typically not be available through formal interviews or through non-participant observations. Some may argue that the use of participant observation involves bias in data collection (see Soulé, 2007: 129). The presence of the researcher does always influence the field. For this reason, the researcher must conduct a reflexive data analysis, taking into account how his or her presence might have influenced what was observed. Nonetheless, it should be recalled here that every qualitative study potentially involves bias. Indeed, formal interviews lead to similar methodological issues, as

interviewees' speeches often do not reflect concrete facts or thoughts, but rather controlled speech and public statements. For this reason, this study mainly used informal interviews with the organizations' leaders and volunteers. Suspicion from a large section of the community towards authorities and academics indeed brought about the requirement of these specific interview methods, as many actors targeted by the case studies were reluctant to be interviewed and recorded in a formal setting (Lanzarini and Bruneteaux, 1998). Nevertheless, formal semi-structured interviews were also conducted with some organization leaders as well as statutory agency managers in order to collect official claims and to provide another type of data.

Data

Firstly, this research identifies and describes the most influential Islamic social services and Islamic social work organizations in Switzerland. The research focuses on the three main associations or networks which were the most active in social work in the areas of social exclusion and identity-based conflicts during the research period. Each is briefly described below in order to elaborate on its main features. For confidentiality reasons, the names of the organizations and cities are anonymised.

Case A: A community-based project to tackle radicalization

A project was launched in 2016 following the terrorist attacks that happened in France in 2015 in a bilingual Swiss city. This project aimed to tackle "radicalization" and "religious extremism" among youth who identified themselves as Muslim. Two years later, it turned into an independent non-profit association registered under Swiss law.

Concretely, this association developed two kinds of activities. First, it provided youth and their families with free mediation and counselling services. To this end, the association trained more than ten mediators with a focus on intercultural skills. Subsequently, some of these mediators began to approach children and teenagers in trouble and their families. First contacts were often initiated through the network of the association's leader or of other members. Some schools or social workers took the initiative to establish links with this association if they considered someone to be subject to religious radicalization or extremist thought. Over time, the association extended its social services and counselling to tackle "non-religious" issues such as drug addiction, violence, and petty crime. This latter orientation raised the question of its identity as a faith-based organization specialized in preventing and countering radicalization and violent religious extremism insofar as it aimed to extend its contributions to other social problems beyond a religious context.

A second aspect of the association's societal involvement pertained to the prevention of sociocultural and identity-based conflicts through the holding of several public events which addressed themes such as Islam, gender issues, and asylum. These events gathered diverse groups

and included the participation of local authorities and civil society organization leaders. The association insisted on the importance of peace-building and integration through activities which sought to bring people together in spite of their prejudices and fears. It tried to include the widest possible audience, ranging from right-wing leaders to Christian pastors and Muslim activists.

Despite having taken advantage of important media coverage since its beginnings, the association lacked funding. On the one hand, media and political figures, not only at a local but also at regional and national levels, lauded the association's merits and quality by insisting on the need of such projects and involvement, deeming them particularly useful towards tackling the issue of radicalization and towards preventing terrorism amongst young Muslims. On the other hand, some public and private donors were reluctant to provide significant funding to the association, apparently because of their suspicion towards the religious identity of its leaders.⁷ Finally, the lack of human and financial resources curbed the development of the association.

Case B: Social welfare services addressing poverty and exclusion

In a French-speaking city of Switzerland, a local mosque launched a social agency to address poverty and exclusion especially within the local Muslim community. A few years later, the social agency became an independent association and began to extend its social services to the broader public. It held a "social grocery" activity weekly to provide free food to needy people who were directed to the mosque by statutory social agencies. The association also organized free meals and other welfare and social services such as French courses, educational activities, and public workshops on administrative, political, health, and social issues. Beneficiaries, including a majority of migrants coming from diverse countries, were disparate in terms of gender and origin.

The selection of beneficiaries was based on the sole criterion of need regardless of religious or cultural identities. This point was a condition in the organization establishing partnerships with local statutory agencies and private welfare organizations.

Due to its inclusion within the mosque, this association was first managed exclusively by practicing Muslims. Over the years, mainly after its independence, it began to hire volunteers from other religious backgrounds, including many South American Christian migrants. Finally, most of the association's members and volunteers were not Muslims. However, the association still contained in its name an explicit reference to Islam, and its leader continuously claimed to orient its involvement in line with "Islamic ethics".

⁷ During interviews, public and private donators expressed some concerns about the links between Islamic social work organizations and transnational religious movements and their ideologies. A local municipal authority claimed that it was not conceivable to establish partnerships with an association close to the Muslim brotherhood movement. In another case, a Church welfare organization representative claimed that they could provide Islamic organizations with grants on condition that they respect gender equality, which involved certain theological issues.

Over the years, this association became a recognized social agency of the city. It joined a local network gathering most of the statutory social agencies and civil society organizations addressing social exclusion in the city. Despite its Islamic identity, which sometimes led to questions and misunderstandings among some stakeholders, the association succeeded in being included and well-integrated into the local network involving both the public and private voluntary sectors.

Case C: A network of associations and welfare projects gathered around a mosque

Conversely to cases A and B, case C did not involve a single organization but rather a network of associations and projects within a defined territory. Situated in another French-speaking urban area of Switzerland, several associations defined by both an Islamic identity and a charitable or social mandate developed a range of activities and extended social services beyond Muslim communities. The choice of considering them together within a sole case study was justified by both their link with a specific mosque and their interaction with an umbrella organization which gathered together most Islamic associations in the region.

The umbrella organization itself carried out its own social projects. A major social service associated with it aimed to foster the integration of young people into the professional market, providing them with counselling and coaching. The strategy was to accompany them throughout their work prospection and facilitate their integration within their new work environments. This project received state funding over a period of time.

Several associations and independent actors more or less linked to this umbrella organization developed social work projects to contribute positively to society as a whole. Some of them organized food distribution in the streets while others implemented educational workshops intended for female migrants. The aforementioned mosque linking the organizations also launched some tours in the streets to prevent suicide during Christmas and New Year's, considered to be a period of high risk.

For each of these three cases, several dozens of hours of interviews were conducted with primary actors including organization leaders and project managers as well as volunteers and stakeholders associated with either statutory agencies or civil society organizations. Long-term participant observation in the field was also undertaken.⁸ A third source of data came from both internal and external documentation such as reports, advertisements, and media articles. The data were collected and analysed for each case. Then, the three case studies were compared, and cross-cutting issues and features identified and analysed in the light of the academic literature.

⁸ As mentioned above, participant observation was often needed to access and enter the organizations, observe social services and organization environments, and conduct informal interviews with organization managers and volunteers.

Analysis and findings

The cross-cutting analysis of the three case studies highlighted shared challenges and issues related to Islamic social work within Swiss society. It then enabled the conclusion of a series of results.

First, the three cases show that Islamic grassroots associations in Switzerland have developed some initiatives and social services to address the needs of the country's population as a whole, focusing mainly on problems related to Islam and Muslims but also extending to non-Muslim recipients. Therefore, these organizations have contributed to addressing broader societal issues which reach far beyond the concerns of solely Muslim communities.

The study assessed that the different Islam-based associations were independent of transnational Islamic movements and primary global Islamic organizations, although some of them were initially linked to mosques or religious umbrella organizations. This is a relevant discovery as it challenges the widespread idea that Islamic social services aim to implement a hidden agenda or political strategies as may be the case in other geographic and social contexts (see Davis and Robinson, 2012).

The three case studies converged on the idea that social projects were developed and implemented independently by Muslim actors for reasons related to faith, moral principles, citizenship, or personal interests. It was observed that the social projects carried out by the examined Islamic associations in Switzerland sought to contribute positively to society. They did not aim to enact radical socio-political change and they did not promote alternative systems. They often labelled their actions as "civic engagement" and "socially-responsible engagement".

Nevertheless, the combination of Islamic identity and a Swiss citizen-based approach in the activities of these associations raises questions regarding their specific features and purposes in a "welfare state". During public events held by mosques and Islamic organizations, some Muslims in the public argued that social work was the duty of the state and that Islamic associations should not invest this field, which was discussed and contradicted by others. To address them, it is necessary to consider the role of the government and statutory agencies in the treatment of social issues involving Muslims and Islam over the past years.

In Switzerland as well as in other European countries, specific social issues related to Muslims have recently emerged in public debates. Although Switzerland has not been targeted by Islamist terrorist attacks, some citizens have travelled to conflict zones to joined groups such as ISIS or Al-Qaeda. Moreover, the major terrorist attacks in France and other neighbouring European countries which have been taking place since 2015 have been largely covered by local media and have triggered fear and misunderstanding within several statutory agencies and institutions, including

probation services, childhood protection agencies and high schools. In addition to the question of terrorism and radicalization Muslims are often associated with, Muslim migrant populations are highly affected by specific social issues such as crime, poverty, exclusion, and overrepresentation in prisons.

This context has drawn the state's attention to the need for implementing new responses to the challenges of religious extremism, crime, and exclusion particularly involving Muslims. Specific training and discussion points have been developed within statutory agencies to define strategies to address these problems, particularly in the prison system but also in education and other areas.

In parallel, faith-based organizations including the cases highlighted by this research have developed a range of social projects and services. Many of them have been designed to tackle community-based issues such as unemployment among young Muslims as well as religious extremism and radicalization. Even projects that are developed to address social problems and exclusion without any reference to Muslim communities or the Islamic religion target mostly Muslims due to their overrepresentation in marginalized groups. Therefore, to a certain extent, the Islamic associations' social projects seemed to specialize particularly in "Islamic-related" problems and Muslim populations even if their managers tended to display and promote a universal, impartial, and neutral approach to social work.

In various contexts, several Islamic organizations began to be viewed positively by some civil society organizations and local public authorities that noticed that the organizations were contributing effectively to social welfare within the scope of their focus on problems related to Muslims and Islam. Further, some Islamic organizations fostered this "communitarian" trend by conceptualizing their own approach of social work based on an "intra-cultural approach" in which they claimed that common religious and cultural belongings lead to the provision of more efficient services and to obtaining better results at work. This point demonstrated a shift from a cross-cultural practice in social work, in which statutory agencies already considered the need of taking into account the cultural and religious characteristics of aid recipients, towards an intra-ethnic (Jovelin, 2002) or "intra-cultural" practice which promotes a shared and common background between social workers and recipients in order to facilitate access to specific target groups and to foster intervention efficiency. Islamic organizations often commit to this intra-cultural approach and argue that their shared values and backgrounds lead them to understand and work more effectively with Muslim populations, and that they can therefore provide more efficient and relevant social services. In parallel, some local and regional authorities consider that the identity of these organizations could be a useful asset to some specific groups that often mistrust the state and therefore remain difficult to work with.

The relative success of Islamic-based social services at a local level in Switzerland seems to have been permitted by needs for which the state's solutions were insufficient and inadequate. A lack of social solutions to issues related to Islam and Muslim youth created an opportunity for community-based organizations to develop their own projects and to implement specific strategies. Some of these have been innovative and efficient, particularly due to the cultural skills and religious awareness of the Islamic organizations' actors as well as due to the proximity between them and their beneficiaries. Therefore, some Islamic organizations and Muslim leaders have highlighted an intra-cultural approach, cultural awareness, and religious competencies as added-value which they bring to social work.

Several local authorities have recognized the need for these alternative initiatives, acknowledging their positive contribution to society. In this sense, public and private funding has been provided to several Islamic social work organizations, notably by local and regional authorities. However, all the organizations studied in this research mentioned that the funding they received was insufficient and irregular. Therefore, all of them continued to look for more public and political recognition as well as perennial sources of funding.

It is important to note here that support from public authorities and private stakeholders has been very disparate as regards the socio-political context, agencies, and decision-makers. Therefore, as there have not been any common practices among public agencies throughout the country, it is not yet possible to make a general statement on the stand of public authorities regarding Islamic welfare organizations and their involvement in Swiss society. This article showed that partnerships strongly depend on public agencies and decision-makers and that a clear public policy strategy is still lacking. Some statutory agencies did encourage and fund Islamic organizations whereas others refused any partnerships and expressed concerns related to their religious profiles.

Conclusion

The analysis above raises questions about the public, political, and social participation of Islamic organizations in Switzerland's secularized society. Public authorities in Switzerland are still looking for ways to deal with these new religious actors, oscillating between cooperation, disinterest, and undue mistrust. These contradictory patterns and positions were observed during this research. Some authorities and statutory agencies encouraged the analysed Islamic organizations to provide welfare services and funded some of their projects, while others refused any partnership with them and expressed some concerns about their religious identity. This latter point has to be understood in light of the current context of Islamophobia in Switzerland (see Zouggari, 2017) in which Islam and community-based activism may appear suspicious to various stakeholders and decision-makers.

Whereas some political discourses have promoted the relegation of religion to the private sphere, others assume that faith-based organizations should or could be of positive value to society. Which of these political positions seems to be dominant and socially legitimized varies according to a particular country's political systems and contexts. Besides the question of the role of religion in society, which is raised regularly throughout different regions of Switzerland and to a greater extent in neighbouring France, Islamic engagement remains generally considered as foreign and illegitimate. Nevertheless, models of state-religion relations according to various political systems are not sufficient to explain the development of Islamic faith-based initiatives in Switzerland.

To illustrate that the potential of Islamic social work also depends on other factors, one can quickly argue that a strict view on secularism along with a Republican state model hostile to any community-based demands and claims have not prevented the development of consistent faith-based and community-based social work associations among Muslims in France. Indeed, many Islamic grassroots organizations have been emerging for more than a decade in deprived neighbourhoods across France, and they seem to have succeeded where statutory services and authorities have failed (Bouzar, 2001; Brodard, 2011). In the Swiss context, this article outlined that Islamic social work organizations were often able to establish partnerships with the authorities and statutory agencies, as well as with private institutions such as the churches or civil society organizations, despite the hostility against Muslims and Islam in the society. Both the public and private sectors have demonstrated a willingness to work with Islamic organizations, mostly on issues related to migrants, integration and religious radicalization issues. Islamic organizations often understood they had to invest and to focus on these specific social issues to be considered and funded by public and private institutions. Intra-cultural approach in social work paradoxically led to higher chances of sponsors and funding from the state. However, in several regions of Switzerland where the state implicitly fosters religious communities to implement social welfare services, Islamic organizations have often not been able to deliver sustainable and consistent social work services due to a lack of community-based resources. Many of these faith-based organizations generally did not find the means to provide regular and efficient social services despite their aspirations and claims. Most association leaders and managers interviewed as part of this research explained that their limitations were due to difficulties in finding long-term volunteers and significant funding. This shows that political context is just one factor among many when it comes to the effectiveness and thriving of faith-based social work organizations, and that the features of Muslim communities and organizations, such as their inner resources and ideological views, also have to be considered carefully to understand this matter.

Finally, faith-based social services provided by Islamic organizations question the use of new practices in social work in the Swiss context. The innovative and alternative contributions of these organizations still have to be evaluated. However, there have already been positive outcomes. Through the cultural awareness of Swiss Islam-based social work organizations as well as through their understanding of current social issues and their positive relationships with aid recipients, they participate in the development and reinvention of social intervention and compete with other agencies. Moreover, the “intra-cultural” perspective advocated by Islamic organizations reflects a minority but debated trend within institutional social work. Therefore, Muslim actors could contribute to social change by rethinking and redefining social work practices. These faith-based organizations additionally bring cultural and religious diversity to the country which contributes to enriching it with different perspectives.

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Appendix: interviews and observations

In each of the case studies, data were collected through observation, interviews and documentation. The details related to the interviews are outlined below.

Case A

Interview dates

With the founder and director of the association (A1):

- 15/11/2017
- 16/03/2018
- 23/03/2018
- 12/04/2018
- 20/06/2018

- 24/09/2018

With the co-president of the association (A2):

- 11/11/2017
- 09/02/2018
- 16/03/2018
- 23/03/2018
- 18/04/2018

With the other co-president of the association (A3):

- 09/02/2018

With a volunteer of the association (A4):

- 09/02/2018

With a volunteer of the association (A5):

- 28/12/2017
- 09/02/2018

With partner (A6):

- 10/04/2019

With partner (A7):

- 25/11/2017
- 21/03/2018

With partner (A8):

- 25/04/2018

Interviewee profiles

A1: Founder and director of the association / Middle aged woman, migrant from North African who has lived in Switzerland for many years, unemployed / Practicing Muslim.

A2: Co-president of the association and volunteer / Middle aged man, Swiss citizen from Turkish background, born in Switzerland, employee / Practicing Muslim.

A3: Co-president of the association and volunteer / Swiss citizen from local background, employee / Practicing Christian (Protestant).

A4: Volunteer / Third-age male, Swiss citizen from local background, retired / Atheist.

A5: Volunteer / Middle aged woman, migrant from North African who has lived in Switzerland for many years, unemployed / Practicing Muslim.

A6: Manager working for a Church-based welfare organization.

A7: Counsellor working for a statutory agency.

A8: Analyst working for the Federal Police.

In addition to these interviews, direct and participant observations were regularly conducted from 2017 to 2019 at 1) working sessions and internal meetings 2) workshops and trainings 3) public events. Besides, the association's paper document and online resources were carefully analysed as well as the official reports and media articles.

Case B

Interview dates

With the founder and director of the association (B1):

- 04/12/2016
- 29/01/2017
- 15/11/2017
- 29/06/2017
- 18/07/2017
- 01/02/2018
- 12/03/2018

- 07/09/2018
 - 08/09/2018
 - 28/09/2018
 - 16/10/2018
- With volunteer (B2):
- 03/07/2017
- With volunteer (B3):
- 17/06/2017
- With volunteer (B4):
- 20/03/2017
- With community leader 1:
- 03/07/2017
 - 16/10/2018
- With community leader 2:
- 14/03/2018
 - 06/04/2018
- With partner (statutory agency partner):
- 14/09/2018
 - 12/10/2018
- With partner (civil society organization):
- 16/04/2018
- With Muslim chaplain 1:
- 16/10/2018
- With Muslim chaplain 2:
- 21/04/2017
- With researcher A:
- 11/04/2018
- With researcher B:
- 18/04/2018
- With a partner Islamic organization leader:
- 24/10/2018

Interviewee profiles

B1: Founder and director of the association/ Middle-aged man, migrant from Africa who has lived in Switzerland for many years, unemployed/ Practicing Muslim.

B2: Volunteer in the association/ Middle aged-woman, Swiss convert to Islam / Practicing Muslim.

B3: Volunteer in the association/ Middle-aged woman, Colombian who has lived in Switzerland for a few years / Christian.

B4: Volunteer in the association/ Middle-aged man, Swiss born in Switzerland / Practicing Christian.

In addition to these interviews, direct and participant observation was regularly conducted from 2016 to 2018 and focused on 1) social work services 2) workshops and trainings 3) meetings with the stakeholders and partners 4) public events 5) community-based events in the mosque. Besides, the association's paper documentation and online resources were carefully analysed as well as the official reports and media articles.

Case C

Interview dates

- With the Umbrella organization leader 1 (C1):
- 02/10/2018
- With the Umbrella organization leader 2 (C2):
- 06/10/2018

With the Umbrella organization leader 3 (C3):

- 03/10/2018
- 06/10/2018

With volunteer (C4):

- 04/06/2018
- 06/09/2018
- 02/10/2018

With volunteer (C5):

- 27/11/2017

With volunteer (C6):

- 06/10/2018
- 06/05/2018

With volunteer (C7):

- 02/10/2018
- 06/10/2018

With volunteer (C8):

- 04/06/2018
- 05/06/2018

With volunteer (C9) :

- 05/06/2018

With volunteer (C10) :

- 06/05/2018

With the Imam:

- 23/09/2017
- 06/05/2018

With partner (statutory agency):

- 06/09/2018

Interviewee profiles

C1: Middle-aged man, Swiss citizen from local background/ Practicing Muslim.

C2: Middle-aged woman, Swiss citizen from local background/ Practicing Muslim.

C3: Middle-aged man, migrant from North Africa who has lived in Switzerland for many years/ Practicing Muslim.

C4: Middle-aged man, migrant from North Africa who has lived in Switzerland for many years/ Practicing Muslim.

C5: Middle-aged man, French citizen converted to Islam who has lived in Switzerland for a few years/ Practicing Muslim.

C6: Middle-aged man, migrant from North Africa who has lived in Switzerland for many years/ Practicing Muslim.

C7: Middle-aged woman, French citizen from North-African background who has lived in Switzerland for many years/ Practicing Muslim.

C8: Middle-aged woman, migrant from North Africa who has lived in Switzerland for a few years/ Practicing Muslim.

C9: Middle-aged woman, migrant from North Africa who has lived in Switzerland for a few years/ Practicing Muslim.

C10: Young woman, Swiss citizen converted to Islam/ Practicing Muslim.

In addition to these interviews, direct and participant observations were regularly conducted from 2017 to 2019 and focused on 1) social work services 2) internal work meetings 3) workshops and trainings 4) public events 5) community-based events in the mosque. Besides, the association's paper document and online resources were carefully analysed as well as the official reports and media articles.