

# Cool and Competitive Muslim Culture in the West

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In contrast to the austerity of traditional Islamists who recommend asceticism and marginality vis-à-vis western culture as a pure form of commitment, a new Muslim elite are arising bringing with them a new urban Muslim culture from within the Occident. These elites have launched companies and projects which are "ethislamic," inspired by an ethic of diffusion and production resulting from their Islamic commitment. They might also be actors of the Society of the Islamic Spectacle which uses non-traditional media such as music, theatre, or television, for preaching.

## Performing Islamic modernity

The new urban Islamic culture, strongly inspired by popular American aesthetic standards, has produced specific products that contribute to the performance of a "cool Islam." Among the new products and markets are those promoting Islamic street wear, Islamic soft drinks, Muslim pop idols, religious songs, Muslim rappers, and even Muslim comedians. More than ever the new Muslim cultural actors aspire for a prominent space on the global western stage. They make their values accepted through a new Islamic culture that presents itself as cool and fashionable (i.e. modern), along with being competitive (i.e. powerful and dominant). These "cool and competitive" actors internalize the notion that the West is in a position of political, economic, and cultural dominance over them.

After the failure of political Islamism these new actors have sought to express themselves via identity categories that give a new dignity to Muslim culture. These identity categories are no longer founded in the global Islamist Utopia, but in standards considered as modern and efficient. In other words, Islam has been embedded in capitalist markets. Islamic goods and services promote an ethical point of view resulting from an Islamic faith, but at the same time they are embedded in the market of the global western culture, thus making Islam a competitive faith.

In the world of the ethislamic, the Dawah Wear jogging suit, a brand founded by three African Americans and whose French branch has just been launched by Tarik Abdelwahad, the basketball player star of the NBA, acts for many as an alternative to the Saudi *qamiss*. The Capsters, a brand from the Netherlands, will manufacture a velcro hijab that provides the consumer with a choice between the skater, tennis, or aerobics model for sporty Muslim women.

Concerning the Society of the Islamic Spectacle, they organize numerous festivals of Islamic songs in Europe where, for example, Yusuf Islam (Cat Stevens) or Sami Yusuf, one of the UK's leading modern *nashids*, perform "Islamic songs" in English in competition with the traditional Arabic *nashids*. Traditional Muslim preachers see their public turning to "Islamic art festivals" where one-man showmen act out pastiches on the ummah's deficiencies. On Islamic websites art and culture has occupied a dominant place which testifies to the weakening, since the 1990s, of Muslims' requests for a purely normative and intellectualized religious knowledge.

This new western Islamic culture represents a form of secularization. Being based on supports belonging to the secular world, this new culture will allow new elites an integration and an easier diffu-

**Muslims in Europe and the United States have been trying to redefine their political aspirations through a new urban-based western Islamic identity, especially since 9/11. They are attempting to move away from traditionalist Islamist categories by forging a new urban Islamic culture based both on an individualistic ethic that promotes economic success and a certain conception of spiritual well-being.**

sion in western public space in the face of the stigmatization of the traditional religious Islamist identity. For the consumers, this culture will also give them a pride to be westernized Muslims in an Islamic and non polemical way, and also provide comfort and well-being through services corresponding to their daily lives.

## Crossing Islamic and secular spaces

This mode of secularization with its performance of a "cool" Islam does not mean that the Islamic reference as a religious system is abandoned. On the contrary, the new elites will increasingly insert this Islamic reference in a cultural imaginary which is finding ways to get in touch with their identity as modern Muslims and at the same time with their daily western and competitive cultural choices. The traditional values of the corpus will be reinterpreted by, for example, referring to the ideal of the Prophet Mohammed as a great merchant. Such an association with the Prophet transforms their commercial or artistic actions into an Islamic ethic allied with cultural globalization.

The most important changes brought about by this redistribution of values relates to the notion of solidarity for Islamic cause (which was the preoccupation at the heart of the Islamist movements). The traditional intra-Islamic modes of action and mobilization, such as aggressive street demonstrations and political militancy, make less sense. The new Islamic elites reinterpret their relations with the non-Muslim outside community, or even with the other competing Islamic currents in terms of networks and partnerships. Notions of partnership will develop according to standards of competence and competitiveness, and no longer merely on the adherence to the same religious or ideological world.

The tension between the active presence of the new Islamic elites in a secular world and their religious ethic can be detected in the logos and slogans of their brands. The motto for Muslim Gear is "believe in what you wear" (see photo) and the logo for Dawah Wear is a series of numbers which would not hold significance for non-Muslims. However Muslims would recognize them as representing the four positions of prayer: *sujud*, *ruku'*, *wuquf* and

*iqamah*. Likewise, Mecca Cola's French slogan is "Drink with commitment !" (thus very close to Nike's "Just do it!"), but in Arabic the slogan will be "*Ishrab Multazim*" (which could mean "Drink faithfully !") which is clearly making reference to a religious domain. In this way this new Islamic urban culture only makes sense Islamically for those who wish to consider it as Islamic; the others could easily understand it as part of a western common urban culture in the long term (or at least as ethnic products).

This new capacity to manage two worlds, the West and the East, the Islamic and secularized spaces, also has an effect on the Islamic norms. To a growing extent the normative references and traditional concepts of the Islamist thought will be taken outside the theological world and transposed on the secularized supports of this new Islamic culture. For example, *da'wa* (call to the "true" Islam) is no longer made in an active and moralistic way, but through the exhibition of personal success (people will love God because they will want success that God gave me). The hijra (the migration which the Prophet made from Makkah

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where he was persecuted to Medina) is no more purely religious but economic, thus the boss of Mecca Cola explains that the company made its hijra by moving its head office from the French suburb of Saint Denis to Dubai. The filet-o-fish sandwiches sold by McDonald's become "haram" (not Islamically permissible) because of the position of the USA in the war in Iraq. One will be able to gain *hassanat* (some "good points" that you gain for entrance to paradise) by wearing ethislamic clothing; the zakat (the alms, one of the five pillars of Islam), for example, could be replaced by the purchase of products which make donations to charitable associations.

## Redefinitions of the relation of politics to Islamism

Taking into consideration this focus on culture and consumption, it thus seems that the Islamic identity need no longer be represented as political, ideological, and institutional, but as the choice of an individual consumer. Western Islamic identity appears to be departing from Islamism and to be no longer concerned with Islam's political side.

It is possible, however, to question this supposed departure from Islamist utopianism with regard to other forms of struggle and activism.<sup>1</sup> Drinking Mecca Cola might also be a way to boycott the perceived imperialism of Coca Cola, and might especially be done to support an Islamic company's donations to the Palestinian cause. This "consumerism" might very well be in the process of reconstructing a strong mythic ummah. The new Islamic urban culture may constitute a "detour" toward the invention of new forms of competitive political behaviour in the West. In fact, Islamic socialization through politics has failed, and this failure has led a Muslim elite to withdraw from classical forms of political commitments. They have repositioned their claims within the market without the baggage of their Islamist predecessors.

Where the traditional Islamist militancy was heavy, expensive, and very framed, the Islamic identity suggested by this new culture sets up mobilizations, identifications, modes of actions, and participation that is less expensive, less stigmatizing. The classical notions of Islamism,

such as the sacrifice for the cause and the suffering, weak, and dominated, disappear. What is proposed is the revalorization of the personal pleasure of consumption, success, and competitiveness. We also observe new modes of political organization that differ from the pyramidal and strongly hierarchical structures of Islamists. These new cultural elites composed mainly of young people born in the West, were often dismissed by Islamists who came most notably from the Arab world. They had to develop a logic of partnerships and networks in order to promote their modern Islamic ideal.

The effective political strategy is no longer to find an utopian and holist Islamist project vis-à-vis the State or the political sphere; now the promotion of Islamic references is done through spontaneous micro-projects with strong advertisement. Thus Dawah Wear will form a partnership with schools in the USA and participate in anti-drug prevention for children. Some songs of the modern nashid tour organized in France speak to the suffering of veiled girls in France, and of the plights of immigrants and exploited workers. The discourse is no longer grounded in classical Islamist topics of decadence and the necessity of purification, but rather advocates that inequalities be addressed through a political discourse, in particular in the economic and social areas. The first and stronger ambition of this new Islamic culture, and that is why we speak about performance, is to give a positive image of the success of the new Muslim elites. The traditional authorities, with their sometimes oppositional, too erudite, and immobilizing religious knowledge, can be undermined and replaced for many by these new cultural elites whose notoriety and economic success serve as their religious credentials.

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**MuslimGear  
Advertisement,  
2005**