

Social Action of Muslim Organizations in Switzerland

PhD thesis project outline

Barbara Schmoutz

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This doctoral research investigates the evolving role of newer Muslim organizations in Switzerland in the field of social welfare. These organizations, often founded by second-generation migrants between 2015 and 2020, represent a significant shift in Islamic civic engagement. Moving beyond traditional religious functions and transnational charity, they increasingly focus on localized social support, aiming to serve both Muslim communities and the broader Swiss society (Banfi & Gianni, 2023; Brodard, 2023). Their emergence reflects broader transformations in the relationship between religion, migration, and welfare provision in Europe, and particularly in Switzerland, where the welfare system is characterized by subsidiarity, cantonal diversity, and limited direct state intervention (Cattacin, 2006; Armingeon, 2001).

The study examines how these actors negotiate their position within the Swiss welfare system, which relies heavily on civil society actors, including faith-based organizations. While Christian institutions have historically shaped the Swiss welfare landscape (Geremek, 1987; Gnaegi, 2012), Muslim organizations are increasingly participating to social cohesion and support in Switzerland. Their activities challenge dominant narratives that portray Muslims as passive recipients of welfare, instead positioning them as active agents of solidarity and care (Schmid & Sheikhzadegan, 2022a; Tunger-Zanetti & Endres, 2019). This is particularly relevant in light of persistent anti-Muslim racism in Switzerland, which manifests in public discourse, institutional practices, and access to social services (Trucco et al., 2025). Muslim women, especially those who wear the hijab, often face compounded discrimination in public spaces and welfare institutions, where cultural

stereotypes and sexist norms can shape service provision (Choffat & Martin, 2014; Afrouz & Crisp, 2022).

In light of these observations, the research question I seek to address is:

In what ways do welfare Muslim organizations founded by post-migrant generations negotiate their position within the Swiss welfare system ?

This question engages several sub-questions:

- Who are the institutional and community partners of these organizations, and what norms and informal rules govern their collaboration?
- What types of Islamic or non-Islamic resources (financial, human, symbolic¹) are available, and which ones are mobilized in practice?
- What strategies do these organizations adopt to access or secure such resources within the welfare system?

Existing literature has documented the involvement of Muslim organizations in Swiss welfare, particularly those led by first-generation migrants or centered around mosques (Banfi, 2018; Brodard, 2019). However, research on newer organizations remains limited. These actors, shaped by hybrid socialization within both secular Swiss institutions and familial religious traditions, bring fresh perspectives on civic engagement, religious interpretation, and social responsibility (Baumann, 2018; Trucco, Schmid & Sheikhzadegan, 2024). Their generational specificity is significant, as it influences not only internal community dynamics but also their interactions with public institutions and broader society. For example, the Swiss Zakat Foundation interpretes the practice of zakat to prioritize local aid, reflecting a shift from transnational charity to domestic solidarity (Amor, 2016).

The theoretical framework combines postcolonial theory and critical social capital analysis. A postcolonial lens highlights Muslim agency and challenges essentialist narratives that frame Islam as incompatible with Western welfare values (Amiriaux, 2012; Özçetin, 2021). It situates anti-Muslim racism within broader colonial legacies and examines how Muslim actors resist exclusion

¹ By "symbolic," I refer to all non-material resources, such as various forms of recognition or legitimacy.

through civic engagement (Meer, 2014; Gutiérrez Rodríguez, 2018). Social welfare provision by Muslim organizations is interpreted as a form of empowerment rooted in Islamic principles of justice, compassion, and communal responsibility (Kamali, 2019). These practices challenge the Eurocentric framing of welfare as a secular or Christian value and contribute to a more inclusive understanding of social solidarity.

Social capital theory, particularly the concepts of bonding, bridging, and linking capital, is used to analyze organizational networks. Building on the work of Putnam (2000), Bourdieu (1980), Woolcock, and Leonard (2004), the study critically examines how social ties are formed, mobilized, and constrained by power relations. Bonding social capital refers to trust and cooperation within a group, while bridging social capital captures relationships between different groups. Linking social capital, as defined by Woolcock and Szreter (2004), refers to connections across institutional hierarchies and gradients of power. These concepts are particularly relevant in the Swiss context, where Muslim organizations must navigate complex relationships with public institutions, often marked by asymmetrical power dynamics and limited recognition (Banfi, 2018; Brodard, 2022).

Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative approach, focusing on Muslim organizations founded between 2015 and 2020 in French- and German-speaking regions of Switzerland. Selected organizations include the Swiss Zakat Foundation, Swiss Barakah Charity, Dounia Charity, Mosaik Kulturverein and Tasamouh. Data collection methods include egocentric social network analysis using network free design drawing, a visual tools to map organizational relationships (Hollenstein, Töpfer & Pfeffer, 2020), but also semi-structured interviews with organization members and public welfare actors, participant observation during social welfare activities and observation of committee meetings, and document and website analysis to assess visibility and strategic positioning. The analysis will be conducted using ATLAS.ti software, combining deductive and inductive coding to identify themes and patterns (Perry, Roth & Small, 2024).

Preliminary findings from initial interviews suggest that Muslim organizations are sometimes approached by public institutions to fill gaps in welfare provision. These collaborations are often informal and hidden, reflecting underlying power asymmetries. For example, the Swiss Zakat Foundation was contacted by a cantonal social service to support a beneficiary, with the request that the relationship remain undisclosed. Similar dynamics were observed with Tasamouh. These

findings indicate that Muslim organizations play a strategic but constrained role in the Swiss welfare landscape, acting as gap-fillers while navigating complex institutional expectations and limitations. Their positioning is shaped not only by their religious identity but also by broader societal perceptions of Islam and migration.

Through this project, the study aims to contribute to a more inclusive understanding of welfare provision in Switzerland, foregrounding the contributions of Muslim actors and challenging dominant narratives about religion, migration, and social responsibility. By analyzing the welfare system from its margins and situating this analysis within the context of Switzerland's colonial entanglements, the research contributes to the development of a critical, postcolonial social network analysis that foregrounds power, inequality, and resilience.

Time Schedule (January 2025 – December 2028)
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Preparatory Phase (9 months / January - September 2025): Refinement of the research question, identification of the research gap, comprehensive literature review, and development of the research design.

Data Collection (12–20 months / September 2025 - September 2026): Fieldwork including observations, conducting semi-structured interviews and transcription of interviews.

Data Analysis (8–12 months / September 2026 - Mai 2027): Qualitative content analysis, interpretation of findings, and identification of recurring themes and patterns.

Writing Phase (ongoing from Year 1 / Mai 2027 - Mai 2028): Structuring of the dissertation and drafting of individual chapters.

Finalization Phase (4 months-Mai 2028 / September 2028): Formatting of the dissertation in accordance with the guidelines of the University of Fribourg, compilation of the bibliography, and preparation of appendices where applicable.

Submission of the Dissertation: September 2028

Oral Defense: December 2028

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