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## ***Chapter Eighteen***

### ***The Ramadan Controversy Dilemmas in Mediating between Cultures through the Study of Dutch and Iranian Media Discourses in the Post-Iranian Uprising***

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#### **Abstract**

Playing the role of mediator between Islam and the West is one that is particularly fraught with danger. Mediators often find themselves in a critical dilemma of placement of the self within larger contesting discourses. Tariq Ramadan, a Swiss-born Islamic scholar, is one such appointed mediator between Dutch statehood and its multiethnic Islamic population. He was invited by the Rotterdam City Council to serve as an integration advisor for its multicultural population. However, his affiliation with an Iranian TV station sponsored by the regime caused considerable consternation, with his credibility being questioned by the Council. The post-Iranian election and uprising triggered a wave of reactions culminating in the dismissal of this prominent scholar, recently named by *Time* magazine as one of the world's top one hundred scientists and thinkers. This chapter focuses on the nature of media discourses and ideological leanings among key actors to explain how these issues can escalate, often with severe consequences to those involved. The authors use this event as a springboard to analyze the role of public mediators in complex political and cultural environments, using the lens of mediation and dialogue. By attending to issues of language and the framing of perspectives in the media, this chapter proposes a nuanced and novel approach to mediation and discourse construction in arenas of chronic dispute.

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **THE CONTROVERSIAL CELEBRITY MEDIATOR BETWEEN ISLAM AND THE WEST**

Tariq Ramadan is a Swiss-born Arab Muslim scholar and activist renowned for his expansive contributions to the understanding of Muslims in European society. He has been placed by the *British Prospect* and the *American Foreign Policy* magazines as eighth in a list of the world's top one hundred contemporary intellectuals in 2008 (List 2008). While Swiss in nationality, he comes with a notable ancestral background of political power, as the son of Said Ramadan and the grandson of Hassan al Banna, who in 1928 founded the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt (Laurence 2007). Given his unique crosscultural positioning, he has been sought after to serve as a key advisor and mediator between the West and the Islamic domains. After all, his view appears reconciliatory, emphasizing the distinction between religion and culture, where Islamic values and European citizenship are not necessarily in conflict. Yet, controversy seems to follow him no matter where he goes

(Buruma 2007). In 2004, his visa to the United States was revoked using the ideological exclusion provision of the USA PATRIOT Act due to his visible vocal and financial support to the Palestinian cause, interpreted as supporting and financing terrorism. He has been blacklisted by Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, and Egypt. Adding to the list of tensions, he has been caught in several battles in France, including being accused of being an anti-Semitic for attacking French-Jewish intellectuals in their defense of Israel. That said, he is tremendously popular, particularly among young, educated European Muslims for negotiating Islamic and Western identity and culture and serving as a dignified role model to follow (Ramdani 2009).

### **CLASH OF THE TITANS: ROTTERDAM CITY COUNCIL VERSUS TARIQ RAMADAN**

Tensions among the Dutch regarding the Muslim community are at an alltime high. Moroccan and Turkish immigrants came in large numbers in the 1970s to labor and stayed on, balkanizing into low-income neighborhoods with poor housing quality, chronic unemployment, and high levels of crime. Distrust among the non-Muslim Dutch has not just circulated, but also exponentially grown particularly because incidents such as the murder of Theo van Gogh by Mohammed Bouyeri, a Moroccan-Dutch Islamic extremist in November 2004, as well as the arrest of the Hofstad Group on charges of terrorism, mark their psyche. In the meantime, Muslims have witnessed increasing suspicion and fear of them that seem to gain strength as time goes on. In 2006, a poll was taken on perceptions in Dutch society of Islam. It was found that 63 percent of Dutch citizens felt that Islam is incompatible with modern European life, and many expressed being threatened by immigrant or Muslim young people (Islam 2006). Such sentiments feed into further social segregation of the Muslim community from the rest of the society. This is reflected partly in contemporary Dutch politics where Geert Wilder, the hard-right, anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant politician, is now ahead in the EU polls, particularly gaining momentum on issues of immigration, beliefs of Islam, banning of the *burqa*, and control of Moroccan youth in the cities. While about 5 percent of the total Dutch population is Muslim, Muslims currently dominate the media debates on culture and politics (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2002, November). As these feelings resonate in the media and seep into general discourse, many Muslims claim to experience alienation and disconnect from both their first-generation immigrant parents and from Dutch society. Instead, Islam is seen as the pervasive glue, creating an affiliation that transcends national boundaries, creating a global Muslim community feeling. Therefore, the Dutch government, in order to prevent further alienation, hired Ramadan in 2007 to serve as a key advisor on civic integration and multicultural policies. In particular, he was invited by the Rotterdam City Council, since about half of the population in Rotterdam are not of Dutch origin, and the city has currently enormous socioeconomic-cultural problems. His duties were to provide participatory dialogues on religious identity and citizenship with a special emphasis on Islam as well as to shape social policies

on Islamic-Dutch cultural integration.

This relationship had already started to fray by early 2009 as Ramadan was accused by the *Gay Krant*, a newspaper for the homosexual community, for making homophobic and misogynistic statements. This prompted a demand by the right-wing political party to dismiss Ramadan as city adviser. However, having investigated these accusations further, the case was dropped. Furthermore, his hosting of the *Islam and Life* show on an Iranian Press TV station, which is financed by the Iranian regime, seemed to stir sentiments again. This show is intended to be primarily an educational platform on Islam as a way of life for a multiethnic and global audience, Muslim and non-Muslim alike. Yet, with the Iranian election and uprising, a renewed impetus to dismiss Ramadan came about, and this time succeeded. The rationale by the Rotterdam City Council was as follows:

The council finds that in deciding to work with Press TV, Professor Ramadan has failed to take sufficient account of the sentiments that this might evoke in Rotterdam and beyond. This is made worse by the fact that he continued to work there after the elections in Iran when the authorities very seriously clamped down on freedom of speech (Van Eerten 2009).

In response, Ramadan released a statement defending his choices. In essence, he attributes this dismissal as deeply politically driven, serving the upcoming Dutch elections. More importantly, he argues that any mediation takes place at the internal level and that it is dangerous to view the Iranian regime, however tempting, as a homogenous entity:

In Iran, the relationship between religion and politics is extremely complex. The simplistic view that posits two opposing camps—the fundamentalist conservatives versus the democratic reformists—displays a profound ignorance of Iranian reality. Moreover, no evolution toward democratic transparency can take place under pressure from the West: the process will be internal, lengthy and painful (2009).

## **DIALOGUES ACROSS CROSS-NATIONAL MEDIASCAPES**

The furor in the media mirrors the public's confused expectations of Ramadan. In the next few paragraphs, we will explore why it is necessary to be realistic about his role as a mediator in the discourse between cultures.

## **DEAD-ENDS IN THE ISLAM-WEST DEBATE**

Islam and Christianity have a tremendous history in the competition for converts. Much literature has been written about how these two great religions and their respective cultures interact, respond, and react to one another (Blankenhorn, Filali-Ansary, and Mneimneh 2005; Paden 2005). While this is not the place to go deeply into the reasons for such long-standing disputes and tensions between these two religions, it is important to keep in mind that the

forces of globalization have compelled these two cultures to encounter one another more frequently, more intimately, and more visibly. These encounters have seeped into all realms of public life, pressurizing state involvement. It would be naïve to see these two forces as sharing equal platforms in power and politics with the state, particularly in the West. That said, it would be equally naïve to perceive Islamic forces as primarily victims and marginalized forces, given their larger global affiliation, community, and distinct and diverse cultures.

Therefore, for the purposes of conciliation, the debate has taken on multiple tangents, sometimes simultaneously, of suppression, of outlawing, of embracing, and of understanding. One such strand in the debate is the faith versus freedom paradox: one party free to maintain the authenticity of their religion while the other party equally free to reject this very authenticity and even claim infringement on their public sphere. State versus religion is another age-old binary, where citizenship and belief struggle to reconcile. Multiple efforts at resolving these tensions are being undertaken; one such effort is to emphasize universal human values over religious specific values, with the idea of ironing out all differences. This, however, has been a weak resolve as it is too abstract and too broad to be applied to specific social policy. Another effort is that of multiculturalism, of live and let live; yet, this fosters a compartmentalization of cultures with little resemblance to social realities of cross-cultural interaction. A third approach has been to clearly state what constitutes public versus private practice since “public expression of religious conviction, is inherently problematic” (Blankenhorn et al. 2005). This erasing of difference publicly while giving free reign to it privately rests on the rationale that visibility of belief is prime provocation. In minimizing the presence of difference, social harmony can prevail.

However, as we have seen in multiple recent public controversies, whether it was the proposition to ban the headscarf in France (Graff 2004) or the Swiss vote on banning the building of minarets in their country (Switzerland Votes 2009), this is hardly an easy idea to implement. These public controversies call attention to the fact that religious and cultural practices are hardly something that can be easily contained in the private realm without deeply alienating, offending, and in general, creating tremendous conflict. Yet another strategy of resolution is to create bifurcations within the contentious religious group, which in this case, would be the Islamic population. Therefore, media discourses of radical or fundamentalist Islam versus normal or moderate Islam are intended to appease both parties, acknowledging the plethora of violence in the name of Islam at the same time acknowledging that the majority of the Islamic practicing population are “decent, faithful and peaceful” (Blankenhorn et al. 2005). This is yet another dead end, however, in conflict resolution, as this framing of schizophrenia within this community is seen as condescending and, at worst, deeply offensive. This implies that membership within such a faith comes with a need to prove in public one’s

qualification of moderation. Underlining these multiple dead ends is found in the following:

The presumption of incompatibility has provided the dominant motif for storytelling about Islamic and Western cultures. Both Western observers and Muslims paint with broad brushstrokes when they engage in generalization about macro-cultural units of analysis, and fail to account for the diverse strands of cultural legacies. As protagonists of the story of incompatibility, they often resort to a language of exclusivity. This language is preoccupied with defining boundaries, and manifests a retreat from intercultural experiences to psychological and cultural segregation. Implicitly or explicitly, the “other” is depicted as a threatening monolith. The result is that Muslim and Western analysts have placed such strong emphasis on extremist tendencies among their purported adversaries that a “clash of symbols” has begun to emerge, in which the most superficial and eye-catching aspects of the “other” are highlighted at the expense of shared and convergent values (Said and Funk 2002).

In essence, the differences between Islam and the West are portrayed as the “clash of civilizations,” a wasted effort at reconciliation where the twain shall never meet; counteracting this is the euphoric effort to build and demonstrate common grounds between these cultures, often portrayed as aligning closely with the Western framework of ideals and values.

## **WHAT IS THE ROLE OF A MEDIATOR IN POLITICAL AND SOCIOCULTURAL CONFLICT?**

In order to understand the role of mediators in political or sociocultural situations, we need to differentiate between facilitators and mediators. At best a TV show host is a neutral facilitator who brings panelists with conflicting points of view to engage in a conversation with each other. She does not share her own perspectives, seek to persuade, or resolve disputes. Through skillful facilitation, she seeks clarification and greater understanding. At worst the TV host is a partisan moderator with strong views who through debate challenges and tries to persuade people to come around to his point of view. From what we understand, Tariq Ramadan was a moderator who brought a very specific point of view to the show, *Islam and Life*. This does not perforce mean that he could not have been neutral, just that his strong opinions within and outside of the show compromised his neutrality.

Mediation is a dispute resolution methodology with a well-defined process. The mediator brings parties in conflict together, helps them develop better understanding, and moves them toward resolution. According to Moore, Mediation is generally defined as the intervention in a negotiation or a conflict of an acceptable third party who has limited or no authoritative power, who assists the involved parties to voluntarily reach a mutually acceptable settlement of the issues in dispute. In addition to addressing substantive issues, mediation may also establish or strengthen relationships of trust and respect between parties or terminate relationships in a manner that minimizes emotional costs and

psychological harm (Moore 2003).

While there are many schools of mediation and types of mediators, (Karpov and Haywood 1998; Saikal 2003), the two commonly used in political and sociocultural situations are third-party neutral mediators, whom I will call professional mediators, and credible figures from the disputing groups, whom I will call interested mediators. The first group has specialized training and a type of neutrality called omnipartiality; that is, they try to empathize with both sides and to help all parties meet their genuine interests. The second group uses its influence to bring people to the table for dialogue and to resolve conflict.

### **WHY DID THE IRANIAN UPRISING SERVE AS A KEY TRIGGER TO DISMISS RAMADAN?**

Unlike professional mediators or genuine third-party facilitators, Ramadan, being from and functioning within two worlds, finds himself in the all-too-predictable quandary of being an advisor to the two communities as well as trying to maintain enough distance to be credible as an intermediary. This is an unenviable situation for him. In a crisis situation (if it were not the Iranian election, it might well have been another issue some months down the line), his audiences would, naturally enough, force him to choose sides. It is harder for a nonprofessional or interested mediator (one who has substantive interests in the case or an investment in the outcome) to maintain distance from the content of the issues at stake, as opposed to the professional mediator whose primary interest, other than helping polarized groups engage with each other, is in maintaining the integrity of the process. The Iranian election was merely the immediate provocation; the multiple roles inhabited by Ramadan were eventually unsustainable.

Tariq Ramadan's role in the discourse between Islam and the West is shaped by his being in the awkward situation of someone who straddles both cultures. However, those who wanted him to be a bridge builder, one who could help integrate a recalcitrant Muslim minority with a restive and suspicious majority, overestimated his value as a true mediator. Neutrality is critical to be trusted as a mediator between polarized groups. "I want to be an activist professor," Dr. Ramadan once told Ian Buruma. Being an activist requires that you choose sides. According to Scott Appleby, He [Ramadan] is accused of being Janus-faced. Well, of course he presents different faces to different audiences . . . he considers the opening he finds in his audience. Ramadan is in that sense a politician. He cultivates various publics in the Muslim world on a variety of issues . . . he's got his ear to the ground of the Muslim world (Buruma 2007).

While this strategy may help him retain the ear of the Muslims, it also leaves his Western audiences bemused by his contradictory statements. Hence, even as he is banned in some Islamic countries for not being Muslim

enough, he is accused of doublespeak by his Western critics.

### **SHOULD MEDIATORS BE FROM EITHER SIDE OF A DIVIDE TO BE GENUINE FACILITATORS?**

Because “the identity of the mediator affects the mediator’s influence, trust, and legitimacy” (Bercovitch 2007), the case is often made that authority figures such as religious leaders and prominent personalities from one or the other religion have an advantage over professional omnipartial mediators. Theorists who claim this do so because they suggest that these authority figures are usually trusted persons, have influence and leverage, and can, where necessary, bring resources and pressure to bear on the parties to settle. While this type of mediation has historically been used often, we need to recognize some of its limitations:

1. Authority figures, when they are trusted, can both bring people to the table and keep them there. However, when they bring extrinsic pressure on their people to create agreements, they can run the risk of alienating the very people who trust them.
2. Similarly, authority figures are often dependent upon the community for their own credibility. When their views cease to reflect the bias and prejudices of the larger group, they risk losing their authority.
3. Religious leaders are constrained by their own strong belief systems and allegiances to their community. When mediating disputes involving their own and competing groups, they are likely to be viewed as partisan and distrusted by the other party.
4. While persons rooted in a culture or religion are far more knowledgeable and able to bring the symbols and signs of their religion into the discussion, this intimacy itself can make it harder for them to step outside of the boundaries, vocabulary, and biases of their group. Where the fundamentals of their faith are at odds with those of the other group, it can be difficult for them to mediate. Sometimes in order to keep the mediation going, they are forced to seek particular interpretations or passages that either water down the problem tenets and passages or dilute them sufficiently to make them seem less threatening and more acceptable. This prevents them from getting to the volatile core issues that need to be addressed. Without being able to honestly address core divisive issues, mediation cannot create genuine understanding, empathy, or resolution.

The professional mediator’s trust and credibility do not inherently come from the person being from and belonging to a certain ethnicity, religion, or nationality, while it is true that all these do play a part in building trust, at least in the beginning. Credibility comes from a track record; from the skill and ability to demonstrate a willingness to listen and be empathic to the party’s needs and vulnerabilities; from the ability to create and sustain a safe space where difficult conversations can be had; and from the trust that no coercion or pressure will be put on the parties to get them to sign off on

agreements that harm them. A professional mediator, not having to speak for a constituency, also has the ability to raise and facilitate discussions, however painful, in a safe environment.

The professional mediator's agreements are, at the point of creating, nonbinding, but can be entered into court records or written up as a contract with the help of lawyers. Once having done so, the agreements become binding and also have the advantage of having been crafted by the parties themselves and hence are more likely to be followed through. In order to be effective, it is necessary for a mediator to have a working knowledge of the domain areas, whether they are religion, culture, or economic issues; it is not necessary for the mediator to be from within or of the culture.

### **MEDIA AND THE CONDUCT OF MEDIATION IN THE PUBLIC GLARE**

Television is arguably the major institution that mediates contemporary public discourse (Dahlgren 1995). It is well accepted that this technological forum allows for multiple voices to circulate and negotiate, shaping public perception on issues and events. Television is an active participant and key instrument in the cultivation of citizenship and culture (Livingstone and Lunt 1995). Yet, the nature of mass media discourse is often reduced to the level of spectacle, given its inherent need to appeal to and to entertain a large and varied audience demographic. Furthermore, ongoing sociocultural dialogue, the essence of genuine mediation, is constrained by the structural allowances of the television medium.

This is not to say that media figures have little influence in public debate. On the contrary, they can be deeply influential and pivotal in public debates, providing certain framing of sensitive issues and events that can dominate audience perceptions. Media personalities also often have the capacity to bring differing perspectives to the table. While this is necessary, the ability to present multiple perspectives does not per se lend itself to helping parties move toward the resolution of their disputes.

Ramadan was trying to play too many contradictory roles—an Islamic expert, TV show host, a bridge builder who had strong opinions of his own, an advisor on intercultural integration, and a neutral mediator. He was bound to alienate some of his audience as well as his employers. For good reasons, most mediation happens outside of the public glare. It is one thing to raise awareness and educate the people about various standpoints and perspectives through public discussions in the media. It is quite another to expect well-entrenched parties to engage in sensitive discussions in public. It is an axiom that for mediation to work, the parties require a safe space where they can talk freely and evince curiosity about the other side's perspectives even when these perspectives are at first glance deeply offensive, problematic, and may entail dredging up historic grievances. In doing so, parties are likely to make themselves vulnerable to having their cherished



ideas questioned and even proven. There is also the risk of upsetting the more orthodox members of their own constituencies who may accuse them of selling out or betrayal.

Hence, we need to recognize the role media can play in this kind of discourse and its limitations. The discourse that takes place in the media can help inform and educate. We also need to bear in mind that deep-rooted political and cultural ideologies and social beliefs are rarely changed because of articles and TV shows. More often than not, people tune out of media that they disagree with and switch to channels that validate their biases. Issues related to religion, culture, and identity can rarely be discussed at the rational and empirical level because there are historic and emotional issues at stake. People need safe spaces and, most of the time, private conversations and dialogues for airing, let alone challenging, deep-seated beliefs. The problem with the public conduct of mediation is that it encourages public posturing, oversimplification of very complex issues, and a further polarizing of the groups. Leaders and critics of both sides find themselves constrained by the need to protect, defend, and justify their opinions. There is little learning and almost no reflection that can take place in public.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

Mediation is a complex and messy process, and dialogue is hard to condense into sound bites. After all, “conflict resolution does more than address material clashes of interest; it speaks to social reintegration, restoration and redemption, existential security, personal transcendence and transformation” (Said and Funk 2002). Mediators must eschew the glare of publicity if they want to do real work. Activists can communicate in order to influence. Journalists and academics who are acceptable to both sides must choose whether they will use their expertise to influence public opinion through the media or whether they want to engage in helping parties understand each other and negotiate differences. If the latter, they would be better off to keep their opinions to themselves and do the hard work of helping polarized groups engage behind the scenes. The authors, while recognizing the importance of the role that public intellectuals such as Tariq Ramadan play in the discourse between Islam and the West, cannot but feel that in being party to and subject of the discussion themselves, they cannot play the role of a neutral mediator. Therefore, this essay is by no means a case in support of the dismissal of Ramadan from his mediation post at Rotterdam. Instead, we bring to the surface what we consider the more relevant issue of what constitutes a suitable mediator for such chronic and sensitive cross-cultural realities, highlighting the tradeoffs that occur in appointing a highly public figure such as Ramadan to address the growing “Islamophobia” in the Netherlands.

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