
Let's Do It Our Way:

Muslim Youth Redefining Leadership

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Introduction

We're living at a moment of great change in the lives of millions of Muslim youth across the world. Sparked by what is now known as the Arab Spring, youth in Muslim countries everywhere are reassessing notions of citizenship and of leadership – both how to be led, and how to lead others. Their views are taking centre stage in their national political systems, in most cases for the first time ever. These views, seen by many as a breath of fresh air reinvigorating decrepit systems that have stood in place for tens, even hundreds, of years, are important to understand for many reasons. Not least because they provide a valuable steer on, and a lens through which to comprehend events on the ground across the Middle East and North Africa today, as pro-democratic revolutions continue to strain against autocratic regimes that struggle to hold on to power and relevance. But also because these are the youth who have in their hands the power to shape the future of the Muslim world, and with it, the world at large. What they believe in, the values they are fighting for, and the way they want to be treated, will have long-lasting repercussions within not only their political systems but their civic societies, their educational systems, their commercial and economic worlds and their interactions with the rest of the non-Muslim world. Companies, governments, organisations and individuals who wish to interact with this new generation of educated, informed and future-focused Muslims, not just in the Middle East but all over the world, need to internalise the basis of the values and beliefs that are guiding them in order to ensure a relationship of mutual benefit and understanding in the future.

Our research

Our previous research and global Muslim consumer segmentation¹ had established that a shift in focus was required, from understanding the group we labelled the Traditionalists (who tended to be older, more rooted in their communities, very dependent on their faith as guidance) to understanding the Futurists, who we believed were vanguards of things to come. The Futurists are younger, and strikingly different in many ways – in their openness to the world, the way they wear their faith proudly but personalise it as they need to, in their knowledge and intellect, their ambition and hunger for success, and in their critical, challenging nature. They are the generation of 'new Muslim consumers', the youthful vanguard of behaviour in global Muslim world, from Indonesia to Iran, for years to come. In our 2010 research into them, we turned up clues that pointed towards a largely generational gap in attitude and mindset that could spark ideological revolutions of the kind we have gone on to witness in 2011. We believe that many of the traits we identified, such as impatience with rhetoric and a belief in the power of community action, came to the fore during the recent Arab Spring and firmly established themselves as the values of a new generation of young Muslims. But we felt we needed to understand these values even better in the light of the tumultuous few months following the first protests in Tunis in January 2011.

To this end, we have now conducted a piece of online research between March and April 2011 – to tap into attitudes to leadership amongst young Muslims across the world at this key juncture. We had a total global sample of 450, split equally between male and female respondents. Our focus was on understanding the Futurists, who therefore formed about 75% of our total sample, with small groups of Traditionalists and non-Muslim respondents also being included to reveal valuable counterpoints to their views. In terms of geographical split, our research covered four important macro-regions in the

¹ See *Brands, Islam and The New Muslim Consumer: How to Build Brands that Appeal to the Muslim Consumer Today*, published by Ogilvy Noor, June 2010.

Muslim world – South East Asia (SEA), South and Central Asia (SCA), the Middle East & North Africa (MENA) and Western Europe & North America (WENA). Responses from each region have been equally weighted to allow for accurate geographical comparisons where they are helpful.

Our findings

Our key finding is that there has indeed been a **seismic shift in the attitudes and values** that define this generation of young Muslims, as they have been forced to articulate what they believe in, and been thrust, in some cases, in direct opposition to their countries’ leadership systems. They’ve pro-actively voiced opinions about the kinds of leadership they’d prefer and the kind of society they’d like to live in, both on a national and global level. It’s fair to say that young Muslims today see themselves as the flag-bearers of a new generation of leaders, embodying a whole new set of values that are as much out of sync with the way things were as they are indicative of the bold new world they want to live in. Our table below broadly summarizes this shift.

Definitions of Leadership: An Attitudinal Shift	
FROM...	TO...
Didactic	Consensual
Unilateral	Multilateral
Packaged	Genuine
Rhetoric-driven	Action-oriented
Imposed	Elected
Opaque	Transparent
Unquestioned	Accountable
Complacent	Restless
Rigid	Flexible
Paternal	Partnering
Benevolent	Equal
Distant	Empathetic
Nepotistic	Meritocratic
Cautious	Entrepreneurial
Top down	Grass roots
Hubristic	Humble
Out of touch	Connected
Contrived	Intuitive
Feared	Loved

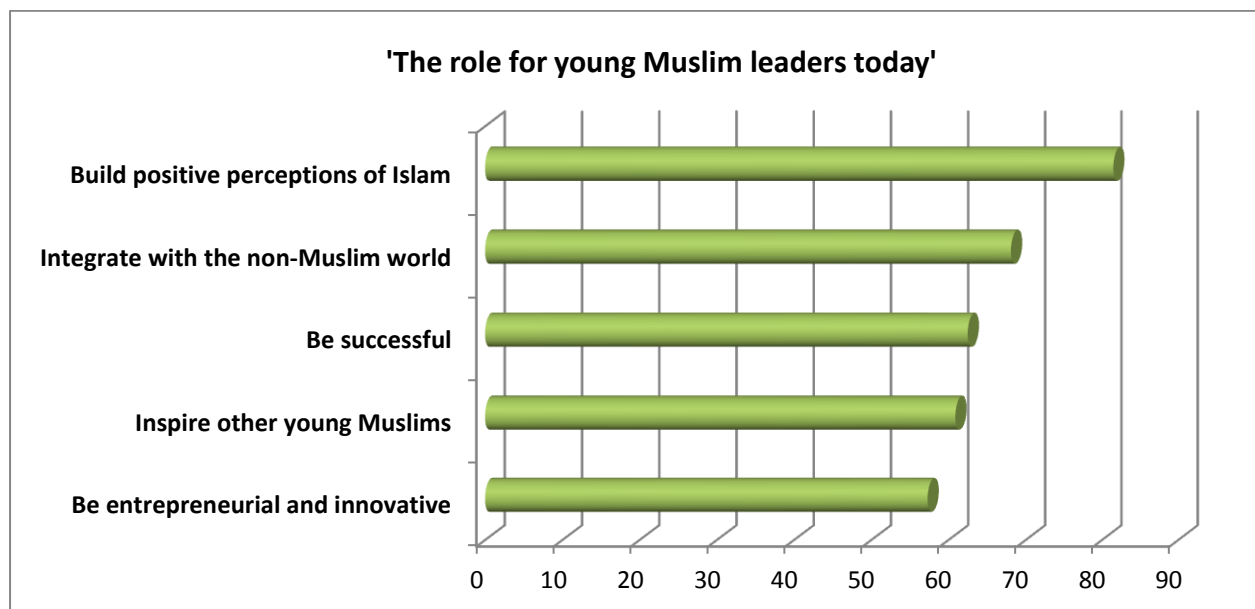
The important thing about this enormous attitudinal shift is that these emergent values or redefined visions of leadership go beyond the events of the Arab Spring. They're not just political and local shifts but also commercial, social, creative, regional, even global. This explains the domino effect that took place following the first protests in Egypt. It means that other organisations, or anyone in authority, must reassess where they stand in order not to be equally vulnerable. So while it is tempting to read this data in solely political terms, the fact is the values of the new generation are going to shape modes of behaviour with all aspects of society. It is of significance to anyone attempting to engage in a

conversation with this group in any Muslim country. If global corporations are to engage successfully with them either as partners, employers, or providers of goods and services, the onus is on them to understand these values better.

In order to do so, it's important to understand the roots of this brave new world that they are trying to create. The great attitudinal shift as captured above is a useful snapshot. Within it lie many of the stories around how young Muslims today want to live their lives – how they want to lead and be led, how they want to see the world and be seen by it. In order to fully understand this, we asked young Futurists a number of questions about what it means to be Muslim in the modern global context today, as perceived by them themselves.

The core values that they associate with Islam are indeed timeless. 'Honesty' tops the list amongst Futurist respondents the world over. This is closely followed by 'respect' (very strongly felt in the MENA and WENA regions) and 'tolerance' (strongly felt across Asia, both SEA and SCA). Then come 'equality' and 'humility', both key Islamic values that are strongly adhered to across all regions. It is telling that all of the top five values they associate with Islam are social values, not individual values. This points towards their very outward, open, people-oriented understanding of Islam.

With this core understanding of Islam in mind, we then asked them to identify for us the key roles that they believed young Muslim leaders today must fulfil – leadership here being defined in its broadest sense. Their top five responses provide an illuminating framework through which to understand the kind of new world that these young idealists are striving to create and provide some clues as to how we might work with them in doing so.



We'll go through each of these 'roles' in detail, teasing out aspects of behaviour that are important to the Futurists, and that serve to give us a fuller understanding of how their redefinition of leadership will continue to affect all interactions with them here onwards.

1. 'Build Positive Perceptions of Islam'

Positivity wins. While only 44% of Futurist respondents thought it important to 'battle negative perceptions of Islam', a full 82%, almost double, felt that it was important to 'build positive perceptions of Islam'. This is a telling comparison, one that points towards their general preference for the constructive and positive stance in the face of the destructive or negative.

Universal, yet misunderstood. They feel that their values, rather than being just 'Islamic', are more fundamentally universal – a full 99% agreed that 'Islamic values are universal human values'. At the same time, nearly just as many, 97%, felt that Islamic values and Islam as a whole are misunderstood by the non-Muslim world. At a time when the positive values of Islam such as equality, loyalty, peacefulness and compassion are so in need, it is not surprising to register their frustration at how the non-Muslim view of Islam is largely unaware of values such as these that they depend on to guide their own lives.

A personal responsibility. A full 94% of Futurists agreed that 'it is my responsibility to improve perceptions of my religion'. While they feel that Islam is generally misunderstood by the world at large, they also believe that it is very much their duty on an individual level, to do what they can to better this. This is not a generation who believe in sweeping statements of political or corporate bravado, nor do they have much faith in the long-standing institutions of the Muslim world being able to shift global perceptions. This is a generation who believe in grassroots action to bring about real change on the ground and the power of that action in being able to mobilise others and shift global perceptions.

Living by example. One of the ways in which they do this is by living more honestly Muslim lives – rather than living one life in private and another in public, this generation believe that achieving clarity of definition of who they are is important across all aspects of their lives. 95% of Futurists agreed that it's important to live both their private and public lives in accordance with Islamic values. They want their positive values to shine as beacons of what they believe in, and as representations of the positive aspects of Islam. When probed on what these Islamic values are that define how they live, Futurists across all regions listed 'honesty', 'respect', 'tolerance' and 'loyalty' as the values that they personally attempt to live by. A greater number of women are also likely to include 'dignity' on that list. And while 94% of our total sample of Futurists were in agreement that Islamic values guide them in their daily lives, men seemed to feel this even more strongly than women (with 66% of them 'fully agreeing' compared with 54% of females).

2. 'Integrate with the non-Muslim world'

Fair portrayal. Given their strong belief that Islamic values are universal, and the extent to which they feel misunderstood, it's not surprising that they feel this is one of the key responsibilities of Muslim leaders today. They want more than anything else to affect a rapprochement with the non-Muslim world that they feel has held them unfairly in suspicion and apprehension for too long, but one that is fair and based on mutual understanding.

Flexible practice. One of their key ways of doing this is to exercise their great belief in flexibility. Over 70% of Futurist respondents felt that being a good Muslim in the modern context necessitated flexibility and adaptability to circumstance. This is nowhere truer than in the context of being Muslim and surrounded by *non-Muslim* values and customs as a daily way of life, where the key Islamic value of tolerance is called for. To the statement 'a good Muslim is a practising Muslim', more Futurists

‘somewhat agreed’ (46%) than ‘fully agreed’ (44%). A much higher proportion of Traditionalists when faced with the same statement ‘fully agreed’ (60%), pointing to the younger generation’s greater flexibility and openness to multiple viewpoints on this front. Whilst there’s no doubt that the practice of faith is an important part of being Muslim to them – only 11% felt that it wasn’t – they see it as a personalised choice. As one young Turkish Futurist put it, ‘how you practise your faith is a personal decision and should be up to you’.

Staying true to oneself. But while they look for global integration, they still assume a core adherence to faith. As a young Indonesian respondent put it, ‘the world is changing in terms of culture and technology, so we must balance our modern lifestyles with Islamic ways. But new things will always turn out positive as long as we carry along strong Muslim values in living life’.

Equal terms. Interestingly, it was the MENA respondents who felt the need for flexibility and adaptability in the practice of religion the most (at 80%) while the Futurists of WENA were in milder agreement at 66%. This is perhaps reflective of the fact that flexibility and adaptation are very much natural to their lives already, being young Muslims in the largely non-Muslim contexts of Western Europe and North America, and that they are much more likely to perceive the need for flexibility and adaptability reciprocally, that is, from the non-Muslim communities that they live within. And indeed, this kind of reciprocity is crucial to them – it is again the WENA respondents who are in strongest agreement that ‘Muslims today need the support of the global non-Muslim community’ (89%).

Integration with the non-Muslim world, and an ability to co-exist in complementary value systems, will therefore be one of the key directions in which they will want both their own lives and their leadership styles to develop in future.

3. ‘Be Successful / Be Leaders in their Chosen Field’

Seeking success. One of the main ways in which their Islamic values form a bedrock for how Futurists live their lives is in their ambition to be successful. When asked how Islamic values guide and affect their lives, 83% say that their ‘faith inspires them to strive for success’. It’s no secret that this is a highly ambitious generation, equipped with the skills and education to go far beyond their parents’ achievements. As many are finding themselves at the cusp of historical and political change, more often than not their faith provides a valuable supportive resource in propelling them forwards. It’s their faith, too, that gives them the strength to pick themselves back up when they’ve been knocked down or when challenged, with 91% of all Futurists agreeing that their faith ‘gives me the strength to reach for my goals even in the face of adversity’.

Success defined broadly. Doing nothing is rarely an option and is the reason why high unemployment rates across the MENA region come as such a bitter blow to many – indeed, as the spark for the original Bouazizi riots in Egypt. Indeed, striving for success is inherently Islamic – commerce was a part of the Islamic nation right from the start, with Khadijah the wife of the Prophet (pbuh) as the very first businesswoman. Success is seen a good thing, and money can be too – if used wisely. But the important thing to understand is that Futurists tend to quantify success not through financial measures alone, but through the leadership roles that they are able to carve out for themselves, the amount of knowledge or specialist expertise they are able to amass, and through the amount of greater community and social good they are able to effect.

Constructive criticism. They are certainly ambitious and progress-oriented, but they’re also quite clear about the nature of success they seek, and the conditions for achieving that kind of success. They are not a generation of anti-authoritarian anarchists. They believe in change and in the need for change at

the present time, but they are also believers in the stability of an established order where it exists. Indeed, 94% of them agree that ‘respect in authority means that we are all working towards a common goal’. Islam being a relatively rule-oriented belief system, Muslim culture tends resultantly to be comfortable with prescribed systems of organisation or behaviour – especially when they are yielding results. Our young Futurists wouldn’t see any point in rebellion simply for the sake of it. It is when the systems are not working, or delivering as they are meant to deliver, that this generation of Muslims really come into their own. Educated and with minds of their own, Futurists are not afraid to challenge the status quo when they feel they may be getting a raw deal, and this is an important part of their definitions of progress and success.

4. ‘Inspire other young Muslims’

Leaders that lead. Related to the importance of success to Futurists is the huge social impact they see it having, not least through positive role-modelling for other younger Muslims. In Muslim culture there is something of the cult of leadership, in that a bold, charismatic leader can usually harness a lot of love and support. It is very important to them that the new style of leadership be tangibly and obviously successful, have high moral standards and seek to improve the lives of those around them. Interestingly, these young idealists, while inspired by all successful people everywhere, are most deeply inspired by leaders who are ‘both ambitious and devout’ (87%) – looking to role models who set out by example that success does not necessarily have to come at the cost of faith, or vice versa.

Collective power. Part of their desire to inspire others is their belief in the collective. They feel that inspiring a wider cohort of young Muslims is their duty, and one of the ways in which they can ensure their voices are better heard. Collectively, they are louder, and they want to draw on the power of today’s young Muslim collective. 87% agreed that ‘it is my duty to give back to my Muslim community’. Fuelled by technologies that connect rather than isolate, this is a collaborative generation who believe in the power of the collective. Whereas once their ‘in-group’, to use a term favoured by cultural anthropologists, may have included only family and friends, today they have extended their in-group to include anyone with a shared belief in a cause or a shared point of view on the world. So while they believe that it’s their personal responsibility both to improve perceptions of Islam and to give back to their communities, they feel that they are doing this very much in connection with a whole generation of like-minded youth. 96% believe that ‘technology has meant that young Muslims hold more power in their hands than ever before’, and they are determined to use this power their way.

Community first. A full 98% of the Futurists agree that ‘real leadership benefits not just a few people closest to those in power, but everyone in society’. To them, leading is about raising everyone along with you, and the most powerful entities, whether they be brands or grassroots organisations, are those that put the community above the individual. Importantly, their personal belief in community and collaboration affects their view of others’ responsibilities when it comes to the same – with 92% saying that they’d expect companies to respect and collaborate with the Muslim community (regardless of the company’s own origins). They also, in a direct illustration of their widened in-group, say that they hold companies and governments accountable ‘to the same standards as their friends and family’ (90%).

5. ‘Be entrepreneurial and innovative’

From consumers to creators. Ever focused on the future, this generation of Muslim youth have their sights set on going from being merely the world’s consumers to being the world’s producers – of ideas, of innovation, technology, or inspiration. As one young respondent in the Middle East said, ‘the time for us to just blindly consume the world’s ideas is over. We need to show the world that we can produce great things too’.

New paths. Whilst taking unnecessary risks and thinking unconventionally may have come less naturally to, or even been frowned upon by, the Traditionalists, for the Futurists, the future lies in the hands of those who are unafraid to create new solutions. Their role models are shifting from being just those who are successful in traditional fields to those who are achieving success in non-traditional routes – like media figures, sports personalities, community activists and so on.

Brave vision. Entrepreneurial leadership requires a bold vision and the passion and fearlessness to make it happen. Futurists are often living in the kinds of societies where it can be easier to follow the well-trodden set path than to challenge or deviate from the status quo. 98% of Futurists felt that true leadership must embody ‘a bold vision and a passion to follow that vision through’ Although this was felt slightly more strongly by males (75% fully agreeing) than by females (61% fully agreeing), there’s no doubt that on the whole visionary leaders who are unafraid to break out of the mould to follow a personal passion are considered inspirational models of new leadership.

Support. They crave a world in which entrepreneurship and non-traditional routes are tangibly supported, and given the space to grow. Johor Corporation in South East Asia launched its “BusinessJihad” concept to encourage young talent to embrace entrepreneurship – this is exactly the kind of initiative they would like to see much more of.

Conclusion: Towards A New Leadership

This is a generation who have strong views on their role in life, how it affects others, how others affect them, and in particular how they want to be treated. In this understanding of being both instigators and recipients of change, they are perhaps the generation most acutely aware of their potential impact on the world. Having now understood in greater detail the component parts of their new vision of leadership, we are able to better understand the kind of world they want to live in. When asked about the qualities of true leadership, the values they put first include ‘honesty’, ‘vision’, ‘accountability’, ‘respect’ and ‘fairness’. Surrounded as they often are by nepotistic and corrupt systems of government and commerce in which advancement is predicated on connections and power, a fierce strain of their wish for change is their desire for equality and fairness – they dream of a meritocracy. With this comes the desire for greater information and clarity in everything – as one respondent in Pakistan put it, ‘a good leader must be able to tell you the Whys, not just the Nos’. Transparency and accountability are not just corporate buzzwords for them. They’re values, and very Islamic ones no less, that they crave on a daily basis.

Another thing they demand is better communication. This is a communicative generation, who only stop what they are doing long enough to update the world about it. 82% of them believe that today’s generation of young Muslims are more expressive of their faith than previous generations, with the highest agreement being in the WENA region at 94%. They are a generation that genuinely believes in the power of expression and communication to bring about change, especially when faced with systems that feel ripe for change, or that they feel opposed to. At the same time, their communications-savviness means that they are quick to see through the insincerity of spin. In a sense, they’ve learned to deconstruct the brands and the myths that have surrounded the political regimes in many of their countries – as a young Pakistani respondent put it, they’re now at a stage where they’d like ‘leadership, not salesmanship’. It is only logical to assume that they will increasingly begin to use this critical faculty with everyone, not just companies or political leaders but anyone with a product and a message.

It is not so much that they would like to see a complete devolution of power, from the hands of the one to the many, but rather that they would like to see a real change in the quality of the power, and the way

it is exercised. While they don't want to overthrow everything, they are tired of being treated as invisible. They want their voice to count, with 97% agreeing strongly that true leaders should 'involve everyone in equal and respectful dialogue'. As one Malaysian respondent put it, 'Yesterday's leaders were about one way, whereas now there can be many ways, many perspectives, and all are welcome'. This is an important lesson when considering the notion of leadership to these youths – the goals remain the same, it's just the paths for getting there that are different, more flexible and more open.

Perhaps one of the best examples of the 'new leadership' today is Wael Ghonim, the Egyptian pro-democracy activist who was named one of TIME magazine's most influential people in 2011. He left Google to start an NGO to fight poverty and foster education in the Middle East – unafraid to follow his vision and lead by example. The fact is that when young Muslims think about leadership today, they see it the way Ghonim did - not as a rarified state of being only accessible to the privileged few, but available to anyone with the vision and the capability. Perhaps one of the biggest changes in attitude from previous generations is that they themselves feel capable of real leadership, and are unafraid to take the helm if and when necessary. They are an incredibly self-confident group, spurred on by their faith, youth and education. All over the world, we are seeing them taking leadership into their own hands, in all aspects of society. The tremendous shift in attitudes that they have triggered is sure to have enormous and long-term consequences of which we are just seeing the beginning. To work in partnership with them, to be seen as supporting their values, or better yet, be recognised as a true leader in their communities, organisations must follow a few basic rules of engagement with the Futurists that we have summarised below. If their way succeeds, as is likely, we can be sure that the new world under their leadership is sure to be a very different place to live in.

The New Rules of Engagement

- ✓ Take the time to understand the reality of their social context.
- ✓ Invest in them, support them, and give them platforms for personal development.
- ✓ Involve them in decision-making. They want to know that their voice is being not just heard but really listened to.
- ✓ Be open to their criticism. In fact, invite it.
- ✓ Communicate constantly. Give them all the information they want, and then some. If you don't they will go and find out things on their own, things that may not even be true.
- ✓ Treat them as you would media-savvy consumers anywhere – they can see through spin just like everyone else.
- ✓ Invest in their communities and in the causes close to their heart.
- ✓ Don't make promises you can't keep. They will hold you to them.