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Breaking Through

By CARLA POWER

When Famile Arslan showed up for her first day of work, the receptionist pointed her toward the broom closet. "The cleaning supplies are over there," Arslan recalls being told. "I had to say, 'No, I'm not the cleaner. I'm the lawyer.'" In fairness to the receptionist, Arslan was making history that morning, as the first attorney to wear a hijab in the Netherlands. Ten years on, she has her own practice in the Hague. Her name's on the door, her cat Hussein pads around and a veiled assistant fields phone calls. "People keep telling me how successful I am," says Arslan. "But I'm not all that successful. Had I not been a migrant woman in a hijab, I could have gone much further." Still, when younger Muslims ask Arslan how to climb the professional ladder, she's optimistic. "If you think strategically, this is a great time to be a European Muslim," she argues. "Everyone's focused on us, so it's an opportunity — if you take it."

For European Muslims, the era after Sept. 11, 2001, has been both the best and worst of times. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have strained relations between Europe's governments and its Muslims; there has been a rise in Islamophobic incidents; the specter of Islamic radicalism dominates media debates and shapes government policy. But the era in which Muslims became a feared minority also saw another trend: the rise of a Euro-Muslim middle class. A Gallup poll last year found European Muslims to be at least as likely to identify themselves as British, French or German as the general populations. Migrants' children have begun moving from corner shops and factory floors to offices. They swap business cards at Muslim networking events like Britain's Emerald Network or Holland's *Toward a New Start*, a group for Moroccans who, in the words of founder Ahmed Larouz, are "the sort of people who say, 'I want to be CEO of Philips.'" Parisian professionals go to *Les D rouilleurs*, a networking salon whose name (the Un-Rusty Ones) jabs at the stereotype of *les rouilleurs* — jobless Maghrebi youth "rusting away" in the banlieues.

That's all good news. More disheartening was news in January that the first person convicted under British laws targeting the preparation of terrorist acts was Sohail Qureshi, a

29-year-old dentist from London. That followed the arrest in Britain last summer of three doctors and an engineer on suspicion of attempting to strike Glasgow's airport with a car containing propane-gas canisters. This has challenged the stereotype of jihadis as disenfranchised madrasah students, presenting Europe with a troubling question: Why would those who have made a success of their professional lives be drawn to violent extremism?

The answer lies in the subtle nuances of Western Muslim lives. What non-Muslim Europeans often see as alienation among their Muslim populations is often integration in disguise. The second and third generation are more confident Europeans than their migrant parents — and they're more confident Muslims, too. In the media, debates over Muslim women being allowed to wear veils in schools, courts and government jobs have been read as a clash between European and alien values. In fact, they're signs of Westernization, flaring up when the daughters of Muslim migrants, armed with European educations and passports, edge toward the mainstream. The debates over the veil are waged not by downtrodden housewives, but by women who are studying, teaching or working as lawyers.

Fatima Zibouh, a Ph.D. candidate and researcher at the University of Liège in Belgium, says her hijab is "not a flag or a symbol, merely a manifestation of my spiritual life." A British teaching assistant, sacked for wearing the face-covering *niqab*, invoked not Shari'a or tradition but her concern for the rights of career women: the ruling, she said, made her "fearful of the consequences for Muslim women in this country who want to work."

While headlines blare about jihadis, the vast majority of Muslims are spending their time, like other Europeans, at work. The war on terror may create tensions for European Muslims, but in globalized cities and sectors, the war for talent gives them opportunities. On Fridays, the shoe racks at the mosque near Paris' glittering corporate suburb, La Défense, are increasingly filled not just with migrants' sandals, but executives' lace-ups. Prayer rooms at London's multinationals are no longer used by migrant janitors and support staff, but by lawyers, accountants and bankers. Umar Aziz, a litigator in London, recalls a clutch of law firms courting a top-flight Muslim candidate. Aziz's firm, with its prayer room and strong Muslim community, had a clear edge. When a rival firm called and vowed to match any offer, the candidate said: "I'd like a prayer room and ablution facilities." They said they'd have to get back to him on that, so he went with Aziz's firm.

Such moxie is the preserve of the exceptionally talented. And it is far easier to be a practicing Muslim in a globalized London firm than in Denmark, where prayer rooms at work are controversial, or in those German states that have outlawed the hijab for government employees. Islam is traditionally a faith that shapes not just individual souls, but public life. That makes for difficulties. Many Muslims who want to thrive in the European mainstream feel they have to take their cue from Christians and make their faith a private matter, so that they become Protestantized, as it were, at the office. To get on at work, they need to leave their faith at the door. Both in the office and outside it, "Islam is only a problem when it becomes visible," says Omid Nouripour, a Muslim and a Green member of Germany's parliament.

It follows that for many European Muslims, professional success means compromise. Some have to deal with open prejudice. "We want nothing to do with Islam or Muslims," one law firm told Dutch attorney Arslan during her three-year job search. Particularly after terror attacks, stereotypes tend to bubble to the surface. French computer-systems analyst Mourad Latrech recalls huddling around a TV with his colleagues on 9/11. "What are those bastards doing?" said one, as the World Trade Center collapsed. "Oh ... Sorry, Mourad, I didn't see you standing there." Being lumped in with terrorists has become one of the great work-related hazards for Europe's Muslims. "It's not outright discrimination," says Kamal Halawa, a Palestinian surgeon, who has lived in Spain for 40 years. "It's more like mistrust. You notice it in the way your [work] superiors treat you. You have to be continually demonstrating, day after day, that you are the same as everyone else."

The Pressure to Conform

Many Muslims make daily choices to blend into mainstream office culture. Consider the Dutch marketing consultant who drinks wine at client lunches. Or the British computer-graphics expert who says he's popping out for a sandwich rather than admit he's going to the mosque. Or Arslan, who had to jettison her cultural values to argue for a raise: "Modesty is an Islamic virtue, but if you're modest, you don't get anywhere in Europe." Just as working mothers do, Europe's Muslim professionals raise issues about white-collar workplace culture and its demands. Those who refuse to compromise — like the female Muslim doctors or dentists who decide to stay at home rather than treat male patients — explode old notions of what it means to be a professional. "If you're calling yourself a professional, you're saying you have a skill set that makes you competitive, valuable and a contributor," says one young Muslim art curator. "But how much are you contributing if

you're ghettoizing yourself? How valuable are you if you're not prepared to embrace the culture of an organization?"

Nowhere is the tension between work and faith more pronounced than in France. There, *laïcité*, or secularism, dictates that religion should be confined to the private sphere. Though the 1978 Islamic Revolution in Iran shattered the long-cherished view that modernization inevitably pushes people away from faith and toward secularism, French Muslim professionals say they often face the assumption from their colleagues that career success will have this effect. "If you're doing well, they assume you're one of them, and so you're secular," says Parisian Muslim Zoubeir Ben Terdey, a consultant with an international accounting firm. "Factories have prayer rooms, but for a professional to ask for time off work to go and pray? That shocks them."

Ben Terdey is more confident at work than many Muslims. He's not afraid to speak Arabic on the office phone. He doesn't feign illness when he's fasting for Ramadan, or beg off wine at lunch by claiming a headache. He founded the networking club Les Déroutés because he wanted to prove that "it was possible to be a success in France without abandoning your Islamic principles." There's still a way to go, he says. He's envious of tales from London-based Muslims about company-sanctioned prayer breaks. "Ooh, la la," he says, rolling his eyes skyward, the very picture of Gallic consternation. "If I were to ask if I could go pray, the answer would be, 'Why should I do you a favor? Why are you so different from everyone else?'"

Increasingly, however, influential French voices see "diversity as an opportunity, not a problem," says Hakim El-Karoui, who along with Rachida Dati — President Nicolas Sarkozy's Justice Minister — founded the 21st Century Club for minority movers and shakers. A former speechwriter for Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin, El-Karoui recalls working lunches during Ramadan when he'd cover his plate with his notebook, so Raffarin wouldn't notice he wasn't eating. Occasionally, he'd face the prejudice of exceptionalism: colleagues would refer to him as "a good Muslim," adding that "not all of them are like him." Now an investment banker at the Rothschild banking group in Paris, he finds his current work culture reassuringly cosmopolitan. "Since the Rothschild family is Jewish, they know better than anyone about respect for minorities," he says. "Diversity is a given for them."

Not so for many French employers. It's difference — particularly visible difference — that challenges *laïcité*. "The central issue for us is visibility," says Mohammed Colin, co-founder

of SaphirNews, a French Muslim news and networking site. It would be "unthinkable," says Colin, to have a veiled Muslim woman in a French ad — and rare to see one at work. Those who can get jobs tend to work in back offices. As CEO of the French communications group CS, Yazid Sabeg is perhaps France's most prominent French-Arab businessman and the author of a study on workplace discrimination. Asked if any of his 4,000 employees wear the hijab, he says he remembers one who did, but adds that she wouldn't have had contact with clients: "I'm against wearing the hijab at work. Shows of religion just result in antagonism between the majority culture and minorities." Recruiters often ask Boujema Hadri, owner of the Paris-based employment agency Very Important Training, if a candidate with an Arab name wears the veil. "They know it doesn't affect women's job performance," he says, "but they're scared." Employers recruit in their own image, he shrugs: "France wants clones — people who look like them."

That said, there's evidence suggesting the evolution of a French hijab economy. "I'll tell recruiters, 'Take a veiled woman — it's cheaper,'" says Hadri. In a country with 8% unemployment — and over double that if you're young and have an Arab name — it's hardly surprising, he says, that "the women don't care. They just want to work." Zeenath Simozrag is a Sorbonne-educated lawyer with two master's degrees and three languages, but it still took her six months to find a job, a fact she attributes to her wearing a head scarf. She now works in a small firm, earning \$1,100 for a three-day week — less than half the going rate for someone with her qualifications. When her boss has French-Arab clients, Simozrag is introduced as a colleague, but she says she's not introduced to white clients. Like many professional French Muslims, she has thought about leaving — for Dubai, Malaysia, the U.S. or England, somewhere where she won't be forced to choose between a head scarf and a career.

The stereotyping can start early. Growing up Muslim in a Parisian banlieue, Najett Kaddouri was at the top of her school class every year. When she told teachers she wanted to be a doctor, they'd respond: "Najett, that's just a dream. Think about something you could realistically do." She recalls: "I thought, 'I'm better than the white people in my class. I can do it.'" Eventually she did, but faced hurdles when she donned the hijab. Kaddouri had wanted to wear it since she was 15, but knew that French law meant she had to choose between covering her head and getting an education. "It wasn't just ambition that made me feel education was more important than wearing it, but my religion," she says. "The first word that God said to our Prophet was 'Read.' God gave me intelligence, and I didn't want to waste it."

By 25, Kaddouri was doing well enough at work that she dared to start wearing a head scarf. Her parents, Moroccan migrants, were alarmed. Their brilliant daughter would risk her job over the hijab? Couldn't she just wear it at home? "Don't worry, I know what I'm doing," Kaddouri told them. In some hospitals, nobody minded. But at one, she was asked to remove her scarf. "It's personal," she insisted, mindful that she couldn't say it was religious. She began wearing a surgery cap, until the hospital passed a rule — "designed for me," claims Kaddouri — banning head coverings of any kind. Suspended for five weeks for breaking the rule, she took the hospital to court for discrimination. Jean-Pierre Burnier, the hospital's chief administrator, defends the decision to suspend her. "[Under *laïcité*], public services like hospitals have a responsibility to respect [religious] neutrality," he says. "This wasn't just a boss's whim." Two years on, the tribunal's decision is pending, and Kaddouri works as a doctor in other hospitals, wearing a hijab.

Bridging the Divides

Muslims in Britain don't face *laïcité*, but they must cope with a local tradition held perhaps just as dearly: drinking. "The pub is an important place for bonding and networking in British culture," says Asim Siddiqui, a London accountant. "If you're a Muslim who doesn't drink, it can make it harder to climb up the professional ladder." Looking for an alternative to after-work beers, Siddiqui founded the City Circle, a lecture and charity group aimed at Muslim professionals. On Friday nights, well-heeled Muslims come straight from their offices to nurse cups of tea and catch, say, a Muslim comic doing stand-up, or a lecture on Sufi poetry. Go to a City Circle talk and you won't see a defensive minority turning inward, but educated Britons with the confidence to be self-critical. The week after the July 7, 2005 bombings in London, the weekly panel discussion was boldly topical: "The criminal distortion of Islamic texts."

In the current climate, speaking freely can provoke attacks. Riazat Butt, the religious affairs correspondent at the *Guardian* newspaper in London, says her major career hurdles came from her own Muslim community: "I've experienced more prejudice and hostility from Muslims than from non-Muslims. Sometimes they get really hostile, saying, 'You're working for the enemy.'" While reporting articles, she's been called a whore, a traitor and a disgrace to Islam.

Such comments reveal a bitter dilemma. Many Muslims, particularly in Britain, feel caught between the devil and the deep blue sea. Criticize the radicals, and they're turncoats; criticize the government, and they're unpatriotic. Last year, a group of prominent Muslims

sent a soberly worded open letter to then Prime Minister Tony Blair, arguing that British foreign policy fueled extremism. Government ministers denounced the letter, one calling it "dangerous and foolish." The reaction showed that "well-adjusted, contented and successful British Muslims are considered the biggest traitors of all by the powerful in the British state," wrote columnist Yasmin Alibhai-Brown in the *Independent* newspaper. "A new abominable social contract is being offered to us. If you Muslims want to be accepted here, you must ... be prepared for an endless conflict or a life in the shadowy margins where you will be kept confined and contained."

Yet though British Islam is known as a religion of protest for alienated youths, it has also been the catalyst of a powerful work ethic. Islam in Britain, writes sociologist Tariq Modood, has been "finely poised between a religion of the ghetto and a religion of social mobility." For Farhan Qureshi, it was watching Woody Allen's films that inspired him to become a movie director. But Islam provided practical and spiritual spurs to success. Waking up on cold English winter mornings to perform *Fajr*, the dawn prayer, gave him an extra half-hour to write before setting off for his job as an engineer. Islam, he says, also reassured him that his screenwriting efforts were worthwhile: "It teaches you that good work that one does from the heart won't be wasted."

That's a truth that non-Muslim Europeans might do well to remember; after all, in Europe's Dark Ages, it was great European Muslim universities like the one in Córdoba that kept the lamp of learning alight. Islam's stress on education helped propel London barrister Azeem Suterwalla through Oxford and Harvard. "My religion gives me drive and purpose," he says, and it has also helped shape his political and professional views, giving him "a feeling of obligation" to help the Muslim *umma*. It was a concern about the state of Muslims in Gaza and Kashmir that spurred Suterwalla to become a barrister — and such instincts can, of course, curdle into resentment, even radicalism. "I'm trying to make a difference in a positive way," says Suterwalla. "But there are those who don't know how to cope with it, when they see what's going on in the news." Radicalized fellow Muslims think he's fooling himself by tackling injustice through the courts. "They tell me, 'You're working within the system that is not compatible with Islam,'" he says. "Even some very well-educated people are attracted to radical groups, because of what they see as injustice. The middle class is not immune."

That was underscored when the main suspects in the Glasgow Airport bomb plot turned out to be doctors. According to a 2004 study by Marc Sageman, a former CIA officer and

forensic psychiatrist, the stereotype of the jihadi as poor and uneducated needs revision. Of 400 terrorist suspects studied, he found that three-quarters were middle-class or upper-class, with many employed in the sciences or technology. University students and professionals attracted to the rigorous theology of radical Islamist organizations like Hizb ut-Tahrir find in them the same structured, mechanistic precision they've learned to apply on the job to hard drives or computer models. In his recent book about life inside Hizb ut-Tahrir, British Muslim Ed Husain contrasts the aggressive, intolerant Islam he found in Hizb ut-Tahrir to the "Islam of the heart," the tolerant, humanistic Sufism of his migrant parents. In modern Islamic radicalism, custom and humanism are jettisoned in favor of logic and politics. Hizb ut-Tahrir, which targets youth on college campuses, promotes itself as the thinking Muslim's alternative to blindly following parents, mullahs or tradition.

Why would the angry radicalism of groups like Hizb ut-Tahrir appeal to some successful Muslims? Middle-class Muslims don't face poverty, but they can feel a disconnect between their white-collar jobs and their Muslim home lives. "You can still feel alone in a crowd," says Mona Siddiqui, director of the University of Glasgow's Centre for the Study of Islam. "You can spend a lot of time with colleagues and professionals from a completely different culture to you, really nice people to work with, but with whom you don't feel any emotional connection. You have to constantly turn inward, and your circle becomes smaller and smaller." Navigating the gap between a European workplace and the expectations of a migrant community can be intensely stressful, says Fuad Nahdi, a commentator and consultant on Muslim issues to Blair's government: "In terms of alienation, nothing succeeds like success." For Muslims who have made it, the loneliness of the corner office can be a cold contrast to the camaraderie of the mosque.

So this is the disquieting risk facing Europe: that the fallout from violence wreaked by alienated terrorists can create still more alienation among peaceful, moderate professionals. Martijn de Koning, an anthropologist at the International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World in Leiden, the Netherlands, interviewed a group of twentysomething Dutch Muslims before the 2004 murder of Theo van Gogh by a young Dutch Moroccan angry at the filmmaker's on-screen portrayal of Islamic culture. Back then, De Koning found his subjects were outraged by the fact that it was tough to be Muslim in the Netherlands. By contrast, three years on from the Van Gogh affair, he found apathy, a dulled acceptance by the successful Muslims he interviewed that no matter what they do, they'll never be Dutch. "These aren't disenfranchised youth," he says. "They're well educated, and they have jobs. They feel they've done everything right, and still they're rejected."

Famile Arslan has an answer — both for Muslims in Europe who feel beaten down, and for non-Muslim Europeans struggling to navigate the unexpected shoals of a continent with many faiths and many ethnicities. When her more radical Muslim friends talk to her of alienation, she crisply dismisses them. "They keep telling me, 'They're against us.' And I say, 'Guys, who are *they*? And who is *us*?' " When all — Muslim or not — can agree that they're one and the same, Europe will finally be able to move on.

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