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Little Islam, Muslim Town, Halal Boulevard, and Arab Spring Sales - in a city near you

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I'm preparing for a series of forthcoming events on Muslim majority and minority economies and to freshen up those integration debates - by proposing a new approach for Muslims. This is following the 'China Town' model of creating clearly marked and branded areas open for business and cultural exchanges fit for a non-native majority.

Here's some background behind what has influenced my thinking recently. Last month I was invited by the Azerbaijan State Committee for Religious Groups to participate in a trip called the 'Silk Road of Tolerance' alongside a press conference for the launch of their Centre for Religious Tolerance. The key objective: to create a culture of elders and the young sharing spaces, across religious groups at the grass roots.

After meeting Azerbaijani elders and religious leaders, I didn't feel the same pangs of cynicism as I did with this week's Tommy Robinson and Quilliam event - but I reminded myself of that Muhammad Ali quote, "The man who views the world at 50 the same as he did at 20 has wasted 30 years of his life." So I think the acid test is whether these things move the right people and thinking has changed, or they simply generate column inches - time will tell.

Seasoned author John Grant just launched his book called, *Made With: The emerging alternative to Western brands*, which charts the shifting sands and rise of brands from Muslim geographies, from Istanbul to Indonesia. Earlier on in the year as a prelude, we wrote a paper together in the *Journal of Islamic Marketing*.

I was on a panel for the recent Labour Party Conference fringe event titled, "The importance of Islamic finance in UK growth", organised by the All Party Group on Islamic Finance and Diversity in Financial Markets. This ties in with my work on Halal with PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC), where I produced infographics and new concepts for the 9th World Islamic Economic Forum (WIFE), to be hosted in London (for the first time outside of the Muslim world); and November's Global Islamic Economy Summit in Dubai. We argue that Halal is more than 'meat and money' or bringing commodities from the 'farm to the fork' - it's a rapidly expanding industry, spreading right through to pharmaceuticals, cosmetics, leather goods and beyond.

London also saw the UK's first Halal Food Festival, with appearances from mainstream celebrity chefs, and a hubbub of Muslim bling, buzz and chic - making me think that Muslims are hungry for a good knees up. It was more about meeting than meat.

The long-tail and storm clouds of 9/11 now are driving middle-class educated Muslims to claim social and commercial spaces - to counteract negative perceptions, create new identities, and develop cultural economies which cross-over. A new way of saying 'we are not terrorists'.

No job is for life and as we work harder and for longer, the lines between work and play are blurring. The sliver lining to these clouds hails the age of the global artisan, as a parallel career. Like in the movie *Inception*, people have dreams within dreams. A world of superheroes, who are entrepreneurs, chefs and entertainers - looking to save humanity, with a moral purpose, a smart phone, smart words, smart threads and insh'allah (God willing) a viral 'selfie'.

The Gulf, Malaysia, and China are investing heavily in London. China is key to the Muslim world, because they have developed a Halal hub in northwest region with more than 120 companies, reaching a production volume of over US\$1.27 in 2012 - and by some estimates China has 50 million Muslims.

Let's treat religion more as a cultural and lifestyle choice, and put aside the dogmas of theological debates for one minute. Now think of those China Towns and the idea that you can have a taste of the Chinese experience in cities around the globe. Whether you're Chinese and home sick, or not Chinese, but still lovesick for the same intense experience - then it's there. I also love cities with a 'Little Italy', and Dubai's Global Village and Ibn Battuta Mall. Can the Muslim world crossover onto foreign soil in the same way?

Picture a Little Ummah concept in non-Muslim countries. Think about a complex of shops; souks with gold, perfumeries, ceramics, and spices; coffee shops and restaurants - but also with riad style apartments, galleries, gardens and fountains; women only spas, swimming pools and gyms; a mosque and office space for professional services firms with a specialism in Muslim markets. When Halal and Islam are positioned like this, as a lived experiences to serve all communities - rather than just being reported as aliens, objects, products, and politics, then I think that can only help, unveil and bring people together.