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The cultural-economic model and public relations in the Middle East: An examination of the Islamic banking system in Kuwait[☆]

T. Kenn Gaither^{a,*}, Ali Jamal Al-Kandari^{b,1}^a *Elon University, School of Communications, 2850 Campus Box, Elon, NC 27244-2010, United States*^b *Mass Communication, Gulf University for Science and Technology, Department of Mass Communication, P.O. Box 7207, Hawally 32093, Kuwait*

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ABSTRACT

This article adopts the cultural-economic model of public relations practice to analyze the communications through the websites of three prominent Islamic banks in Kuwait. The analysis extrapolates Islamic value orientations including respect for religious authority, affinity with the past, fatalism, communal kinship, attachment to the eternal life and spirituality and idealism. The orientations are then examined relative to public relations practice in the Middle East. The study advances the understanding of Islam and public relations in the Middle East, an understudied region in public relations literature, and illuminates the relationship between religion and public relations. It concludes with observations to guide public relations projects directed toward Muslims in the Middle East for professionals and scholars.

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1. Introduction

Recent world events from the turmoil in Syria to the spiraling tensions in Egypt between backers of ousted President Mohammed Morsi and supporters of the interim military government illustrate the need for understanding Islam and Muslim values. The rise in Muslim faith and continued tensions between the west and Middle East as a geo-political region portend to a cultural gap that this paper argues public relations can help address. In their discussion of the relationship between the west and Middle East, [Curtin and Gaither \(2007, p. 175\)](#) observe, “Now, religion dominates, leading to a Middle Eastern-West split in which each side constructs the other as a monolithic binary opposite.” The majority of studies (e.g. [Schwartz, Warkentin, & Wilkinson, 2008](#)) associating public relations and religion are concerned with how public relations helps religions to promote faith. This study, in contrast, demonstrates that religion can influence almost all aspects of public relations. It suggests the definition and function of corporate social responsibility in the Middle East is based on Islamic values that might differ greatly from western, corporate-centric models of CSR. The study examines three Islamic Bank websites in Kuwait to highlight corporate social responsibility as it relates to public relations, suggesting CSR is a ripe area for understanding organization outreach initiatives in the Middle East. In also identifying Islamic value orientations, the study suggests corporate social responsibility in a western concept is not the same as the concept of CSR in Islam, mirroring

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 336 278 5776; fax: +1 336 278 5734.

E-mail addresses: tgaither@elon.edu (T.K. Gaither), Alkandari.j@gust.edu.kw (A.J. Al-Kandari).

¹ Tel: +965 9938 8602.

the contention that public relations in the west and public relations in the Middle East are conceptually different (Alanazi, 1996).

While culture has received attention in public relations scholarship, religion has received little extant attention in public relations research (Tilson, 2011; Shin, 2008). This study examines discursive practices that denote meaning associated with Islam, culture, public relations and the Middle East through the cultural-economic model of public relations (Curtin & Gaither, 2007). The model is used to study the website communications of the three largest Islamic banks in Kuwait: Kuwait Finance House (KFH), Kuwait International Bank (KIB), and Boubyan Bank. Through these websites, the study extrapolates Muslim value orientations and concludes with guidelines on the relationship between these values and implications for public relations practice in the Middle East. In doing so, this paper addresses a largely understudied region, the Middle East, and a public that has received scant attention in public relations literature, Muslims in the Middle East.

The study situates its discussion in Kuwait and its Islamic banking system, neither of which have received attention in public relations scholarship. Kuwait is a small country of approximately 2.7 million people in the Middle East between Iraq and Saudi Arabia (CIA World Factbook, 2013). Its diminutive size in terms of population and geography (it is ranked 158 in country land size) do not overshadow its vast oil repositories. The country is home to about 7 percent of the world's crude oil supply, and its GDP per capita of an estimated \$43,800 place it in the top 20 of world rankings. Kuwait is more than three-quarters Muslim and maintains three Islamic banks, the largest of which is KFH.

An Islamic bank is a bank guided by the administrative, economic and cultural precepts of Shari'ah. In short, an Islamic bank essentially functions like any other bank with a regulatory ambit strictly tied to Islamic values as proscribed by the Koran. There is a rich body of literature on the functionality and purpose of Islamic banks, with general agreement among Muslim scholars that Islamic banks should normatively focus on redistribution of wealth and poverty alleviation (Farook, 2007; Yusuf Yasir & Bin Bahari, 2011).

Kuwait was selected as a focal point for the study because of one of the author's familiarity with the country and because of its economic clout as one of the world's largest oil producers (BBC, 2012). Focusing on this small country at the top of the Gulf neighbored by Iran and Saudi Arabia is admittedly limiting. The cultural-economic model of international public relations intrinsically suggests that observations about public relations in Kuwait are not generalizable to the entire region. Still, the study recognizes the exigencies of context and culture, and the prominence of Islam and the Islamic banking system across the Middle East give the study relevance beyond Kuwait. The Islamic banking sector is an estimated U.S. \$500 million market with a growth forecast of 10 and 15 percent (PR Newswire, 2010), making it a formidable economic engine in the region. According to KFH, the potential for Islamic financial services could reach \$4 trillion USD by 2020, where Muslim population is expected to reach 2.5 billion worldwide and Islamic banks are expected to manage nearly half of the total savings (KFH, 2013).

This study recognizes Edward Said's precept that Islam is not monolithic at the same time it purposely makes broad generalizations about Muslims, which is one thread of commonality that ties together significant parts of the Middle East. This study is limited in its treatment of Islam. There are, of course, various denominations of Islam with varying interpretations of the Koran. The Middle East is not wholly Muslim; Judaism, Christianity and other religions are scattered across the region. Furthermore, the study does not take into account the cultural variance in the region, partially steeped in tribal affiliations and varied political and socioeconomic systems.

2. Literature review

The literature review summarizes public relations scholarship examining the Middle East and explicates the cultural-economic model to guide the identification of Muslim value orientations. As is the case with much international public relations scholarship, examinations of the Middle East are largely located in regional overviews of public relations practice (by continent or region) and country case studies. Three themes emerge in much of the literature: Public relations practice in the Middle East is as varied as the cultures of the region; public relations is distinctively different from western notions; and the centrality of the Koran and Islamic faith as crucial cultural considerations related to public relations practice and scholarship.

There is widespread agreement the Middle East is an understudied area in public relations literature (Taylor, 2001). Of regional treatments, Alanazi (1996) posits that public relations practice is relatively new in the Middle East by western standards, while Kruckeberg (1996) argues public relations is a culturally bound practice that has a history dating back thousands of years to era of Mohammed. More recently, Freitag and Stokes (2009) suggest public relations in the Middle East is often associated with advertising and ceremonies. There is widespread agreement the term "public relations" has vastly different connotations than western meanings and that PR practice is far more advanced than the theoretical foundation to support it. According to Kruckeberg (1996, p. 181), this difference does not diminish his contention that "Sophisticated public relations is being practiced in the Middle East." That level of sophistication has not limited the numerous studies that consider the Middle East within a western framework by comparing public relations to western models and theories. Many scholars warn against retrofitting western models of public relations practice into the Middle East. In turn, numerous studies categorize public relations in some Middle Eastern countries as "emerging" or "growing," which ostensibly validate western theory building rather than offer new theoretical bases for understanding public relations practice in the region. Nonetheless, these studies are critical to illustrate the rich heterogeneity of both public relations practice and culture in the region.

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