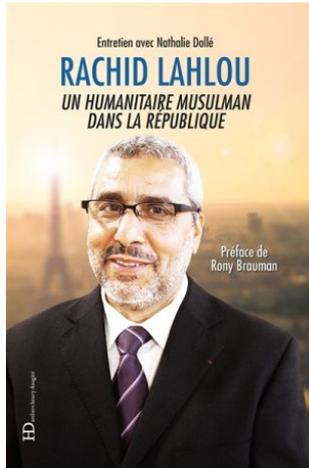


“Within French diversity, I wanted to address Muslim humanitarian aid”

Interview with *Rachid Lahlou*



Un humanitaire musulman dans la République [A Muslim humanitarian in the Republic]
Rachid Lahlou,
interview with Nathalie Dollé
Ateliers Henry Dougier, 2018
(Published in French)

Rachid Lahlou is the founder and President of the Secours Islamique France (SIF) organisation. His first book, *Un humanitaire musulman dans la République*, retraces his career path and the initial stages of the association.

Humanitarian Alternatives — *Why the need to write a book with a title that sounds like a plea?*

Rachid Lahlou — It’s the story of a Muslim who wanted to become a humanitarian worker. Being a humanitarian worker is part of French culture, but for a Muslim – especially a practicing Muslim – people will say he’s a radical or extremist. Within French diversity, I wanted to address Muslim humanitarian aid. Initially, I wanted to write the story of the SIF. It’s had to overcome a lot of obstacles in the 27 years since it was established. I wanted to tell this story in France in order to pinpoint certain excesses or exaggerations, but also to bring an element of hope: in spite of a difficult, not to say chaotic, journey, the SIF story shows you can get there. When you are determined, are sure of yourself, and have nothing to apologise for, you need a strength to get there. I also wrote it so that people joining SIF would have an idea of the history of an organisation that currently has a good image and good projects.

H.A. — *SIF was created 27 years ago. How did it come about?*

R.L. — At the time, I was a professor of marketing, and very happy with my job. I gradually got involved in the question of Islam in France, but I was out of synch compared to other people. I therefore chose to focus on the Education nationale (national education) and one day Hany El-Banna, a genius of medicine, suggested I create the Secours Islamique France. His organisation, Islamic Relief, was set up in 1984 in England, and in 1990 they realised that their donors were

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throughout in Europe and felt it was necessary to go international. At first I refused, but he ended up persuading me and I set up the project in 1991.

I became a humanitarian fundraiser from one day to the next. We found a small office in Saint Denis, in the suburbs of Paris. Islamic Relief gave us some literature, leaflets translated into French, which they sent out from England to a first mailing list, by looking up addresses in the French phone book by hand.

As I was known to be involved with Islam in France from the outset, I took up my pilgrim's staff and set off on a tour of the country, visiting places of worship, associations, and talking to them about humanitarian actions. I was very interested in what was going on in the world, the war in Afghanistan, the Eastern bloc which was starting to crumble, the crisis in Albania... I still remember a report broadcast on France 3 which presented the situation in Albania as a catastrophe where even tables and chairs were being stolen from schools. That was the subject matter of my first speech: "Help us to help them". And that's how it all started. And then the crisis in the Balkans started.

H.A. — *How did the Bosnian war change your way forward?*

R.L. — Bosnia was the element which propelled us forward, without any preparation. Initial funding of 20 000 francs [the old French currency] enabled us to collect around 300 000 francs, then 4 or 5 million the following year. Field visits, donations in kind, etc. then started to develop... Our phone was ringing until 4 in the morning. And there were only two or three of us! It was very stimulating, we were in the heat of the action. I also went over there to see what was going on, we sent a convoy of flour etc. paid for by the organisation. The first year was voluntary where I combined my involvement with my professional teaching work. My management profile helped me, and I was good at marketing. I used all of these skills to benefit the organisation that went from strength to strength in Bosnia, and in Croatia as well. We developed a lot of projects, not just emergency food aid. Having an office in Sarajevo proved to be a considerable advantage. Despite the difficulties, especially the fact that the city was at that time encircled, we managed to deploy to meet the most basic needs. Of course, the most urgent thing was humanitarian aid, but we also took part in rebuilding of houses for the return from Srebrenica, through micro-projects. After an emergency, we didn't leave the field, we stayed there. The population needed development projects for stability, to take back control, so we created a development department.

H.A. — *How did the general public in France see the Secours Islamique, and how was SIF accepted within the humanitarian community?*

R.L. — In a difficult context in France, we found ourselves in the spotlight thanks to an article in the *La Vie*¹ newspaper which questioned the role of nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), and especially Muslim ones, which were taking up lots of space and leaving little room for others. By using our logo and one of our photos to illustrate the article, the journalist was pointing the finger at Saudi organisations, especially the Islamic Relief Organisation (IRO), which was an offshoot of a Saudi government body, Islamic World. The disagreement was resolved amicably, and the newspaper published a correction. But the damage had been done, and for ten years we

¹ Editor's note: a French weekly newspaper connected to Social Christianity.

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had to bring lawsuits against journalists who were accusing us of financing terrorism, Islamism, fundamentalists. The press never interviewed us and our donations suffered in France.

But the problem was exclusive to France. The 1990s under Jospin were difficult years for the Muslim community in France. It was the beginning of the concertation with the Etat des Musulmans, the publication of articles that were anti-Islamic, anti-Muslim, anti-veil, anti-fundamentalist, anti-Algeria. It was an extremely difficult and untenable situation. I was even worried I would be arrested in my own home. I was stopped at exits, entrances, sometimes in front of my children.

H.A. — *Did you have any particular support, from other NGOs in the humanitarian field?*

R.L. — At the beginning, we were caught up in our own problems. To defuse the tension, and to have direct contact with journalists, we set up a communications department and then, little by little, we became affiliated with the Centre de Recherche et d'Information pour le Développement (CRID), and other organisations.

H.A. — *How did the coming together with other, mainly secular NGOs in the humanitarian field happen?*

R.L. — The major French humanitarian organisations knew of Islamic Relief in the field and the organisation was highly respected. I remember the book *Jihad Humanitaire* [Humanitarian Jihad], by Abdel-Rahman Ghandour, prefaced by Rony Brauman, who was very complimentary of Islamic Relief. Incidentally, Ghandour himself, having been in Afghanistan, knew Islamic Relief and considered it to be an exemplary organisation, the exception of the Middle East. Thanks to Rony Brauman, who had also been interviewed by Yves Calvi, French NGOs abroad started to have a good image of Islamic Relief. Gradually, national authorities invited us to meetings and debates.

The first time I debated with NGOs was during a debate organised by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). I was taking part in a round table discussion with Médecins du Monde and Philippe Ryfman, on the question of secularism, secular organisations and humanitarian aid in Islam. I remember a heated debate with Jean-Baptiste Richardier, who became a good friend, and who had a rather rigid view of denominational organisations, even if they tried to collect zakâts²...

We did a huge amount of PR work to get ourselves known and accepted. I created links through Coordination Sud and lots of people played an essential role in the process, at the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and within other organisations with whom relations have been established in crisis areas such as in Iraq, Chechnya and elsewhere. Then, September 11th was to prove the turning point for our fledgling organisation.

H.A. — *Whilst one might have imagined that there would be a resurgence of denunciations... How did 9/11 participate in this "normalisation"?*

² Editor's note: zakât is the Muslim legal alms tax.

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R.L. — We spoke out publicly against the situation, in a strong and unequivocal way. We sent a letter to all of our donors to explain the situation and our donations went through the roof. Lots of journalists also asked us for our opinion: it was really the beginning of change.

The 9/11 attacks shook up the humanitarian work of Muslim humanitarian organisations in the United States. Islamic Relief was virtually the only organisation not to be affected, because it was operating with total transparency. Currently the Secours Islamique is well-known, and recognised by public authorities and the French humanitarian network. Incidentally I was elected to the board of directors, then to the office of Coordination Sud as vice-president, which was proof of their confidence.

H.A. — *But the word "Islamic" is still a problem...*

R.L. — After the Arab Spring, the term “Islamic” became an obstacle again for working in certain Muslim countries. Our break with the Islamic Relief network was also a major event. In 1994-1995, I pointed out the unprofessionalism of its directors and the need to restructure the organisation. The internal advocacy lasted for more than ten years. Until the break-up...

The opening of the first SIF mission in 2006 in Chad was badly experienced by Islamic Relief because its leaders were blocking any initiative of this type in order to keep the centralisation of operational actions from Birmingham. At SIF, we wanted to change Islamic Relief to another model but we no longer shared some of their positions, especially during the Arab Spring. Hany El-Banna and I were the driving forces for the organisation to keep its neutrality in the face of the State, as is written in our statutes, and for it to have strong presence in the field. The break was therefore inevitable. The last legal “battle” was to keep some offices and the name of the organisation. To find a middle ground, they kept the international registration of the name and we kept the property in France. We also changed the logo, and we are in the middle of resolving the last disputes over the heritage. Currently SIF is an organisation that is independent from all bodies. We are not affiliated to any Muslim confederation. Such an affiliation would be unthinkable, even from a statutory point of view.

H.A. — *Can we deduce from the preface, written by Rony Brauman, that he was one of the first sources of support, who remains loyal to this day?*

R.L. — Rony Brauman is a friend, and one of the main actors in humanitarian aid, who propelled the use of the “without borders” label. It seemed appropriate to ask him to write the preface, since he has known us from the beginning, and has always followed us.

Interview by Boris Martin, editor-in-chief

Translated from the French by Juliet Powys

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To quote this article: Rachid Lablou, “ Within French diversity, I wanted to address Muslim humanitarian aid’ ”

Humanitarian Alternatives, n°8, July 2018, p. 164-171,

<http://alternatives-humanitaires.org/en/2018/07/05/within-french-diversity-i-wanted-to-address-muslim-humanitarian-aid/>

ISBN of the article (PDF): 978-2-37704-407-8