

The EU must do more to fight the funding of Islamism across the continent

Written by Nervana Mahmoud on 7 August 2019 in Opinion Plus
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The case of Qatari-controlled, UK-based Al Rayan Bank, which continues to provide financial services to a series of Islamist and extremist groups blacklisted by other institutions, highlights the dangers of lax financial oversight by the EU and its Member States, writes Nervana Mahmoud.



Photo credit: Adobe Stock

For millions of ordinary Muslims, Al-Rayan is a beautiful Arabic word that means "luxuriant" or "plentiful". For many Egyptians, however, Al-Rayan is a word that is linked to bitter memories of financial scams associated with the rise of social Islamism in the country.

A young Islamist businessman known as Ahmed Al-Rayan set up what he claimed to be a strictly Sharia-compliant investment scheme.

He succeeded in convincing Egyptian depositors to withdraw their money from state banks and invest

it in his own company, which later proved to be a ponzi scheme built on the exploitation of religious piety.

Eventually, his company went bankrupt and he was sentenced to 15 years in prison in 1988.

My mother was a victim of a similar scheme, “al-Sherif”, after she succumbed to social pressure and fatwas that claimed state banks were un-Islamic. She eventually lost most of her inheritance.

Now Britain has its own Al-Rayan moment. Although it is not a Ponzi scheme, it is still a questionable business.

An exposé published by The Times has revealed that Al Rayan Bank, a British bank controlled by the Qatari state, has been providing financial services to multiple British organisations linked to Islamists and extremist groups in the UK and across Europe.

While Qatari support for similar groups across the Middle East, from Syria to Libya, has been well documented, until now far less has been reported on the activities and external funding of these European entities backed by the small Gulf state.

“Qatar considers funding Islamist charities and investments as an integral part of its soft power around the globe”

According to the Times’ report, the individuals and groups funded by Qatar in the UK include a charity banned in the US as a terrorist entity, groups that promote hardline preachers, and a mosque whose long-term trustee is a Hamas leader.

Many of the organisations supported by Al Rayan bank have already had their accounts closed by other UK banks, including HSBC, NatWest, Barclays and Lloyds.

These recent revelations come shortly after the publication in France of the book, “Qatar Papers”, earlier this year.

The book investigates the influence of the Qatar charity across Europe.

The authors, Georges Malbrunot (Le Figaro) and Christian Chesnot (France Inter Radio), document how Qatari funding of similar questionable groups extends far beyond the UK, reaching France, Belgium, Italy, Switzerland and even as far as Kosovo.

Qatar considers funding Islamist charities and investments as an integral part of its soft power around the globe.

Pinning the links of those charitable activities to Islamism is a challenging task.

“It may be stating the obvious, but promoting regressive Islamist causes should not be part of the goals of charities”

Islamism is an ideology that mixes politics with religion, as well as charitable causes with politics.

For decades, charitable work has been a safe front that has helped Islamist groups shield their political activities from the scrutiny of state authorities. But European governments have a duty to

protect their Muslim citizens.

Being charitable is an integral part of the Muslim character.

Most European Muslims, however, are not ideologically motivated, and do not identify with Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood or its sister groups. They are entitled to know how their money is spent.

The Times report states that Al-Rayan Bank meets all the regulatory and legal requirements to operate as a British bank, and its linked Islamic organisations are lawfully entitled to operate in Britain.

This “lawfulness”, however, should not be decided only on financial merits, but on other factors too, such as political links and educational goals.

It may be stating the obvious, but promoting regressive Islamist causes should not be part of the goals of charities.

Blurring the line between what is Islam as a faith and Islamism as a political ideology is not acceptable either.

Glamourising Jihad and non-state players, and condoning thorny issues such as under-age marriage, female circumcision and the death penalty for adultery and apostasy, should not be part of any education or preaching programme linked to any European charity.

The parallel between Egypt’s Al-Rayan and the British one is not in the financial element per se (as there is no suggestion Al-Rayan Bank has breached the UK’s financial laws), but in the ideological motivation behind both and the possible political and social exploitations.

The next European Commission and Parliament must prioritise their initiatives to investigate the sources that finance Islamism.

EU investigations into Al Rayan Bank and the work of Qatar Charity across the continent are a necessary and appropriate place to start.

About the author

Nervana Mahmoud is a Doctor, commentator on Middle East issues and columnist for Al Hurra news

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